

Excerpt from *The Phoenix Syndrome* by Claire Gem

I don't quite know how to describe the concert. I can say it was as stimulating visually as it was to my ears. The band—four guys and a girl—all had hair longer than mine, which was well past my shoulders. All except for the keyboardist, whose head was shaved, although he sported a long, red beard parted into two straggly plaits. I wondered how he kept them from tangling with the keys. The girl who sang vocals had inky hair hanging in strings to her shoulders, and she wore a black leather bustier that laced up the front. Well, almost laced. In truth, the garment left little to the imagination.

But then there was the drummer. If not for the overhead monitors panning in for close-ups during the performance, I might never have known he existed. What a travesty that would have been.

In a word, he was . . . magnificent. He sat like a king on his throne at the elevated rear of the stage, sparkling silver-flake drums surrounding him like loyal minions. The monitor directly over our seats focused on him often, so close and so clear I could see the sweat glistening on sculpted upper arms, bare beneath a black muscle shirt stretched taut across a broad chest. Some sort of ink crawled over one bicep. A black-and-white paisley bandanna covered most of his head, but long, dark curls framed his face and clung damp against his neck. His facial hair, limited to a sparse mustache and goatee, was chocolate brown. I indulged in the fantasy that his eyes were that same sweet, smoldering color.

His passion for his work was palpable. Hands flying, head bobbing, he was completely engrossed, as if the music were a drug he was tripping on. His hooded eyes gave him the look of a sleepy lover, but when he did open them, I could swear he was gazing directly at me.

Looking back on that night, I can't be sure how long we'd sat there before I fixated on my drummer boy. The music, which at first grated on my senses as way too loud and completely discordant, gradually began to permeate my brain. Before long, my bare toes started tapping against the carpeted floor. I freed one hand from my cup of wine to pat my thigh in time with the music. When my head began to bob, almost of its own accord, I smiled.

Ah, now I know why they call progressive metal fans *head bangers*.

The next hour and a half went by so quickly I might have slipped into a time warp. At one point I wondered if my cup of nine-dollar wine was laced with something mind-altering and illegal. I began to dig the music. I was actually enjoying the concert.

But before I'd seen nearly enough of my chocolate king behind the drums, the stage went black and the lighting came up. The band did not return for an encore. My first heavy progressive experience had come to an end.

I blinked in the sudden brightness, dazed for a moment, like I'd woken from a dream. Jeri was struggling with the strap of her shoe, her other hand braced against her forehead as though she had a massive headache. Grommet guy, too impatient to wait for the two elders beside him to vacate the aisle, vaulted easily over the backs of the seats into the row in front of us and disappeared into the crowd.

I'd almost forgotten my own young progeny—a son and a nephew—were in the same building.

We reunited on the sidewalk fifteen minutes later. The rain had ceased, leaving the city gleaming under the streetlights, clean and brand new.

Somehow, I felt that way too. Clean and brand new.

We were climbing into my brother's SUV, Paul at the wheel with Jeri and Jay next to him in the front. I sat squashed between my husband and son in the back. Jeri's head immediately dropped to Paul's shoulder. I knew she'd be asleep before we got onto the West Side Highway.

I so wanted to do the same, and cuddle against my husband. But he'd said barely a meaningful word to me all evening. I sighed, dropped my head back against the seat, and closed my eyes.

"So, what did you guys do for all that time?" Ryan asked.

"We saw Dreamwish," Paul piped up from the front, sounding as though his statement actually made sense.

"You saw our concert? You guys?" Jay sputtered through his laughter.

I opened my eyes to find my son staring at me in much the same way Jeri had been earlier.

"How'd you like it, Mom?" Ryan asked in a slight singsong of ridicule, which I chose to ignore.

I caught my brother watching me in the rearview mirror. He was wearing an impish grin. "For a while there," he said, "we were afraid your mother might run off with one of the roadies."

The next words popped out of my mouth before my brain had a chance to stop them.

"To hell with the roadies. If I run off, it will definitely be with the yummy drummer."

Shocked silence extinguished all laughter, and I peeked up to see four pairs of owlish eyes fixed on me.

"Go to sleep," Karl snarled under his breath. "You've had too much to drink."