

CHAPTER 1

The worst things happen in the dead of the night.

It's almost midnight when I hear the front door open. My dad's finally home. He's only six hours late this time. The low murmur of the late-night news snaps off. For a few moments there's an eerie silence, like in a horror movie before the axe falls. In this case, the axe is my mom. She stayed up waiting for him to come home, mentally sharpening her blade.

Snatches of words and phrases in Chinese, low and harsh, creep up the stairs. Sounding angry and scared, my mother throws out words like "debt" and "house payment". My dad's quiet apologies interrupt her.

Lately they've been fighting about money as often as a radio station plays a Top Ten hit. Last year, my dad lost his job when the clothing company where he was assistant manager for over twenty years moved its operations to China. A few months ago, he got a job working the stockroom at a grocery store for minimum wage, less than half what he was making before.

I lie in bed, in the dark, practicing chords on my unplugged guitar. Street lamp glow streams through the open blinds, casting strips of light on the bedroom wall. For weeks, I've been practicing day and night, until my fingertips are numb.

Because I'm playing with Pumping Iron this Saturday in the Montreal Rocks Contest!

My best friend, Craig Chemielewski, formed Pumping Iron with a few other guys from school. They've been practicing together for about a year. I even wrote a couple of songs for them. Craig writes the music and I write the lyrics. We're Chang and Chemielewski, and we're going to be the Lennon and McCartney of our generation.

A couple of the other guys weren't too thrilled when Craig suggested that since I was writing for the band, they should give me the chance to play with them. Mick especially. He's such a diva. I don't want to give Mick a reason to kick me out, so I'm happy playing backup.

I finger the strings, listening carefully to the quiet notes. "Hey, John," I whisper to the black and

white poster of The Beatles on the wall. “How’s this?” I play the chord. He doesn’t say it sucks.

I’ve been taking guitar lessons every Saturday for the past few months. It looked so cool to be in a band that I had to try. Once I got started, I was hooked. Mark, my teacher, told me that I have talent. “The music’s inside you. You have to keep practicing to draw it out.” I practice so much that Mom says the guitar is permanently attached to my hip. I strum *Let It Be*, whispering the words as my parents bring their fight upstairs to their bedroom.

“David!” my dad shouts. “Put away that damn guitar and go to bed!”

It’s not the first time he’s said that, and it won’t be the last.

I wait until their bedroom door slams shut, muffling their words. I can still hear the angry tone in Mom’s voice. After a few seconds, when I’m sure they’re too involved in their argument to notice, I continue where I left off and sing quietly to the end of the song. Then I lean the guitar against the wall beside the bed and lie down. It’s time for the big performance with Bono. He’s been begging me to play with Edge and the boys. Tonight, he gets his wish. Santana’s just going to have to wait.

With my trusty air guitar, I play a solo that blows away audiences around the world. At least until I fall asleep. I know what’ll happen in the morning: we’ll all pretend we didn’t hear them fight.

Sure enough, when I come down the next morning, Kim, my nine-year-old sister, is sitting at the kitchen table eating toast and telling my grandmother the latest gossip about her classmates. Dad’s hiding behind the local Chinese newspaper. All I can see of him is the top of his thick black hair over the paper’s edge. My mother stayed in bed, under the blankets. She prefers to cry when she’s alone.

“Angela says her mother puts stuff into her lips with a needle so she won’t look old.” Kim licks jam off her fingers. “And Michael says his mother never tells anyone how old she is. But she’s forty.”

“Spilling everyone’s secrets again?” I ask.

“It’s only a secret from everyone in *school*,” Kim points out.

“Old is good,” Grandma says, in Chinese. “I am eighty-four years old. One becomes wiser with age.” Although she’s lived in Montreal for most of her adult life, she can barely speak English. Toishan is our dialect. Like every morning, she’s busy packing leftovers for our lunch. I take a quick peek. Barbecue pork sandwiches and dried mango. All right!

When Yeh-yeh, our grandfather, passed away a few years ago, my parents decided Nai-nai, as Kim and I call her, would live with us. Nai-nai smells like the tiger balm she rubs on her legs every night to relieve her aching muscles. She’s almost five feet, just tall enough to reach my armpits. Even though she’s small, it’s easy to pick her out in a crowd because she likes clothes with bright colors and patterns. Nothing matches, but we don’t tell her. The yellow butterfly clip I gave her for Mother’s Day last year keeps her white hair

from falling into her face.

Long before I was born, Yeh-yeh and Nai-nai owned a Chinese hand laundry that was one of the last in Montreal to close. We have an old black-and-white photo of Yeh-yeh standing in the doorway of his new business, with a big smile on his face. He was young and skinny when he opened Chang's Chinese Hand Laundry. The words are hand-painted on a wooden sign over the door. It was sweaty, back-breaking work that left his hands red and raw.

Nai-nai left China when she was a teenager. She and her parents walked miles and miles, crossing a river to get to Hong Kong to look for a better life. After the Second World War, relatives arranged for her marriage to Yeh-yeh. After about a year, Yeh-yeh had to return to Canada, so they were separated until the Canadian government finally allowed Chinese men to bring their wives over. Uncle George was born first, then Dad, who's tall and lean like Grandpa was, with a full head of hair that I'm hoping is genetic.

I pour some Cheerios and milk into a bowl, then sit at the table to eat. My dad hasn't budged from behind the paper. The front page has a big picture of the prime minister and columns of Chinese characters. Sometimes I think it would be neat to know how to read Chinese, but Chinese school is on Saturdays, the same time as my guitar lessons. I have my priorities, and besides, I have all the homework I can handle.

"How come you came home so late?" I take a spoonful of cereal. The crunch fills up the sudden silence in the kitchen.

The pages stop moving, so I know he heard me, but he doesn't answer right away. "I was visiting some friends."

"The guy who runs mah-jongg games in the basement?"

The newspaper comes down a couple of inches. "How do you know that?"

I shrug. "Everyone knows. Why'd you go? I heard people there play for big money. You don't gamble."

Nai-nai nods in agreement. "Lim *Tai* knows someone's husband who gambled away the family business," she says in Chinese. Giving him a look that only a mother could, she continues, "Then they lost their house because they couldn't pay the mortgage. When the wife threatened to take the children and leave him, the husband tried to commit suicide. They live with some relatives now."

Kim's listening, wide-eyed.

The paper wall comes down. "What were you doing, playing guitar so late?" he says to me, ignoring Nai-nai.

"Just practicing."

"You should be studying."

“At least I was home,” I reply, looking him in the eye.

He looks annoyed, tries to get the last word. “You better make sure you pass, or you won’t graduate.”

But I can’t let him have it. “No problem. I got good marks. I could probably calculate the odds of you winning back the money.”

The paper wall goes back up.