

Prologue: A Poet's Lament (From the novel, Poet Of The Wrong Generation)

Johnny Elias stared at the photograph with bittersweet regret. Four suntanned faces smiled back at him; a precious memory from the best day he could ever remember. The blazing sunshine. One enormous stage. Soaring music. Scores of people dressed in summer clothes lined up for miles on the Great Lawn. A perfect day when all was right with the world. If only life could again be so invigorating. So free.

The snapshot was date-stamped August 15th, 1991: the day Johnny had keenly anticipated that whole summer. His last college summer. A fleeting moment when life seemed full of endless possibilities. A time when a ballad was a three-minute escape into someone else's melancholy. When friendships were real. When love was more than a crippling game of insincerity.

Johnny's eyes momentarily broke away from the framed photo and over to a heap in the center of the room. Twelve cardboard boxes contained mementos of the last few tumultuous years. The framed gold records. The press clippings. The fan mail. He drew a heavy sigh then refocused on his own bronzed face in the picture. How young he looked at twenty-one. His hair thicker. His smiling green eyes without a trace of sadness. He was so naively happy. So very much in love with the young woman whose shoulders his arm was draped around. *Ah, love... whatever that was.*

Johnny spotted his CDs and vinyl records stacked haphazardly against a wall. The Beatles. Paul Simon. Bob Dylan. Jim Croce. Joni Mitchell. Elvis Costello. A plethora of songwriting legends, most of whom had reached their creative apex long before he was born. Back in 1991, this collection was Johnny's only meaningful possession inside his tiny Brooklyn apartment – the address he departed from on that celebrated August morning en route to Central Park.

Suddenly, another wave of glorious memories came flooding back. Megan's "borrowed" green blanket. A maze of revelers jockeying for prime position. The blistering sun setting perfectly behind the midtown skyline. The deafening roar of the crowd. A crowd in which he was just one anonymous voice, blending in, cheering on one of his boyhood heroes.

Anonymity, what a concept!

Of course, that was long before the impossible balancing act. The late night rehearsals. The early morning laryngitis. The amphetamine haze. The mounting expectations. The in-band politics. The covert enemies. The media bombardment. The endless demands.

Disillusionment.

Johnny's eyes shifted to the right hand side of the treasured snapshot. Andy Raymer was squinting through his studious, horn-rimmed spectacles, a Cheshire-cat grin etched on his face. Andy: his loyal partner-in-crime. His Cobble Hill High compadre, and later the man who would manage the madness that became his career.

A pained expression spread across Johnny's face. *Damn!* All that Andy had sacrificed! All those hours he sat in a lonely, cluttered guestroom, fanning the flames of his unlikely stardom. And for what? If only he had found a way to enjoy the ride... and the words of gratitude for everything Andy had done along the way.

It was on that brilliant summer day in the photograph when Andy improbably met the lovely woman to his left, Jacqui Spencer. Johnny smiled at the memory. The socially awkward Andy had never been much of a ladies-man. And yet look how comfortably he and Jacqui interacted, only hours after randomly meeting.

Jacqui: Johnny thought. *Andy's soul mate, but my own personal sounding board.* In fact, his spiritual advisor too. His perspective provider, and of course, the artist whose album cover would help launch one of the most legendary debuts in pop music history.

Ah, but a short-lived career, Johnny reminded himself. More like a two-year whirlwind that saw him evolve from a directionless, novice poet to a national megastar in a drumbeat. From a one-room Brooklyn hovel to a doorman building overlooking Central Park. From dingy nightclubs to theatrical euphoria. It was breathtaking. His ultimate rock and roll daydream. And yet nothing like he could ever have envisioned. Nothing at all!

The last pair of eyes in the photo that Johnny's were drawn to belonged to Megan Price. *Megan,* Johnny sighed. Sweet, fragile, complicated Megan. The first girl he ever loved. The only one he ever loved. The woman who embraced him for who he was, who shaped his impression of loving stability - and whose haunting betrayal inspired the painful, creative storm that would evolve as the musical soundtrack of a generation. If only she had the courage to stand up for what mattered most, how different things would have been... for both of them!

Johnny fell back in an easy chair, clutching the framed photo, closing his eyes. He could feel the warmth of that bright summer day. A symphony of boom boxes echoed across the Great Lawn through the corridors of his mind. The smell of freshly cut grass and cold beer filled his sinuses. And suddenly the years melted away. He was twenty-one again, racing ahead of his friends, hoping to score a prime viewing location for the massive free concert.

Long before the boisterous cheers. Before his infamous fall from grace. Long before he understood the consequences of success, the agony of betrayal, or the origins of lyrics and melodies.

Long before he became poet of the wrong generation.