

Songs in Ursa Major

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Songs in Ursa Major is her debut novel.

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*For the amazing women in my family –
especially my grandmothers,
Anne-Marie and Esther,
and my aunt,
Rosemary*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book was inspired by the records produced at A&M Studios and Sunset Sound in the late 1960s to early 1970s, under labels such as Reprise Records, Ode Records, and Warner Bros. Records.

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Island Folk Fest

Saturday, July 26, 1969

As a stagehand cleared the dismantled pieces of Flower Moon's drum set, the last shred of daylight formed a golden curve around the cymbal. It winked at the crowd; then the red sun slipped into the sea. In the gathering dusk, the platform shimmered like an enamel shell, reverberating with the audience's anticipation.

Any minute now, Jesse Reid would go on.

Curtis Wilks stood about thirty feet from the platform with the rest of the press. There was *Billboard's* Zeke Felton, sharing a joint with a Flower Moon groupie in a beaded kaftan; Ted Munz from *NME*, reading over his notes under the nearest floodlight; Lee Harmon of *Creem*, trading stories with *Time's* Jim Faust.

The Flower Moon groupie approached Curtis with the joint between her lips, eyeing the pass around his neck. It showed a picture of Curtis's face – which Keith Moon had once compared to 'a homeless man's Paddington Bear' – printed above his name

and the words *Rolling Stone*. The groupie offered Curtis the joint. He accepted it.

His exhale became a brushstroke inside an Impressionist painting; swirls of smoke rose in the salty air, tanned limbs and youthful faces interweaving like daisy chains across the meadow. He handed the joint back to the girl and watched her skip into a ring of hippies. Someone had a conga; thrift-store nymphs began dancing to an asynchronous rhythm.

Curtis had cut his teeth as a correspondent on the festival circuit. Berkeley, Philly, Big Sur, Newport – none of them could touch Bayleen Island for atmosphere: the hike up the red clay cliffs, the wildflower meadow, the view of the Atlantic Ocean. There was something magical about having to take a ferry to get to a show.

As he watched the girls dance, Curtis felt a wave of premature nostalgia. There was a sense in the industry that folk was on its way out; the Vietnam War had been dragging on so long, the protest songs that had made Dylan and Baez what they were now felt empty and tired.

Curtis had come to see what they'd all come to see: Jesse Reid ushering in a new epoch for the dying genre. As if on cue, the dancing girls began to sing Reid's breakout single, their voices tremulous with excitement.

*'My girl's got beads of red and yellow,
Her eyes are starry bright.'*

Their feverish giggles recalled Curtis to the time a young Elvis Presley had played his high school in Gladewater, Texas, back in '55. Eighteen-year-old Buddy Holly-obsessed Curtis had

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watched girls he'd known since kindergarten openly weep, swept away by the fantasy that Elvis might choose them. The full *Bye Bye Birdie*. That was the power of a true rock star.

Soft-spoken Jesse Reid's persona couldn't have been more different from Elvis's, but Reid seemed to inspire the same devotion in his fans. He had the cowboy baritone of Kris Kristofferson (but Reid's sounded effortless), and the lyrical guitar skills of Paul Simon – plus, he was taller than both, with blue eyes that, according to Curtis's guilty pleasure *Snitch Magazine*, were 'the color of medium stonewash Levi's.'

*'She makes me feel so sweet and mellow,
She makes me feel all right.'*

'Sweet and Mellow' was a Snickers bar of a song; to hear it was to crave it. Hands down the hit of the summer, it had been holding in *Billboard's* top ten for eighteen weeks. Curtis had been tracking Reid since he opened for Fair Play at Wembley Stadium the previous year – but this single from Reid's self-titled album had turned him from fringe hero to mainstream sensation overnight.

And tonight, Reid would take his place as the heir apparent to folk rock.

The crowd broke into applause as a bald man with a gray beard shuffled onstage – Joe Maynard, the Festival Committee chair. The longer the audience clapped, the more pained Maynard looked. Curtis's news radar bristled.

'Yes, hello, my beautiful friends,' he said. Maynard quieted the cheering with his hands.

‘Well, there’s no easy way to say this, so I’m just going to say it,’ he said. ‘I’m afraid Jesse Reid won’t be performing tonight.’

Curtis felt a stab of disappointment as his mental list of feature headlines turned to ash. A visceral shock wave passed through the crowd. One by one, dreamy expressions began to wilt, a field of dandelions turning white with anger, ready to blow.

And then they did. Cries of outrage rang the twilight like a bell. The girls who had been singing and dancing a moment before collapsed into sobs. Maynard shrank behind the mic.

‘But we’ve got a great act for you up next – it’ll just be a few minutes now,’ he said, sweat gleaming at his temples. A second roar from the crowd buffeted him into the wings.

Curtis edged toward the platform. Something must have just happened – he’d seen Reid’s A&R man backstage after Curtis had interviewed Flower Moon. Maybe Reid had gotten too drunk to go on. Maybe he’d lost it backstage. The festival tonight was performance number thirty-six in a sixty-arena global tour. Sometimes artists just cracked; Curtis had seen it before.

He spied Mark Edison passing from the backstage area into the audience and caught his eye. Edison was a reporter for *The Island Gazette*, a local independent daily. Most of the Fest’s press corps found his snide antics insufferable, but he had always been useful to Curtis.

The audience’s initial dismay had given way to movement. Amidst cries from the most stalwart Reid fanatics, lines had begun to form through the crowd, pushing toward the exits.

Edison reached Curtis. He offered Curtis his flask – warm gin. They both drank deeply.

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‘What’s happening back there?’ said Curtis. ‘Where’s Reid?’

Edison shook his head. They stepped aside as two girls thundered by, ripping up the PEACE LOVE JESSE sign they carried like a banner. Curtis did not envy the band about to perform to this mob.

‘Who’s going on?’ said Curtis. ‘Someone from tomorrow’s lineup?’ Mark shook his head.

‘It’s a local band – the Breakers,’ said Mark.

‘I don’t know them,’ said Curtis. ‘What’s their label?’

‘Label?’ said Mark. ‘They don’t have one. They’re just a bunch of kids. They were scheduled to play at the amateur stage down the hill, and the committee just scooped them up. The biggest show they’ve ever played is forty, fifty people.’

‘Holy shit,’ said Curtis. This was going to be a train wreck.

As he spoke, three young men began to set up onstage. They couldn’t have been more than twenty. The drummer looked the most filled out, with a chiseled jaw, shoulder-length black hair, and almond-toned skin. He and the bassist were clearly related; the bassist looked younger, hair shorn around his chin, a red bandanna tied across his brow. The guitarist was paler, with boyish features and a somber manner. His sandy hair flopped in front of his eyes as he tuned.

‘We want Jesse!’ a girl shrieked from over Curtis’s shoulder.

Curtis began to wonder if it wasn’t better just to head back to town. The Elektra producers had rented a yacht and were hosting an after-party for industry folk. Bayleen Island was only five miles from international waters, which meant good drugs; he could be flying within the hour.

‘Jesse Reid, Jesse Reid,’ a chant rose up in the crowd among the faithful.

As the boys checked their equipment, Curtis noticed a figure plugging in to the amplifier behind the drum set. As she straightened up, the spotlight caught her yellow hair, which hung down to her waist like a bolt of golden silk. Her clothing was simple: jean cutoffs and a white peasant shirt, an acoustic guitar strapped across her back. Her tanned legs looked girlish as she strode center stage, but she had a woman's features: full lips, hollow cheekbones.

She glowed.

'Who is that?' said Curtis.

'Jane Quinn,' said Mark. 'Lead vocals and guitar.'

As she got into position, the boys instinctively inched toward her. Their feet pawed the ground, like horses anxious at the starting gate.

'We want Jesse!' a hysterical girl cried out.

Jane Quinn stepped up to the mic. Curtis saw then that her feet were bare.

'Wow,' she said, flushed with excitement. 'Quite a view from up here.'

The crowd ignored her. Those headed toward the exits continued walking, as if she wasn't there. A small contingent of Reid fans chanted his name like a descant over the din.

'Jesse Reid, Jesse Reid.'

Jane Quinn tried again.

'Hi, everyone,' said Jane. 'We're the Breakers.'

This had no impact; the crowd continued to chatter as though they were in a parking lot rather than at a concert. Onstage, the boys fidgeted in place. Jane exchanged a look with the guitarist.

'Get off the stage,' a shrill voice cried above the chaos.

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Jane glanced toward the drummer as though about to count off. She faltered. Curtis felt a wave of pity. How was this slip of a girl supposed to compete with one of the world's biggest stars?

'Jesse Reid, Jesse Reid.'

Then Jane Quinn turned toward the crowd, squaring her shoulders. Her movements were slow and deliberate. She took a deep breath and placed a hand on the mic stand, closing her eyes. She stood perfectly still, listening. The crowd quieted half a decibel.

When she opened her eyes, there was flint in her stare. She leaned toward the mic.

'My girl's got beads of red and yellow.'

Curtis's heart skipped a beat as the chorus from 'Sweet and Mellow' arched over the meadow like a silver comet. Jane's bandmates exchanged mystified looks. The crowd gasped.

Had she really just done that?

'Her eyes are starry bright.'

Jane Quinn surveyed the audience with self-assurance, as though to say, *I know you think you want Jesse Reid, but I'm about to show you something so much better.* It was like watching someone hold a lighter up to a monsoon. The girl was bold as fuck.

'She makes me feel so sweet and mellow.'

What a range – a soprano, in the school of Joan Baez and Judy Collins, though not nearly as patrician-sounding as Collins, or

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as embattled as Baez. There was an untrained edge in her voice, an almost Appalachian coarseness, that raised the hair on Curtis's neck. Just gorgeous.

'She makes me feel all right.'

Jane glanced at her guitarist. He gave her a nod – she had taken a leap, and they were right behind her. The root chords of the song were a simple A-major progression any practiced group could pick up. The drummer counted them in, and the Breakers began to play. Time slowed.

'My girl makes every day a hello.'

When Jesse Reid sang 'Sweet and Mellow,' his voice intoned the melody: no ornamentation, just his pure baritone and his guitar. As Jane Quinn sang, she cast off any memory of Reid's rendition, adding runs and grace notes as she went, as though composing the song in real time. Curtis was astounded. She made choices no other musician would have – or could have – made.

'Her eyes light up the night.'

The crowd couldn't help themselves – they began to sing along. They had all come to witness a legend being born, and now they were: it just wasn't Jesse Reid.

'She makes me feel so sweet and mellow.'

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Curtis had been at Newport when Bob Dylan had walked onstage with his electric Fender Stratocaster. He'd been in Monterey two years later when Jimi Hendrix had lit his guitar on fire during 'Wild Thing.' Neither compared to this. An unknown taking over the headlining spot – a girl. They'd be talking about Island Folk Fest '69 forever.

'She makes me feel all right.'

Those who had been walking away turned back. Those who had been crying smiled. They whooped and cheered and kissed and hugged. When the song finished, they lost their minds.

'Janie Q!' shouted Edison, applauding beside Curtis.

Janie Q.

'It really is a beautiful night,' said Jane, as though continuing a conversation from earlier.

With that, she counted the Breakers into their next song – an up-tempo original called 'Indigo' that brought to mind 'White Rabbit.' Curtis couldn't catch the words, but the music was hot. The Breakers had a great sound – a mix of art and psychedelic rock, all twisting notes and braying chords.

Even so, Jane's voice stole the show. Her loveliness felt personal – it was impossible to look at her and not take flight in some small part of you. As she sang, Curtis felt that true rock-star feeling – he wanted her to see him. She gave her shoulders a small shimmy, light refracting off the silken strands of her hair. Then it happened. Jane Quinn grinned right at him. He just knew it.

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Hours later, as Curtis floated on the Elektra party yacht snorting lines off the Flower Moon groupie's abdomen, Mark Edison received word from a source at the Island's hospital. Thirty minutes after that, *The Island Gazette* went to press with the headline: FOLK FEST'S BREAKOUT JESSE REID NARROWLY MISSES DEATH IN MOTORCYCLE CRASH AND CANCELS REMAINDER OF TOUR.

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Jane lay in bed, listening to the wind chimes knock against the front porch. Daylight warmed her eyelids, but she kept them closed. She wasn't ready to let go of last night.

A series of images replayed through her mind: kicking her sandals at Kyle as he tuned his bass behind the amateur stage; Greg agape as he placed his snare drum into the back of a beat-up army jeep; the crowd roaring as a Fest staffer dropped them behind the Main Stage; the heat of the spotlights on her own cheeks as she walked on and realized she'd left her shoes behind; Rich's knuckles turning white against his frets when the crowd refused to quiet.

In three years of performing at the Fest, Jane had never imagined she might appear on the Main Stage. It was as much a part of her world as a tri-deck yacht docked in Regent's Cove: sure, she could see it, but it belonged to the sphere of wealth and power. Jane hadn't been scared to walk onstage last night because it hadn't felt real.

Then she'd seen Rich about to lose his nerve, and her instincts had taken over: if they wanted 'Sweet and Mellow,' she'd give them 'Sweet and Mellow.' She could still hear the sound of her own voice crackling over the loudspeakers.

The irony was that Jane had never even heard Jesse Reid's album – she knew 'Sweet and Mellow' because it had been playing nonstop at her grandmother's hair salon all summer, but the album had been so overhyped (namely, by Kyle) that she'd resisted listening to it. She'd had to improvise the hell out of the verses, but in the end it hadn't mattered; she could still hear the crush of applause after she'd sung.

Knuckles rapped against her door. Jane kept her eyes closed.

'Janie.' Grace walked in. 'I waited as long as I could, but we have to be up-Island by eleven.' Her aunt drew back the curtains, illuminating Jane's cluttered floor.

'My shift doesn't start until noon,' said Jane, rolling over.

'Sorry, I know. But I have an interview at eleven-thirty – outpatient care.' Grace pried open Jane's closet and tossed a starched blue uniform at her head. Jane groaned.

'Come on. Today's going to be a *big day*,' said Grace. Jane sat up. She felt a twinge of dread as the uniform slid into her lap.

Downstairs, Jane found her cousin Maggie propped up at the kitchen table, chair pulled out to accommodate her swollen belly. Their grandmother, Elsie, looked up from the stove.

'Morning,' said Elsie. The kitchen smelled like lemons and burned butter.

'Good morning,' said Jane, piling her hair into a bun with a comb. Maggie glared at her, then turned back to *The Island Gazette's* front page.

'And hello,' said Jane. Maggie said nothing. She was twenty to Jane's nineteen, and in golden hair, long limbs, and sun-browned skin they could have been sisters. That's where their similarities ended.

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Elsie gave Jane a wink, then went back to scraping hash browns around the frying pan. She was in her early fifties, and Jane had inherited her angular features and gray eyes – though Elsie’s gaze seemed otherworldly, exaggerated by her silvery hair. It had been that color for ten years, since the night Jane’s mother hadn’t come home.

Jane walked over to the stove and reached her fingers into the pan.

‘By all means, help yourself,’ said Maggie, without looking up. Jane popped a hash brown into her mouth and felt the oil sizzle on her tongue. She walked to the table and read the headline over Maggie’s shoulder.

‘Whoa – Jesse Reid was in an accident?’

‘Ugh, Jane, your breath,’ said Maggie, elbowing Jane into her own chair. Elsie slid a plate of hash browns, bacon, and eggs in front of each of her granddaughters. She picked up the paper just as Grace swept in from the yard.

‘Good, you’re up, Janie,’ said Grace, replacing a watering can under the sink. She walked over to the pan and plucked out a hash brown, just as Jane had done.

‘And that’s where Jane gets her manners,’ said Maggie.

‘Relax, officer, it’s the last one,’ said Grace. She and Maggie shared a strong mother-daughter resemblance, though Grace’s brown eyes creased around the corners and her hair had dimmed from time spent indoors.

Elsie let out a hoot. She folded over *The Island Gazette* and began to read aloud.

‘While Jesse Reid was having arguably the worst night of his life, Bayleen Island favorites the Breakers had one of their best: indeed,

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Reid's absence paved the way for the Breakers to become a main act, and lead singer Jane Quinn was more than ready to take center stage.'

'Mark Edison wrote that?' said Jane. In six years, he'd never given the Breakers a favorable review.

'He goes on to call the Breakers a "slowly evolving but serviceable garage quartet,"' said Maggie.

'There it is,' said Jane. Elsie placed the paper on the table.

'What was it like up there?' she said.

Jane could still feel the music thrumming from her heels to her sternum, the crowd's energy washing over her in waves.

'Like an ocean,' she said. Elsie's eyes twinkled, as though sharing in the memory. Grace gave Jane a weary smile.

'We should head out in a minute,' she said.

A clomping noise shook the stairs as the Breakers' drummer, Greg, descended from Maggie's bedroom. In Jane's mind, Gray Gables was a grand old house; but any time she saw a man framed in one of its Victorian doorways, she was reminded that it was just a cottage.

'Morning, all,' Greg said. He wore his clothes from the night before, caked with dry sweat, his hair sticking up at odd angles. After the show, they'd stayed out drinking until last call.

'Janie Q!' he said, giving Jane a high five. 'Last night was epic. Breakers for life!'

'The Breakers are derivative and trite,' said Maggie.

'Mags, my chickadee,' said Greg. 'I know you're uncomfortable, but there's no need—'

'I told you, you can't stay here until after the baby comes, and last night you just showed up and passed out. You snored for five hours, Greg.'

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‘You should have moved me.’

‘I tried. I could not. You’re like a giant drunk porpoise,’ Maggie said. She turned to Jane. ‘And you brought him here.’

‘It’s not Jane’s fault,’ said Greg stoutly. ‘I’m sorry, it was thoughtless of me.’ He picked a hash brown off Maggie’s plate. Maggie looked murderous.

‘Time to go,’ said Jane.

‘Are you heading to the Center?’ said Greg. ‘Can you drop me at the rez?’

‘You’re not staying?’ said Maggie.

‘Can’t,’ said Greg. ‘I need a shower. I need clothes. My feet are swollen – I need to rest.’

‘You’ve got to be fucking jok—’ Maggie gave a little gasp. At once, the room was at attention. She was only two weeks from her due date.

‘Relax,’ Maggie said, shifting slightly in her chair. ‘It’s just a kick.’

Greg sighed. ‘Wouldn’t it just be easier to get married and move in?’ he said.

‘Not for me,’ said Maggie.

The Quinn women smiled. The last of their kin to marry had been Charlotte Quinn, traded as a fifteen-year-old bride to the captain of a Portuguese whaling vessel in 1846. When the whaler had landed on Bayleen Island to drop its cargo, Charlotte had stolen off inside a kerosene crate. The seven generations of Quinns who had lived on the Island since had been called many names – harlot, witch, grandma – but never wife.

They left the house in the Quinns’ ancient wood-paneled station wagon at quarter to eleven. Jane adjusted the FM dial until she came across ‘Yellow Submarine.’ She rolled down the window

and let the salty air wash over her as they drove from the white cottages of Regent's Cove into the wooded roads of Mauncheake. She hummed along to the radio with tender vocal cords.

A stone's throw off the coast of Massachusetts, Bayleen Island's terrain spanned sandy beaches, wildflower meadows, farmland, and forests across its six towns: the three year-round towns – Perry's Landing, Lightship Bay, and Regent's Cove – and the sprawling 'up-Island' towns – Caverswall and Mauncheake, which abutted the Wampanoag reservation.

The local population was of mixed descent, with Wampanoag, Portuguese, British, and Barbadian bloodlines as inextricably tangled as a fisherman's nets. The Island's diverse community was as intrinsic to its identity as its clay cliffs and beach plums, contributing to its broad appeal as a vacation destination.

Tourism was the Island's main industry, and each summer its population swelled to ten times its normal size. Vacationing families generally stayed in Regent's Cove and Lightship Bay, with their large public beaches, while the rich resort-goers flocked to the yacht club in Perry's Landing. The stratospherically wealthy, including several former first families, oil magnates, and the East Coast bluebloods, lived in thousand-acre Mauncheake and Caverswall estates. The locals and the vacationers interacted on a primarily customer-service basis.

As the Quinns' station wagon approached the rez's south entrance, Grace slowed to let Greg out.

'Thanks for the lift,' said Greg. Grace smiled, shifting the car into reverse.

'Janie Q,' Greg called, 'you working the Carousel later?'

'You know it,' Jane called. He waved as the station wagon pulled back onto the road.

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‘You can take the car back after your shift,’ said Grace. ‘I’m on for a double – I’ll grab the bus.’

‘You sure?’ said Jane. Grace nodded.

Five minutes later, they pulled into a long, paved driveway that Jane knew almost as well as her own. She watched a blue-clad caregiver help a patient across the recreation lawn and felt herself go numb. Grace rolled down her window and waved to the guard at the gate.

‘The Mighty Quinns,’ said Lewis, ushering them inside.

Housed in the palatial home of a nineteenth-century whaling magnate, the Cedar Crescent Hospital and Rehabilitation Center was an upscale private facility known among the wealthy for its state-of-the-art care and its discretion.

Grace had worked there for over a decade, and Jane had become a certified nursing assistant once she graduated from high school. She had intended to work at the Center full-time, but found that she couldn’t bear to face its sterile halls every day. Bartending had turned out to be just as lucrative; but with Maggie’s baby coming, they needed every extra cent, so Jane had taken a few center shifts.

Grace pulled into the parking lot. She switched off the motor but didn’t get out of the car.

Jane turned to face her aunt. In profile, Grace looked almost exactly like Jane’s mother.

‘What is it?’ said Jane.

Grace shrugged. ‘I guess I didn’t imagine myself a grandmother at thirty-nine,’ she said.

‘Gran must have been about that age when she became a grandmother.’

Grace shook her head. ‘Maggie just does whatever she wants.’

'I personally can't wait to watch her have to change diapers,' said Jane.

Grace laughed. 'She doesn't understand. She'll never get a day off. And we're all going to be scraping by for the next couple months. Hospital bills add up.'

'She wants a home birth,' said Jane, but Grace wasn't listening. It wasn't just the bills, Jane knew. Commerce ground to a halt during the winter months, leaving Island locals to squirrel away as much as they could during the tourist season. With Maggie out of commission at the height of summer, the Quinns' budget would be tight for the entire year.

'I'll feel better if I can lock in this long-term gig,' said Grace, steadying herself. On occasion, the Center would match-make patients with their staff nurses if a patient needed protracted care or physical therapy. If Grace got the job, her take-home pay would more than double for the time being. 'You will,' said Jane. 'And even if you don't – Gran and I have Mag's clients covered at the salon. And I'll be here a few times a week, plus tips from the Carousel. We'll be fine. More than fine.'

Grace nodded, but still didn't move to get out of the car.

'Is there something else?' said Jane. Grace looked at her own reflection in the rearview mirror.

'I have this uneasy feeling,' she said.

'Because of the baby?'

Grace shook her head. 'No . . . I think it's more to do with the Fest,' she said.

Sugar rushed through Jane's veins at the memory, already growing dim amidst these familiar surroundings. 'It was no big deal,' she said. 'Just one great night.'

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‘This is how it starts,’ said Grace, getting out of the car. ‘One great night; then the sharks start showing up and making promises.’

Jane laughed, stepping onto the pavement. ‘It’s not going to be like that,’ she said. ‘You heard Maggie. We’re derivative and trite.’

‘We both know that’s not true,’ said Grace.

They crossed from the parking lot onto the recreation lawn, waving to a tall blue-clad orderly playing croquet with a patient.

‘Hey, Charlie,’ said Jane. ‘See you in a sec.’

The orderly nodded as they passed.

‘Just be careful, whatever happens,’ said Grace, taking the flagstone path to the staff entrance.

‘Nothing’s going to happen,’ said Jane.

The possibility that it might both terrified and thrilled her. Music wasn’t real life – it was just for fun, a way to blow off steam. If it became more than that, she ran the risk of having her heart broken, or worse. Grace was right to be cautious: their family knew too well how disappointed dreams could lead to tragedy.

And yet part of Jane felt as though she’d met herself onstage last night. It had been so natural for her to sing to all those people – as if she’d been born to do it. Once you knew you could feel like that about something, was it even possible for life to continue as it had before?

‘Nothing’s going to happen,’ she repeated, more to herself than to Grace.

Grace gave her a small smile, but Jane could still trace a curve of unease around her mouth as they entered the hospital.