

CHAPTER ONE

Jonathan Wynder looked again at the once-fresh copy of *Billboard*, already wearing from the staples due to being opened to the same page and then closed again so many times, still trying hard to comprehend what he was seeing. *Broken Promise*, the album his band had released almost a year and a half ago, had just entered the Top 40 with a bullet, and was showing promise of a steady climb. He should have been overjoyed, hell even shock would have been an acceptable reaction, but all he could feel was sheer terror.

He looked across the desk at his manager, a slightly overweight cigar-chomping shark named Repness, and realized from the look on the man's face that his dirty little secret was going to have to come out. Repness's eyes were intently watching him, almost as though they were trying to penetrate through his skull to read the thoughts within. Repness was sharp. He had been in this business for many years and had learned how to read his artists well in that time. As he took all of this in, Jonathan realized that the man was speaking and probably had been for some time now. Repness took the cigar out of his mouth and adopted that look that Jonathan's entire band had dubbed the "pseudo-daddy".

"I mean it, my boy," Repness said, his voice dropping into the lower registers that signified he was just trying to help. "With the way that *Broken Promise* is starting to shoot up the charts, you boys have a very thrilling ride on the way! I'd bet my stock and lot that it'll hit top 20 or maybe even graze the top ten! I told you that I would take care of you, and now you can see I was telling you the truth."

Jonathan closed his eyes and ran a hand over his face.

“It certainly does appear that way,” he replied softly.

An awkward silence prompted Jonathan to remove his hands from his eyes.

Repness was staring at him in a combination of confusion and disappointment. Jonathan cocked his head to the side and gave Repness a wan smile.

“What?” he asked. “I was agreeing with you.”

Repness shook his head slowly and put the cigar into the overflowing ashtray on his desk. “Your words may have been agreeing, but your actions certainly weren’t.”

The smile faded slowly from Jonathan’s face, *here it comes*.

“You may be Johnny Crone to your band and all those fans out there who are buying this record,” Repness began. “But to me you’re still plain old Johnny Wynder who came from nowhere with a knack for lyrics and music. Little Johnny Wynder who started a band and hired me when he had only twenty dollars in his pocket. I took you on and showed you how to do it: the clubs, the marketing, all the way up to the record deal. You do still remember that night before you signed the contracts, don’t you?”

Jonathan nodded slowly. The night before his band, Naked Angel, had signed their deal with a major label, he had a massive panic attack. Repness had come to his meager apartment to find him piss drunk and ready to leap off of his balcony. The older man had talked him down and stayed with him until he finally passed out on the couch. Repness had not said anything about it around the band, but every time the two of them were alone together and Jonathan was having doubts, the story came back up again.

“I came there that night because you seemed a little off when we had talked earlier that day,” Repness continued. “I know when something’s bothering you, Johnny,

and I know something's bothering you now. I told you that everything was going to be okay then, and everything will be okay now. So out with it."

After a moment's consideration, Jonathan shook his head. "You were the one who called me in here. What do you want?"

Repness gave him a wary look and picked his cigar up again. Jonathan knew better than to think the issue was being dropped, though. Repness had an eerie ability to read him, and would bring it back up in a few minutes. Unless he decided it would be easier to trick him into saying something he didn't want to say.

"This album is pretty well done in," the older man was all business again. "Sure, it's climbing up the charts, but any hope it has of reaching number one was gone when it didn't hit during the first six months it was out. We've run out of singles from it as well. If you hadn't said 'fuck' so much on there, we might have had another one, but you did so we don't. You have to do something to capitalize on the new-found success it's seeing though. That means we need a new record as soon as you boys can get into the studio. How much new material have you got?"

And there it was. Repness had just breached the secret Jonathan had been carrying for almost a year. Naked Angel had been on the road with Saliva when the problem popped up. It started as a struggle but had turned into an all out war by the end of the tour. He couldn't stall any longer.

"None," Jonathan replied with a sigh.

Repness looked as if he had been slapped in the face with a dead fish.

"What the fuck do you mean, 'none'?"

Jonathan noticed the red creeping up from Repness's shirt collar and knew the man was on the verge of blowing his top. *Not much I can do about it now.*

"Exactly what I said: none. I haven't been able to write anything new for over a year."

Repness took the cigar out of his mouth and crushed it out in the ashtray. Jonathan couldn't help but see the teeth marks embedded in the end of it. At least the man seemed to be calming down slightly. There was still a sense of danger around him – barely restrained anger at least – but this was a problem Repness felt he could deal with.

"Writer's block." It was not a question.

"That's what they call it," Jonathan replied.

"Don't get smart. Why didn't you say anything about it until now?"

Jonathan sighed again and pulled the ponytail out of his hair. He shook his hair loose as he tried to decide how to answer. He scratched at his head, something Repness undoubtedly knew was a stalling gesture, and pulled his hair back up before answering. "The bottom line is that I thought I could beat it, that it was only temporary," he responded at last, looking Repness right in the eyes as he did. "I thought it was just the pressures of the tour, the bustle of everything going on around me. I guess I was wrong."

Repness stared at Jonathan for several long moments before finally nodding and shaking his head.

"I swear, the longer I'm in this business the more I believe rock stars are born with part of their brains missing." Repness leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. "Okay. You should have said something sooner, but you didn't and I can understand why you didn't. But, we have to do something about it. We have maybe

another three or four months before our window of opportunity closes. As long as we can get a single out in that time, so that interest can build in a new album, we should be okay. Maybe four to six months for you to get an album recorded. So we have time to get you fixed. I have a friend who's a pretty damn good psychiatrist...."

"I hate shrinks."

"I don't give a damn. You obviously can't fix this on your own, so I'm going to insist you get some help with it. Is that such an unreasonable request?"

Jonathan glared at him before finally dropping his head in defeat. "I guess not."

"Good," Repness said with a smile. "He deals with a lot of other musicians, and I'm almost positive that he has helped with this very problem. Hell, I think he helped out one of the guys from Guns N' Roses, and if that doesn't say something for his skills then nothing does. I'll have my secretary give you the address when you leave. I'll even have her set you up an appointment. I might be able to call in a favor and get you in today. Now, one last question: have you told the rest of the band about this yet?"

"No."

"Are you going to?"

"I don't guess I have much choice."

"Good boy. Let me get this set up for you."

Repness bent to his phone to begin making preparations for Jonathan to get his head looked at. While he did this, Jonathan rose and walked to the window, looking out over Los Angeles and trying one more time to put his finger on the reason his ability to write had left him high and dry when he needed it the most.

The psychiatrist friend was named Kel Chapman, and did not have an appointment available for that day, but because of some unknown favor he owed Repness, the man agreed to meet Jonathan for dinner once he closed his office. Jonathan called him up, they made the arrangements, and Jonathan went home for a nap before he had to meet Kel at the little Italian place down the street from his apartment.

He slept terribly, his dreams dark and ominous, almost seeming to make his mental block a physical demon that plagued him and threatened to destroy him. He awoke with a start, cold sweat drenching him and was shocked to discover that he had been asleep for nearly six hours. He showered quickly and raced to meet his new headshrinker.

Kel had not arrived by the time Jonathan arrived, so he made his way to the bar after letting the hostess know he was expecting someone else to meet him. He had managed to finish three drinks and was on his fourth when someone stepped up beside him.

“Are you Johnny Crone?”

Jonathan looked up to find a middle aged man with a goatee, in jeans, a tee-shirt, and a sport coat looking at him expectantly.

“That depends,” he answered. “Who are you?”

The other man chuckled and offered his hand. “I certainly hope you’re less rude and direct with your fans, otherwise you’ll crash and burn well before your time. Kel Chapman. We spoke earlier?”

Jonathan swore under his breath and took the proffered hand. “Sorry. I’m usually not so rude. Just a lot on my mind, I guess.”

“So I would imagine. I believe our table is ready.”

As they followed the hostess to a small table near the kitchen, Jonathan caught himself checking the young woman out. He closed his eyes for a moment and wondered if he shouldn't have skipped that last shot since there was no food on his stomach to absorb any of the alcohol.

The men were seated and the waitress took their drink orders. Kel ordered a scotch on the rocks and raised an eyebrow when Jonathan restricted himself to water with lemon. As the waitress left to get their drinks, Jonathan noticed Kel looking at him with amusement on his face.

“What?” he asked.

Kel shook his head. “Nothing, I'm just a little surprised is all. You seemed like you were about ready to drink the entire bar when I walked in and then you order water. Are you afraid you'll get too drunk and spill secrets you wouldn't ordinarily spill to a shrink?”

And just like that the ice was broken. Jonathan laughed and shook his head. “No, actually I was afraid I was going to molest the hostess before we left. I doubt I could get drunk enough to spill too many secrets.”

“I guess I have my work cut out for me then,” Kel replied with a laugh of his own. “And I'll either help protect that hostess from you or hold the video camera for you – there's a lot of money in stuff like that, you know.”

The two were still laughing when the waitress returned with their drinks. After ordering, they sat sipping on their drinks for a moment before Jonathan sighed and broke the silence.

“Look,” he started. “We may as well get this over with. Did Repness tell you about my problem?”

Kel nodded and leaned forward. “He told me you have had a severe case of writer’s block for over a year now. He had some other more colorful things to say about the danger this was putting your career into, but that’s just him overreacting. Let me put you at ease here, Mister Crone....”

“Call me Jonathan, Jon, or Johnny. Mister ‘Crone’ isn’t a real person and this problem is real.”

“Okay, let me put you at ease here, Jonathan. I won’t mince words, your career is in danger if you can’t get rid of this block, but that isn’t my concern. That’s something for Repness and your bandmates to worry over. My concern is your mental well-being. The writer’s block may be minor compared to the issue that causes it. It may even be a case of a person only having so much to say, and now you’ve said it. I doubt that, but it is a possibility. If that is indeed the case, nothing I can do will help you. For that matter, I can’t snap my fingers and cure you. You will be the one doing all the work; I’m just here to point out things from an angle you may have missed. Consider me nothing more than a sounding board. The bottom line is that you have to want to be cured, and you have to be willing to do whatever it takes to accomplish that. So it’s all up to you.”

Jonathan considered this in silence for several moments before responding. “I appreciate that, doc. I guess I felt like when Repness insisted that I see you, the battle was being taken out of my hands before I even got a shot off. Failing before I even got started, in a way. The fact that I’ll be doing the hard work is actually a relief. Does that sound weird?”

“Not at all,” Kel replied. “You might be surprised how many people feel the exact same way. This isn’t like needing stitches or having your tonsils taken out. Many people believe that when they have something out of whack in their heads that it’s too personal for anyone else to help them. The end result is that they get so confused about the different ways to fix themselves that they miss the easy answers. That’s where people like me come in. We guide you back to those easy answers. Sometimes it does take medication to get all the cylinders firing again, but usually people just need to look in the right place.”

Jonathan smiled. “That sounds about right. Here comes our food. Let’s talk after we eat, okay?”

Kel smiled back as the waitress set their meals before them. The two men ate in silence, only this time Jonathan felt the silence was much more comfortable than when the conversation first began. He was mildly shocked to find he didn’t mind that he would be telling all his problems to a man he had never met before. In fact, he was actually looking forward to it. He had a feeling that was quite similar to the one he had the first night Naked Angel had played live after their album had been released.

He vividly remembered how he stood in the darkness of the stage those few seconds before the lights came up and his scream signaled the beginning of their set, how he had the sense deep in his gut that this was not an accomplishment of a goal, but the beginning of a great new adventure.

The tour and the manifestation of the writer’s block had dulled that feeling, but now it was back again. With it, however, was the distinct feeling that he was about to undergo the most difficult period of his twenty-six years. He felt frightened by that, but at

the same time he also felt exhilarated by it. This would be the test of his conviction. He could rise up and succeed or he could fall and die. It all came down to this moment and the immensity of it made him light-headed in a way the liquor didn't. He couldn't finish eating fast enough.

Once the meal was finished, Jonathan leaned back and lit up a cigarette. He exhaled the first breath of smoke and looked over at his companion.

“Okay, doc,” he said as he made himself comfortable. “Where do we start?”

The two of them talked until just after midnight, when the restaurant closed around them and forced them out. They walked out in silence, Jonathan lost in thought yet still able to feel Kel's eyes on him, waiting. They were stopped at the curb where they could each hail a taxi when Jonathan finally spoke.

“Do you really think it will be that easy?” he asked.

Kel offered him a humorless smile as a reply.

“Okay, so maybe not easy,” Jonathan amended. “But could the cause of the problem really be that simple?”

The other man nodded as he sat down in the back of a taxi, motioning for the driver to wait a moment before pulling away. “The things we do in our past shape us in ways we can scarcely imagine,” he said. “You quit school and ran away from home after an argument with your father over your choice of career when you were just sixteen. You've had no contact with any of your old friends or your parents since that time. It seems the only person you've spoken to from your old hometown is your sister, and that relationship seems to be strained beyond a breaking point. I think if you go back and clean the skeletons out of your closet, you'll find that you can write as well as you ever

could, if not better. Who knows, the experience may even give you some fresh material to draw from.”

Jonathan nodded slowly, coming to a decision within himself. “I’ll fly out early in the morning.”

Kel smiled and held out a business card. “I’m glad to hear it. Call me when you get back. This has my personal cell number on it. Any time you need me, call me. It doesn’t matter what time of day or night, I will help any way I can.”

Jonathan took the card and waved as the taxi pulled away. He sighed deeply and traded the business card for his cell phone. He hit the speed dial and waited for someone to pick up on the other end.

“What’s up, man?” a voice answered, barely audible over a massive din in the background. Jonathan rolled his eyes.

“Where are you?” he asked. “We need to talk.”

Jonathan stopped for a moment to allow his eyes a chance to adjust to the darkness of the club. Pussycat Dreams looked a lot brighter from the outside than it actually was once you got past the entryway. The deep pounding of the bass in the music was not helping his headache at all, and he found himself wishing once again that his guitar player had picked some other place to hang out at tonight. He made his way deeper into the club, not bothering to look around until the main stage came into view. He glanced up to see a dancer he had never seen before on the stage and groaned quietly. He didn’t mind coming in here since he’d partied more in here than anywhere else in Los Angeles, but there was a reason he always tried to avoid amateur night.

He tore his eyes away from the girl trying desperately to look sexy on the stage and glanced around the room, looking for his guitarist.

“Hi, Johnny.”

Jonathan turned to find himself staring at a buxom blonde in a barely-there bikini. His mind raced to come up with the girl’s name. It wasn’t very often that he came in here sober, even rarer that he left that way, and the condition made it nearly impossible to remember anything other than that the place was bad for his wallet. Finally a name came to him and he prayed silently that it was the right one.

“Hey, Victoria,” he replied, hoping wildly that she wouldn’t get mad if he had her name wrong.

“Out hanging out for a bit? Want a private dance?”

At least he got the right name. “Not tonight, darlin’. Have you seen Jayme around? I’m supposed to meet him here.”

Victoria shrugged and pointed to a table right in front of the stage. Jonathan could see his guitar player Jayme Skellter tossing dollars onto the stage and laughing. From the looks of it, he was insulting the girl as he was tipping her. Jonathan nodded his thanks and started making his way through the tables to where his friend was sitting. His suspicion was confirmed as he sat down next to Jayme.

“Three words, baby,” Jayme was saying as he tossed several bills onto the stage. “Ly-po-suction.”

“Being a gentleman as always, I see,” Jonathan said.

Jayme turned and smiled at him before throwing the last few dollars in his hand in the general direction of the stage and leaning back. “Hey, at least I toss ‘em some cash, don’t I?”

Jonathan snorted. “Yeah. Just don’t get kicked out of here like you did that place in Nashville.”

“Hey, it wasn’t that bad!”

“Dude, the DJ came out of his booth to help kick your ass. I had to pay the manager for the table they broke when you fell.”

“They pushed me into it!”

“You fell on it. They pushed you after you licked a dancer on your way out the door.”

“Whatever,” Jayme growled. “You didn’t come here to complement my titty bar etiquette. What’s up?”

Jonathan sighed and glanced away before answering. The DJ was calling for the next dancer to make her way to the stage and the first-timer was rushing off in tears, her tips clutched to her face in an effort to hide her shame.

“I’m going home,” he said at last.

Jayme looked at him in confusion. “You called me up, told me you had something important to tell me, and then tell me you’re going home as soon as you get here? Dude, I’ll calm down, just tell me what’s going on.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Jonathan replied. “Look, how much have I told you about my past?”

“Not much. Just that you came to L.A. when you were sixteen with stars in your eyes, and that your parents died in some car wreck three years later. I remember you said something about your dad setting up some fund to take care of their house so you would have it to sell or live in if you ever went back.”

Jonathan nodded. “Right. After I dropped out of school, I told my parents to fuck themselves and split town.”

He took a deep breath. The next part was going to be the hardest to tell Jayme, simply because he knew his friend would be hurt by the lack of trust in not telling him sooner.

“Here’s the deal,” Jonathan said. “Let me talk, then I’ll let you ask questions.” After seeing the other man nod, he continued. “I’ve had writer’s block for over a year. I never said anything because I thought I could shake it – just getting used to a new situation, you know? I mean I’d never had an album out or done a world tour before, right? Well, I didn’t shake it. I was talking to Repness today and he was asking how much new material I had written. I told him none and he flipped. He called some shrink buddy of his and had me go see him. The guy turned out to not be so bad and actually helped me a little bit. He thinks that all the shit I left unfinished when I left home is weighing me down. Guilt or some such shit like that. He thinks that if I face my past, I can clear my head for the future and be able to write again. So I’m going home, to try and bury a few skeletons.”

Jayme leaned back, a thoughtful look on his face. “Didn’t you go back for your parents’ funeral?”

“No,” Jonathan replied, shaking his head. “I didn’t find out that Dad had left me the house until much later, when my sister called to tell me she never wanted to see me again. Of course, she wasn’t very happy that dad had left it to me and not her. She wasn’t the one who ran away and ignored them as she put it. Last I heard, she moved to Florida to be a beach bunny or some bullshit. I haven’t been back to that pisspot of a town in a decade.”

The other man nodded. “And you haven’t been able to write anything?”

“I came up with an album title the other day, but no songs.”

“What was the title?”

“I wanted to call it *Fuck It All*,” Jonathan said with a smirk. “I figured that pretty well summed up my state of mind right now.”

Jayme snorted a laugh and glanced back at the stage where one of the regular dancers was shimmying through her routine. He was silent for long enough that Jonathan thought he was either about to explode in anger or he had forgotten that someone else was sitting with him. Jonathan was just opening his mouth to speak when Jayme turned back to him.

“I’ll let the other guys know,” Jayme said, his face more serious now than at any other time Jonathan could remember. “You go home, clear your noggin, then come back and write us the grandest fucking sophomore album the industry’s ever seen.”

Jonathan was nearly speechless. “You- you’re not pissed at me?”

“Not really,” Jayme replied with a shrug. “You got a problem, you kept it from us, but you had your reasons. No sense rocking the boat and worrying the shit out of the rest of us unless there was a damn good reason, right? Now you got a damn good reason,

and here you are telling me about the problem. Why would I be pissed? Give me a little more credit than that, okay?"

Jonathan stared at the man beside him with new eyes. Jayme had always been the hardest partier, the most uncontrollable of the band unless they were on stage or in the studio. Only Jonathan himself had been able to come close to keeping the man straight, and now here he was, being the man that Jonathan had always hoped was hiding inside.

"Thank you," he said softly. He was hoping it had been drowned out by the music, but either it hadn't or Jayme had read his lips.

"Don't worry about it. Go get your shit together, man, and I'll see ya when you get back."

The conversation had gone much smoother than he expected, and Jonathan was immensely grateful for that. As he left the club to finish packing and head to the airport, he couldn't help but wonder if anything else would go even a fraction as smoothly from this point on.

Jonathan had planned on going back to his apartment, packing, and then heading out on a morning flight, but in what seemed like a portent of things to come, it didn't work out that way.

He ended up searching for a battered address book for most of the night so he would be able to call the caretaker of his parents' house to let the man know he was coming home. The search was strange for one reason: he finally found the book in plain sight. He was expecting to have buried it in a box of meaningless trinkets from home or

shoved into a corner of his closet, but it turned out to be sitting on his coffee table.

Jonathan was certain he had not placed it there.

He cursed softly to himself for a night wasted demolishing the already tenuous tidiness of his apartment, shoved the book into his pocket, and replaced all the things he had dragged out into the middle of the floor. A quick glance at his clock showed that he would not be leaving early in the morning as he originally planned. It was already going on five AM, and that meant it he would not even be waking up until after noon. The only good thing was that since he was flying back east, the caretaker would probably already be awake.

The caretaker was thrilled to hear from him, and even more thrilled to discover he was coming back. Jonathan did his best to be a good sport through the old man's rambling but still breathed a sigh of relief when he hung up the phone. Next he called the airport to make arrangements for the flight back home. He would be leaving at nearly one the next morning, but he would be arriving there in time for lunch. It would be a red-eye flight, but at least he was getting first class for the longest leg of the trip.

Los Angeles to Atlanta, Atlanta to Montgomery, and then I'm driving home again, he thought as he waited on the phone to be transferred to the Avis counter. *I can't believe I'm actually going through with this.*

Once the car rental reservations were made, Jonathan hung up and fell into bed, hoping to get a few hours sleep before he began his ordeal. After staring at the ceiling for over an hour, he finally fell into a sleep that was fitful, but mercifully without dreams.