

Chapter 1

Cambridge, MA, 1991


The dreamers were out in full force that windy March night. Someone had leaked the news about Lenny Weir's secret performance to the grunge community, causing fans from all over New England to swarm Central Square. Most didn't have tickets for the sold-out show, but still hoped for a miracle or at least a glimpse of the guy. "Feels like a giant family reunion, eh?" said Colin.

I nodded and shivered in my thin wool coat. But if we were at a family reunion, then I was an auxiliary member or something. Or perhaps a third or fourth cousin, or an in-law of the in-laws. I followed Colin and his friends through the hugging, high-fiving throng, feeling invisible one minute and painfully obvious the next. And why did no one else mind the cold? Even the waiflike teenager holding a sign that said MY FIRSTBORN FOR YOUR TICKET looked comfortable in just a t-shirt and jeans. Meanwhile, I could barely feel my fingers.

My original idea plan had been so much simpler: a box of ice cream, a package of cookies, maybe some Devil Dogs too. Then a couple of hours on the couch, eating and enjoying the latest issue of *The Boston Phoenix*. Basically the same thing I did every weekend night, and whenever I had free time. The reading material varied; the food, not so much. And the vomiting? Well, that always sucked.

But that afternoon, Colin had arrived home all rosy and breathless—ocean air and cigarette smoke steaming off his leather jacket—with an extra ticket *for me*. And how could I turn him down? Especially when he claimed to be skipping out on his first ever meeting with Suzanne's parents for the show. Not to mention the way Colin's Bono-esque brogue transformed me—plain old Erin Reardon—into *Aerin*, a Celtic princess, and turned my insides to mush.


"Plenty of people'd give their left arm to see Lenny, Aerin," he said with a wink. "Just never breathe a word of this to Susie, okay? She thinks the boss needs me down at the bar. Emergency situation, you know? Massive party. All hands on deck."



Secret shows are usually a win-win. The artists are psyched to try out new material with a live audience, and their superfans get to hear the stuff first. Aerosmith occasionally plays them in Boston—using fake names, of course—and the Stones gave a legendary performance at some dumpy little club in Worcester a few years back. The bands spread the word through loyal friends and trusted industry people only, making the best shows cozy, intimate affairs. And although I'd bet some hardcore Winterlong fans would've considered sacrificing an arm to see Lenny play solo that night, none of the lucky folks holding tickets seemed interested in trading them for severed limbs.

Lenny Weir's show at the Middle East was a particularly big deal because he'd recently been released from drug rehab and clearly struggled with his newfound fame. About a year earlier, he'd been arrested for opiate possession, and the police had made several trips to his California home during the fall of 1990 for domestic disturbances. Nevertheless, Winterlong found themselves preparing for a European summer tour, and Lenny had chosen Cambridge as the city for his first public performance in months. Which made sense, because Cambridge was a mecca for the type of students, musicians, and artists who appreciated Lenny's work.

What did they hear in it, though? That really puzzled me. I mean, it sounded sloppy, discordant, and inaccessible. And Lenny—the guitarist and lead singer—didn't like showing his face for some reason, so he kept it covered with long hair most of the time and refused to be photographed unless he was wearing dark sunglasses.



"C'mon, let's cross," said Colin, leading Jimmy, Dan, and me across Mass Ave. When Colin had invited me to see Lenny with him, I'd assumed it'd just be the two of us, but as it turned out, his friend Mark—who worked at the alternative radio station WFNX—had given him four tickets. Jimmy and Dan worked with Colin at the pub. They were Irish too, but their accents weren't nearly as sexy as Colin's.

I reached into my coat pocket to check on the little notebook and pen I'd brought along. Because why not write a review of the show and try to get it published? I needed a new job anyway, and I could string together a few words well enough. That's how Lester Bangs got his start. He wrote an unsolicited album review for *Rolling Stone* back in the 60s, and they hired him on the spot. And since this Lenny Weir concert was such a big secret, I figured most of the established local critics wouldn't have tickets. Worth a shot, anyway. I'd send my review to the three major Boston papers—*The Globe*, *The Herald*, and *The Phoenix*—and see if anyone bit.

The temporary office work I'd been doing for several years—ever since things went bad with Elvis Costello in Geneva—got really old, really fast. I was sick of working in new situations each week, meeting new people all the time, and eating lunch alone. So yeah, becoming a newspaper critic might be the perfect fresh start. Maybe it'd even help me stop puking, because I'd have to work lots of nights and weekends.

Not to mention that I was fed up with the bullshit other writers constantly spewed about Lenny and Winterlong in the various music rags. A reviewer at *New Musical Express* had recently called Winterlong "the American heroes singlehandedly kicking down barriers established by poser groups like Guns 'n' Roses and Poison." *Rolling Stone* had credited Lenny with "ushering in a whole new era in rock & roll." And *Spin* crowned Winterlong "the band of the century." What the hell? Surely Winterlong's record label *paid* those magazines to generate propaganda. The band of the century? Had they forgotten the Doors? I mean, Winterlong was a refreshing change from the pretty boys, drama queens, and formula-rock posers of the late 80s, but the adulation had gotten out of hand. Someone needed to put things in perspective.

"Hey Colin!" called a girl on the crowded sidewalk, but Colin just waved and said something about needing a beer. Then he pulled open the door of the Middle East and motioned for Jimmy, Dan and me to follow. I'd never been to the legendary nightspot before, and couldn't believe how much it resembled a 'normal' Middle Eastern restaurant.

"Where do the bands play?" I shouted to Colin over the din of voices, laughter, and silverware. An experienced local club goer would've known that three separate musical venues lurked within the building: an upstairs room that held about two hundred people, a small adjoining café where acoustic acts and belly dancers often performed, and a large, converted bowling alley in the basement with a capacity of about six hundred.

"Lenny'll be downstairs later," said Colin. "But let's have a black-and-tan up here first. Hey, look, there's Mark over by the bar. I'll get the first round."

It didn't take long for me to start resenting Mark. Sure, he'd supplied us all with tickets, but he also struck me as a serious asshole. He kept his pale gray eyes glued to the door—even while Colin introduced us—and his mouth turned down in distaste when he shook my hand. I already felt self-conscious about my appearance, and Mark just made it worse.

Every other female I spotted had dressed their slender bodies in variations on the grunge uniform: flannel shirt, ripped jeans, and Converse sneakers. None carried handbags or wore visible makeup—other than eyeliner—and all walked with the confidence of women who knew their way around the Middle East and probably nightclubs in general. Not me, though. I slouched on a barstool, clutching my purse and coat, and hoping my black miniskirt, black wool tights, and sensible pumps blended into the darkness of the room. Even worse, I had caked foundation makeup and pressed powder onto my poor blemished face—all that puking takes a

real toll on the skin. I was a chunky Madonna wannabe, ten years too late.

Just focus on your newspaper review, I scolded myself, mussing up my hair. Lester Bangs didn't get famous for his appearance.

Colin caught the attention of the busy female bartender right away, and ordered up five black-and-tans: a mixture of Guinness and IPA. But even though the beer was strong and potent, I couldn't relax. Twenty-seven years old, and I felt ancient. I hadn't hung out in a bar with four cute guys since Europe, and never without other girls in the group.

Colin pointed his glass in the direction of a dark-haired man talking to a woman in a plaid shirt and said, "Brett Milano. As you'd expect."

"That's Brett Milano from *The Globe*?" I asked. "The music critic?"

"Uh huh. He writes that nightclub column for *The Phoenix* too. The girl there with him's Kim Deal. From the Pixies, you know?"

Well, yes, I knew about the Pixies, but *shit*. Brett Milano critiqued all the best Boston rock shows. So if *he* was there, he was covering the concert either for *The Globe* or *The Phoenix*. Possibly both. Something inside me dropped. But wait. What about *The Herald*, the city's most conservative newspaper? Surely none of their reporters had been invited. Okay. Change of plans. Rather than send my review to all three papers, I'd give *The Herald* an exclusive. And unlike other writers who fawned over Lenny Weir for inexplicable reasons, I'd be brave enough to tell my truth. The spirit of Lester Bangs lived on.

"Hey, Colin," said Mark, nodding toward a scruffy guy smoking a butt at a corner table, "check out Peter Wolf."

"He's always here," said Colin. "Probably lookin' to sing a duet with Lenny later on."

I opened my mouth to ask if the dude in the black wool hat was *that* Peter Wolf—the guy from the J. Geils Band who sang "Centerfold" and that song about the wooba-gooba with the green teeth—but stopped before any sound came out. Because *of course* he was *that* Peter Wolf. I wasn't in my bedroom, eating junk food and fantasizing anymore; I was out on the real Boston music scene. Elvis Costello had derailed me for a few years, but I'd bounced back.

"You okay, Aerin?" asked Colin. "You're lookin' tired, girl."

"Just a little." I wished I could tell Colin how much I liked *his* looks. Maybe someday.

He reached over and patted my shoulder. "Ah, don't worry. Lenny'll give you a second wind."

I couldn't help sighing. I mean, why the hell was Colin dating Suzanne? They'd been together over a year, and I knew they had good sex—our apartment had very thin walls—but she didn't understand his *soul*. Unlike me, she never stayed up late with him when he played guitar on the porch, and she didn't help him write lyrics either. Suzanne liked drinking tea, watching sitcoms, and padding off to bed with her fashion magazines around 11 o'clock. Sometimes, she'd sit and listen to one or two of his songs, but her long lashes and expertly plucked brows couldn't hide the boredom in her eyes. The way I saw it, she liked being a musician's girlfriend, but didn't appreciate good music.

So I waited patiently for Colin to come to his senses and realize he'd chosen the wrong roommate. Sometimes, when we'd both had a few beers and the moon was glistening on the ocean, I'd expect him to look straight at me, then drop his guitar and lead me down to the cool, dark beach. Other times, I'd wake up in bed, still quivering from the way he'd touched me in a dream, or feeling the weight of his lanky body on top of me. Once, I even woke myself calling out his name in my sleep, but I don't think anyone heard. And how great would it be when I didn't have to hide my feelings for him any longer?

"Drink up, girl. We gotta head downstairs soon."

I rubbed my chin, which was still throbbing from a zit I'd popped earlier, and forced a

smile. "Okay. Just gimme a minute."

In the club's cavernous basement, a forgettable local band was massacring an Aerosmith song. The smells of bygone beer, old cigarettes, and ancient body odor mingled comfortably with fresh sweat, new smoke, and something resembling bad breath. I couldn't even estimate the number of people in the large room — since most huddled around the bar or in the dim corners — but the place seemed far less crowded than you'd expect for such a special show. And everyone was ignoring the band on stage.

"Poor guy," said Colin, glancing at the guitarist. "That's a hard-workin' man. If I see him around later, I'll buy him a beer."

He knows what it's like, I thought. Colin's punk band played a lot of after-hours parties — in private homes — and occasionally at fundraisers or backyard barbeques. They hoped to get a deal with an indie record label, but they'd never even been booked in a club like the Middle East.

"Speakin' of beer," said Jimmy, "I got the next round. C'mon, Danny, gimme a hand. Budweiser okay with everyone?"

Mark, Colin, and I nodded, and Jimmy and Dan headed off toward the bar. The band finished the Aerosmith song and the guitarist unplugged, bitterly bidding the crowd a good night before stomping off stage. The other musicians shrugged — they'd obviously expected to play longer — and began disassembling their shabby equipment.

"Bravo!" shouted Colin, whistling and clapping. "Joe Perry'd be honored!"

I wasn't so sure about that, but whatever. "Should we go stand up front?" I suggested.

"Good idea," said Colin. "Place is startin' to fill up. But don't expect to see much o' Lenny, no matter how close you get. Guy doesn't like showin' his face in public."

"Yeah, what's up with the hair and the sunglasses?" I asked. Finally, after two full beers — and the Xanax I popped before leaving the house — I felt more chill.

"Don't know," said Colin as Mark lit a cigarette and exhaled in a noisy, exasperated way. "If you want my opinion, Lenny's a bit like Steve Miller."

"Steve Miller?" I asked. "'Big Old Jet Airliner' Steve Miller?"

Colin nodded. "Exactly. Everyone knows Steve Miller, right? But you wouldn't recognize him if he walked through that door, would ya? That's 'cause he never put his picture on the record jackets. Wasn't comfortable in the spotlight. Same thing with Lenny. I've heard he has bad acne too —"

"Total bullshit," interrupted Mark, blowing smoke in my face. "Bullshit rumors, bullshit tabloids. Lenny did an interview at FNX last year and his skin was fine. He's an introvert. End of story. People need to give him some fuckin' space."

Colin looked amused. "Easy there, Marky boy. We're just friends talkin' here. No need to bite my head off."

"Sorry," said Mark. "But I'm fuckin' sick of people who think they know Lenny."

And you do? I thought.

But the conversation ended there, because Jimmy and Dan had returned with plastic cups of beer for everyone. I accepted mine, promising to get the next round, despite the fact that I'd probably had enough beer already. My empty stomach growled, and combining alcohol with Xanax is never a great idea.

A few roadies began dragging new musical equipment onto the stage. They stacked Marshall amps, plugged cords into outlets, tested microphones, tuned guitars, and arranged the instruments in silver stands. Fans started pouring into the place too, and the air grew thicker, warmer, and smokier.

My heart beat with cautious excitement, and I shivered. But when I reached up to scratch my chin, I touched liquid. *Shit!* The freaking zit was bleeding again. "Be right back," I muttered to Colin and headed for the ladies room.

But cleaning up a zit in that environment would've been impossible. All three stalls were full of women chatting and smoking pot, and a pack of grungy teenage girls dominated the sink and mirror area. Some smoked butts while others chatted drunkenly about Lenny and some new Winterlong video they'd seen on MTV. *Fuck, fuck fuck.* I needed space and privacy. Fast.

Darting back out into the dark club, I almost crashed into a cocktail waitress. "Excuse me," I said, "but is there another bathroom? Somewhere? I have a little emergency." I pointed to the blood on my face, hoping she'd understand.

The waitress looked me up and down. Thin and angular, she was probably about forty years old, with deep lines around her mouth. But the sight of the zit softened her a bit. "Over there," she said in a gravelly voice. "Down that hallway, keep goin' straight. Ignore the *STAFF ONLY* sign. Anyone asks what you're doing, say you got lost. Got it?"

"Okay ..." I tried to thank her, but she scurried off with her tray of drinks before I could say anything else.

In the dimly lit hallway, I found two little bathrooms: one with a WOMEN sign on the door; the other labeled MEN. No one was around, so I scooted into the women's room and went straight to work on my face.

Then, just as I patted on some pressed powder, heavy footsteps approached. *A manager?* I rehearsed the waitress's advice in my head: *Oh no! This isn't a public bathroom? I'm sorry. I got lost. I'm leaving now ...*

But when the door opened, I realized I wouldn't need any excuses because the man who entered was barely conscious and clearly not an authority. Drunk, stoned, or both, he sported a huge, untrimmed mustache and beard, and all of his clothing – wrinkled and dirty, like the rest of him – swam on his thin frame. Unlike the cute grunge guys out in the club – with their clean flannel shirts and low-slung corduroys – this guy's ragged attire barely passed for clothes. His tattered black hi-tops lacked shoelaces. Probably homeless.


I inched away from the sink as he stumbled toward a stall, his elbow bumping mine.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "You Dave's girl?"

"Uh, no, I'm Erin, and I'm outta here. But you might wanna use the men's room. This is the women's. Just sayin'."

It took a second for that to register with him, but when our eyes met, I saw a brief flash of recognition – like he knew me, or wished he did. "Erin," he repeated. "Erin the Beautiful."

Oh well, I thought, scooting out the door. *He's a mess, but he's harmless.* The only person the guy seemed capable of hurting was himself.



The crowd had grown much denser, and I didn't reach the front, where Colin and his friends waited, for about fifteen minutes. I thanked everyone who allowed me to pass, but most people ignored me.

"Where you been, girl?" asked Colin, handing me another beer. "I thought you'd abandoned us."

Before I could answer, though, Jimmy smacked Colin's arm. "There's the man!" he shouted as the room exploded in whistles and applause.

"Holy shit!" said Colin. "Holy shit, there's Lenny!"

But his surprise couldn't hold a candle to mine. Because stumbling around onstage was the man I'd just seen in the bathroom. He'd donned a pair of large, dark sunglasses, but everything else remained the same.

"That's Lenny Weir?" I asked.

Colin shot me a suspicious glance. "I'd say so!" he shouted.

I wanted to tell him about recent my encounter with the dude, but the noise of the crowd drowned out every other sound. Not to mention that my heart was pounding in my ears like an amplifier on reverb. People around us were screaming Lenny's name, and a very drunk girl appeared to be having some kind of nervous breakdown.

Lenny, however, remained unfazed as he shuffled over to a wooden stool and picked up an old acoustic guitar. Something about the way he carried himself—his stooped posture under the ratty sweater—reminded me of my dad when I was young, when he'd first started having sciatica problems.

"Hi?" said Lenny to the crowd, his mouth too far away from the microphone. "You guys okay?" He slurred every word, but his voice was sweet, almost innocent.

A roadie ran out and adjusted the mike while the crowd responded enthusiastically to Lenny's question. "Good," said Lenny, re-tuning a guitar string and sounding slightly jealous. "Good to hear."

"I love you Lenny!" hollered the nervous breakdown girl.

Lenny flinched and peered into the audience through his dark glasses. "Okay," he said. "I'm gonna do somethin' mellow, okay?"

Some people clapped, but a few booed too. Lenny Weir wasn't known for his mellow songs. Poor guy; he was doing his best. *This is like Dylan plugging in at Newport, I thought, only backwards.*

The man on stage, however, didn't appear to be making any kind of Dylanesque political statement; I think he just wanted to stay upright. He plucked a few strings, then stopped abruptly, tapped lightly on the guitar, and began playing a vaguely familiar melody. But it wasn't until his damaged voice—something between a crackle and a moan—kicked in that I recognized the song. It was Bob Dylan's "Tangled Up in Blue."

I gasped in disbelief. I'd just been thinking about Dylan and then ... wow. Lenny and I were on the same wavelength. But Lenny's rendition of "Tangled Up" bore little resemblance to Dylan's. I mean, it's not the happiest song to begin with, but Dylan keeps it slightly optimistic. Not Lenny, though. The pain in his delivery was almost unbearable. I reached into my bag for the notebook, but decided to just listen for a while instead. I had to *process* this shit.

Which wasn't easy. By the time Lenny reached the line about everyone he'd once known being nothing but an illusion now, the nightclub had become a church, with Lenny Weir presiding as the darkest, most miserable prophet ever. Only his long, graceful fingers looked comfortable on that stage. Every other part of him seemed intent on burying itself beneath hair, glasses, or clothing. But I saw through it all because I'd seen his eyes in the bathroom. And he'd seen mine too. Nobody else in that audience could say that. *Erin the Beautiful*. Something had happened between us, and I needed to talk to him again. Maybe we could help each other.

Now, I'd had similar feelings about other rock stars, but this was different. Totally different. Lenny and I had *spoken*. Privately. And I knew where to look for him after the show.

The next song he attempted—which I'd heard on the radio—was an edgy rocker called "Shaded Mind," but Lenny didn't switch to an electric guitar. Instead, he clung to the acoustic and stripped the song bare.

*Sleepless angel, tarnished pillow,
Membrane opens as you lie
Cripple growth and cripple beauty
Counting backwards, pain subsides.*

He stopped singing at that point and strummed a sad-sounding chord. Then he played it

again. And again. And again. His head began to nod hypnotically, in sync with the strumming, and his eyes focused on something no one else could see. I couldn't look away throughout the entire, terrifying ordeal. Nobody could. How long did it go on? I'm not exactly sure. After a while, Lenny just hung his head to one side and started singing again.

Muffled silence, needle glisten

Swollen eyelids, cannot see

Shaded mind it cannot listen

Dirty powder, set me free.

He tried shrieking those last few words, but his voice came out hoarse, tormented, and far more forlorn than it'd ever sounded on the radio. A blazing guitar solo should've followed that verse, but Lenny ended the song abruptly after the word *free*, and the crowd burst into relieved applause.

"Thanks," he said, struggling to light a cigarette. "Um, you mighta heard I was... sick."

People nodded and mumbled.

"Yeah, it sucked. But I wrote some songs. I, uh—" He interrupted himself by sneezing, then laid his lit cigarette on the stage floor and started digging in his sweater pockets, as if he forgot he was performing. Eventually he found what he'd been looking for—a tissue—and carefully blew his nose. "Awright," he said, the cigarette still burning on the floor, "this one's called 'Cracked.'"

Eyes darted around and people shifted their weight uneasily, like horses before a storm. "I think *he's crackin'*," whispered Jimmy. "Or smokin' crack."

But Lenny was more than just cracked. That long hair, the sunglasses, the layers of clothing: they served as camouflage but also held him together. Somehow, they made it possible for him to survive.

And the wire-bound notebook? It never left my purse. The tragedy playing out on stage mirrored my own desperate story, leaving me weak, confused, and unnerved. I touched my neck and imagined Lenny's fingers there. If only he could hold me like he held that guitar.

Instead, he started to leak. He slipped into another trancelike series of minor chords, and I swear I saw blood pouring down his face. It may have been sweat, but it sure looked like blood. And like everyone else in the club, I stood stonelike, helpless, watching the whole world hemorrhage out of that elegant, wretched body.

A terrible beauty is born. I didn't know where I'd heard that phrase before; it just popped into my head and hung there. Later on, though, I remembered it came from a Yeats poem I'd learned in high school. *Such a terrible beauty.* A perfect description of Lenny at the Middle East that night.

I turned away for a second, and that's when I heard the thud. Looking up, I saw the guitar bounce off the stage floor.

"Oh god," Lenny moaned into the microphone. "I ... where ... heron?" Then his body went limp and collapsed into a heap of yarn and wrinkled khaki.

For a split second, the room fell silent. Then roadies swarmed the stage and carried Lenny away, a small, frail creature in their arms. Sickening memories of my dad after his accident flooded my mind. His stained white neck brace ... the perpetual smell of urine ... that hollow, gape-mouthed face, like a rotting jack-o-lantern. And his eyes, so empty and lifeless until they'd land on me. Then they'd glimmer oddly. "See, Erin, he loves you," my mom would say. But I knew the truth: my father blamed me for everything. And I deserved it.

"Thank you, everyone, for coming out tonight," said a clean-shaven guy in a black t-shirt who'd replaced Lenny onstage. His voice sounded measured and confident, but he kept claspings and unclaspings his hands. "I'm Lenny's tour manager, and I apologize for the

abbreviated show. I'm sure he'll be fine after some rest. He's just ... exhausted. And dehydrated. So ... have a good night. And ... drive safe."

As the overhead lights flashed on, someone in the audience began to clap. Others joined in slowly, as though awakening from a dream. Lenny had taken us all on a tour of his private hell, but the harsh florescent lighting dropped us rudely back in a Cambridge nightclub.

And yes, the show was over.



"I think Lenny said somethin' about heroin at the end there," muttered Colin as Dan drove us home to Winthrop. "Any of you hear that?"

"Yeah," said Jimmy. "So much for his rehab."

But their voices were white noise in the back of my brain. I stared out the window at the taillights of the cars ahead of us in the Callahan Tunnel, knowing that Lenny had called out to me, Erin. His *Erin the Beautiful*. He needed me. He wanted me. And someday soon, the two of us would reunite. I just needed to figure out how to make that happen.