

Clanking and shuddering, the elevator took an eternity to reach the twelfth floor. Serena, still preoccupied, stared wordlessly at the elevator doors. “Does anyone ever inspect this thing?” asked Blake.

Blue grinned. “What do *you* think?”

Inside Room 1224, faux rock stars and their hangers-on were standing or lounging in every available space. A young man in a white dinner jacket stood behind a linen-covered table in the living room, doling out wine and mixed drinks. In one corner, a half-dozen people were hunched over a low table, snorting cocaine off the glass surface.

“Hello, Blue. Gonna introduce me to the newbie?” An intense-looking man stood in front of them, peering intently into Blake’s eyes. He was dressed all in black except for an oversized pair of yellow, butterfly-shaped glasses.

“Karl, this is Hakim. Hakim, Karl.” Blue’s introductions were less than enthusiastic.

“Karl, my friend, do you understand about the progression?” asked the man, fluttering his hands like a pair of flailing birds.

“I’m sorry?” said Blake.

“We’d love to chat,” Blue began, “but—”

“The *progression*,” the man hissed, ignoring him. “I’m talking about how the mad, deep blues of the tormented stratum lay incubating for centuries in the delta swamplands, until they finally rose up and wandered north, where they became immortally electrified—and how that sound was joined to the banjo-laden music of the hill folk, lifted by the pounding pianos of the southern road houses and energized by the twanging three-chord cowboy yodelers of the dusty west—infused, all of this, always, by the rustic ballads of the old country—until finally it reached its ultimate destination: the eternal flower children of America’s middle-class diaspora and the crazed, youthful amp-humpers of the British streets, twin aliens on a common quest...while of course, soaring above it all—need I tell you?—forever before and forever after, was the indispensable back-lighting...the impossible brightness...of the throbbing *West African beat*.”

Pausing for breath, the man reached for a nearby glass and gulped down its contents greedily.

“I swear he lifted it all from that blackboard diagram in *School of*

*Rock,*” said Blue under his breath. He tried to ease Blake away, but Hakim reached out and grabbed Blake’s wrist tightly. “Do you understand all this, young newcomer? Can your bourgeois brain wrap itself around the magical vastness of this promised land?”

“Karl!” Stepping in between them was Stash, gin bottle in hand. “Lance and I just had a *lightbulb moment!*” Lance looked over his shoulder, grinning maniacally. “When you come to our gig tomorrow night, we’re going to invite you on stage!”

“To play guitar!” Lance added, slurring his words a bit. “You did say you play?”

“Sure, a little rhythm.”

“Shot a flock of rhythm and blues,” sang Stash, snapping his fingers and doing a wobbly version of the twist. He wheeled abruptly and wandered off to another corner of the room, bottle in hand.

“Good. Then we’ll see you there,” Lance said. As Blake started to reply, his vision suddenly went dark.

“Guess who?” Removing a pair of manicured hands from his eyes, Blake turned to see Caroline. “Karl, you made it to my party!” she squealed, throwing her arms around him. She hugged him tightly, pressing her breasts and crotch against his body. “Come on, let me show you around.”

Taking his hand, Caroline walked him through the crowd, introducing him right and left. “This is my friend Karl. He’s new in town—doesn’t know a soul, poor baby,” she told a statuesque blonde woman in a full-body pink spandex leotard and matching heels.

“I see,” said the woman, raising a knowing eyebrow. “How sweet that he’s got *you* for a welcoming committee.”

“This is Dee, lead singer for the No-No’s,” giggled Caroline. “She’s jealous because our band blows them off the stage nightly!”

“In your over-lubricated dreams,” Dee said calmly.

A tough-looking woman dressed in leather pants and a camouflage shirt walked over with a pair of Cosmopolitans and handed one to Dee. “Thanks, doll,” said Dee. “Georgina, meet Karl—Caroline’s latest conquest.”

“Shush, Dee. I haven’t even kissed him yet!” pouted Caroline in mock disapproval.

“Who’s the Yank?” interrupted an irritated-looking man with a northern England accent, peering at Blake through round-rimmed glasses.

“Karl, this is Nigel, of the Puddles,” sighed Caroline. “God’s gift to rock and roll.”

“She means the Liverpudlians—but then, if I channeled a derivative, bubble-gum girl band, I’d be vibey too,” the man snarled, hooking his thumbs into the waistband of his striped trousers. “Of course, not every band can make musical history.” He grabbed Blake’s arm and pulled him closer. As he leaned in to speak, the smell of liquor on his breath was overpowering.

“Listen to me, mate—I’ve had every woman in this room, *multiple* times,” he muttered in Blake’s ear. “This is *my* town, so don’t come in acting like you’re some kind of hot shit. Understand?”

“What’s he telling you, Karl? How many times he’s screwed all of us?” said Georgina with a smirk. “Sorry, Nigel, but I don’t swing that way.”

“You did that night at the Marmont, love,” Nigel replied coolly. “Screamed like a banshee, as I recall.”

“Shove it, jerk,” said Georgina. With a short, swift motion, she threw the contents of her drink in Nigel’s face.

Several partygoers glanced over at the quarreling pair, but no one seemed especially perturbed. “Huck,” Caroline called. “Can you give us a hand over here?”

“Alright, folks,” said a tall man with sideburns and a cowboy hat, coming up behind Nigel and gripping the back of his neck firmly. “This is *way* too much monkey business. Been hitting the Brandy Alexanders again, Nigel? Say good night to all the nice people.”

“Get your hands off me, you bloody has-been,” Nigel growled. He tried to take a swing at the man, but Huck held him out of reach with his long-armed grip as he steadily maneuvered Nigel toward the door and out into the hallway. “Don’t come back, y’all!” he shouted after him.

The buzz of conversation resumed for several minutes until the lights abruptly dimmed and a spotlight on the ceiling clicked on, projecting a circle of light in the center of the room. Caroline stepped into