

## Chapter 1

The late, great Isaac Asimov once wrote, “Life is pleasant. Death is peaceful. It’s the transition that’s troublesome.” Had I any inkling that within a fortnight of my return to Montreal I’d learn just how troublesome that transition could be, I’d have jumped on the very next plane back to London.

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Riley. I’d tell you my full name, but then I’d have to kill you—if you didn’t die laughing first. I was forty-three years old and for two decades had lived a more or less grasshopper existence, going pretty much where the wind blew me, working at whatever struck my fancy. With the exception of a couple of years in South Africa with a marine salvage company and a couple more years flying for a small air-freight operation in the outback of Australia, it had been mundane stuff. I’d spent the last three years on the west coast of Scotland co-managing a small trekker’s inn and pub at the foot of Ben Nevis, while trying to write a book. A novel, not another travel book. But enough about that.

And enough about me.

On a rainy Friday evening in early June, the night after I got home, I borrowed Rocky’s old pink Volvo and drove out to the Château du Lac hotel in Hudson, an upscale bedroom community strung out along the south shore of the Ottawa River, about sixty kilometres west of Montreal. When I went into the hotel bar, Nina Sparrow and her two male bandmates were already on stage, producing a lot of sound from guitar, keyboard and drums. The bar was packed, but I found a vacant chair at a table occupied by two men and a woman, all in their early twenties, sharing a pitcher of beer.

“Mind if I join you?” I asked, shouting to make myself heard over the music.

“Help yourself,” one of the men shouted back.

I nodded my thanks and sat down. The woman, a chunky, vulnerable-looking blonde with acne scars and too much eye makeup, favoured me with a smile, then dismissed me completely. I ordered a draft from a harried waitress and sat back to enjoy the show.

Nina Sparrow and her mates played rock, hard. Nina’s voice was clean and powerful, at one moment cool and smooth and sexy, the next moment raw and edgy. She was slimmer than when I’d last seen her four years before, and more toned. She’d had her belly button pierced and appeared to have a new tattoo or two. And she’d adopted a new look. Her black hair was cropped and gelled to a sleek cap, emphasizing the sculpted angularity of her face. Sneakers and jeans had given way to low-heeled black boots, hip-hugging black leather pants showing a lot of muscular midriff, and a brief black leather vest with a single snap fastener

below her small, flat breasts. She played her low-slung black Stratocaster with considerable energy and under the lights her arms and upper chest glistened with perspiration. I liked the look. So, I suspected, did most of the males in the audience, perhaps hoping for a “wardrobe malfunction” if the snap of her vest popped. I later learned that the snap was fake, though, for show only: the vest zipped up the back.

Her drummer and keyboard player were new. Dressed in T-shirts and jeans, both were at least a decade younger than Nina—who, I realized with a mild shock, was thirty-six—but they were good, complementing her raunchy guitar without overwhelming her vocals. She couldn’t see me, of course. The stage lights made it impossible for her to see anything beyond the first row of tables.

A few words about Nina and me. While we were growing up Nina Sparrow had been my virtual kid sister. Her parents, who’d lived next door to my parents, were doctors and militant social activists. Between their work with Médecins sans frontières and their commitment to various anti-you-name-it movements, they travelled extensively, and almost from the day they brought Nina home from the hospital, my mother had looked after her while they were away.

Nina was eight when she started taking piano lessons. They were paid for by her parents, of course, but she practiced on my mother’s old upright, the same piano on which I’d learned to play. I don’t remember when she took up the guitar, but it wasn’t long before she surpassed me on both instruments. She practiced more than I ever had. For me, music was a hobby, at best an avocation. For Nina, it was a passion.

A few weeks before leaving Scotland I’d received an email:

You are cordially invited to the launch of  
Nina Sparrow’s new album  
Songs from Waterville  
at the Château du Lac Hotel,  
460 Main Road, Hudson, Quebec,  
Friday, June 7, 8 p.m.  
No cover. Bring your friends.

The text was accompanied by an image of the album cover, a photograph of a row of colourful houses along a stony, curving beach, with blue sky and rolling green hills in the background. I’d recognized the location: the village of Waterville in County Kerry in southwest Ireland. I’d stopped there overnight a year or so before, on a bike tour of the Ring of Kerry with Isla Taggart, my on-again, off-again Scottish girlfriend—who had, incidentally, become permanently off-again a few weeks before I left. Such is life.

The set ended and the house lights came up to enthusiastic applause. “Thanks, people,” Nina said, leaning into the mic, breathing hard. “See you in fifteen, okay? Meanwhile, you can buy copies of the CD at the bar.”

She racked her guitar and draped a towel around her neck. I started to get up, but sat back down when she went to a table near the foot of the stage. The table was occupied by a woman with a thick mane of coppery red hair, a girl with identically coloured but shorter hair who could only be the woman’s daughter, and a broad-shouldered man with saturnine features and neatly barbered dark hair. With a sudden frisson of surprise, I recognized the woman, even though I hadn’t seen her in twenty years. Her name was Teresa Jardine, and we’d lived together for six months or so in the mid-90s, before I’d been smitten by wanderlust. It had been a tempestuous relationship that hadn’t ended well, for the most part thanks to me. I experienced a momentary flutter of panic that the girl might be my daughter, but she looked too young, no more than fourteen or fifteen.

I felt a powerful urge to get out of there before Terry recognized me, but someone sitting behind me called out Nina’s name. Nina turned. A camera flashed. She smiled and waved, then locked eyes with me. Her face lit up—then, almost as quickly, darkened.

Oh-oh, I thought, bracing myself.

I got up again as she worked her way through the room, hip-weaving between tables, exchanging high-fives and acknowledging accolades from people in the audience. I wasn’t sure whether to expect an embrace or a punch, prepared myself for either, or both. She stood in front of me for a moment, looking up at me, hands on hips, conflicting emotions playing across her elfin features. Then her deep violet eyes filled and she leapt up, wrapping her arms around my neck and clasping her legs around my hips. A stab of pain lanced through my right knee. I’d banged it up five weeks earlier during a mountain rescue operation that had gone sideways when one of the rescuees, a London dentist, had panicked, sending us both tumbling.

My knee held, though, as Nina, leaning back and looking me in the eye, said, “You bastard.”

She kissed me, long and hard, crushing my lips against my teeth, while the trio with which I’d been sitting gaped. After the initial shock, I surrendered to the inevitable and kissed her back.

“Goddamn you,” she said against my mouth. She unwrapped her legs and I lowered her to the floor. She weighed next to nothing. Even in her boots she was a foot shorter than my six-foot-three.

People were staring. A few clapped or whistled.

“So I guess you’re not still angry with me,” I said.

“Who says I’m not?” she said. “Shit, Riley, you just fucking took off.” She sighed. “But it’s what you do, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I said, guilt twisting in my guts. “I suppose it is.”

“All right,” she said. “No point in going on about it, is there? Dead horses, spilt milk, and water under half-burned bridges, right?” She stood on her toes and kissed me again, a sisterly peck on corner of my mouth. “You look like hell, by the way.”

“Thanks,” I said, fingering the ridge of scar tissue on my cheekbone, also a consequence of the rescue gone awry. I’d broken my nose again, too—for the third time, I think. I’d told Nina all about it during one of our Skype sessions. “You never were too bright, were you?” she’d said.

“Why didn’t you tell me you’d be here?”

“I was flying standby. I wasn’t sure I’d make it.”

“Well, your timing sucks. I’m back on stage in ten minutes and I gotta pee first.” She smiled at the people with whom I’d been sitting. “Are these folks friends of yours?”

“We just met,” I said.

“Okay if I steal him?”

“Go ahead,” the woman said with a shrug. Her indifference made Nina’s smile grow wider.

As I lifted my travel jacket off the back of the chair, Nina took my hand and started to drag me toward the table at which Terry Jardine sat with the red-haired girl and the broad-shouldered man. I dug in my heels.

“What’s wrong?” Nina said.

“That’s Terry Jardine.”

“Yeah. So?”

“I don’t think she’s going to be very happy to see me.”

“It’s okay. I’m sure she’s forgiven you.” I wasn’t, but I let her lead me to Terry’s table. “Look who I found,” Nina said.

“Hello, Terry,” I said.

Terry Jardine’s eyes widened with surprise. “Riley. My god. It’s been a long time.” The girl’s expression was open and curious, but the man’s gaze was wary.

“How are you?” Terry said.

“I’m well,” I said, as Nina abandoned me to use the bathroom.

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