

Charlie Sinclair plays guitar in a rock band. He works on an assembly line. His best friend is a drug addict. PISTONHEAD is the story of one week in Charlie Sinclair's life - a week that changed him forever.

Pistonhead

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PISTONHEAD

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ISBN 978-1-60145-744-8

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2009

CHAPTER ONE

CHARLIE SINCLAIR'S WATCH READ HALF-PAST MIDNIGHT. He unplugged the digital tuner from his Gibson Les Paul and put the guitar on its stand. A year earlier he had bought the guitar for a thousand dollars. The price was equal to two weeks wages at his day job at Evergreen Software but Charlie believed that a good instrument sounded and played better than an ordinary one and was worth the investment. Charlie wiped the mahogany neck with a towel and put the towel in the guitar case.

He scanned the dressing room of the Big Ditch Club. The cramped space was jammed with clothes, guitars, electric basses, and a sagging plaid sofa. On a greasy flea market table were half-eaten sandwiches on paper plates and a pitcher of flat beer.

Sitting on a metal folding chair, Matt Langston absent-mindedly tapped his drumsticks on the table. He was always a sharp dresser and tonight he was wearing a pair of narrow rectangular sunglasses, a collarless white linen shirt, and black jeans. At the age of twenty-six his hair was thinning on top, and he had recently cut it short with a flat top in front.

In one corner of the room stood a large black road case on wheels. PISTONHEAD was spray-painted in white stencil letters across the side. Standing with an electronic tuner propped up on the lid of the case, Fritz Higgins was tuning his white Fender Precision bass guitar. His shoulder-length brown hair framed his broad cheekbones and he paused every few seconds to tuck a stray strand behind one ear.

Charlie was looking for Jack "Rip" Taylor. Three years earlier, when they were both students at Emerson College in Boston, Charlie and Rip had started the band. Together with Matt and Fritz they had worked the club circuit around New England, gotten a few breaks, released two CDs, and built a loyal following. Charlie knew that in the past few months Rip was getting deeper into the drug scene and his need to score had begun to affect the band's professionalism. This was not the first time that Rip had disappeared in the moments before

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a show. During the past few months Rip needed drugs—cocaine, speed, heroin, anything—before every performance. When Rip needed to score, nothing else mattered. On more than one occasion Rip had abruptly vanished only to reappear an hour later appearing relaxed and acting as if everything was fine.

Tonight, Charlie was worried. Pistonhead was scheduled to be onstage ten minutes ago and the club was crowded with fans.

Charlie stepped over to Matt. “Have you seen Rip? You know we have to keep an eye on him. We can’t let him get messed up. We’ve got a show to do.”

Matt shrugged and kept tapping his sticks on the table. “I don’t know where he is. Rip does what he wants. I just go with the flow. He’ll show up.”

Charlie sighed. He decided to go and look for Pistonhead’s singer himself. He opened the dressing room door and descended the narrow wooden staircase to the bottom landing. The stairwell walls were painted forest green but the paint was chipped and flaked to reveal successive layers of grey, saffron yellow, light blue, and navy blue. A fluorescent bulb fixture with a yellowed plastic cover was loosely attached to the ceiling, casting a bluish pallor over the narrow space. Graffiti covered the walls and ceiling, most of it undecipherable. The wooden handrail, absurdly placed at a level corresponding to Charlie’s knees, moved when he lightly grasped it. From behind the metal door at the bottom of the stairs Charlie could hear and feel the concussive thump of the house sound system.

He reached for the dented brass knob and pushed open the door into the nightclub. The house music hit him like a sledgehammer and he stepped forward into a dark mass of people who were standing, drinking, shouting in each other’s ears, waiting for the show. Charlie glanced over to the stage, which was a four-foot high platform covered with tattered red carpet a few feet away to his immediate left. The Untouchables, the night’s opening act, had cleared off their gear and were loading out the back door into the parking lot. Pistonhead’s equipment was onstage and ready for their show. Dino, the road manager for Pistonhead, was adjusting one of the microphones. Charlie stepped to the side of the stage and motioned to him. The

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lanky road manager came over and kneeled so that his head was the same height as Charlie's.

"Have you seen Rip?"

"Yeah, a half hour ago," replied Dino. "He was with those two guys. The Dust Twins. I told him to stick around 'cause it was almost show time. They probably went out to the parking lot. I'll go get him."

"Thanks, Dino," shouted Charlie. He turned and looked out over the crowd. There had been some rough moments during The Untouchables' set when a few guys in front had gotten into a shoving match, but the club bouncers had thrown one guy out and the others had drifted back into the crowd. Before every show Charlie took stock of the audience in order to scope out potential troublemakers, scout for attractive girls, and gauge the crowd's size and energy level. The fans in front were standing around the stage ten or twelve deep, some with their elbows resting on the stage, while a few girls had purses and drinks perched precariously near the edge. Beyond them were the customers seated at tables and chairs, and along the wall to the right was one of the club's two bars. People stood three deep at the brass-railed bar and the four bartenders were working quickly to get everyone served before the set started. Charlie could see their lips move as they leaned in to talk to the customers, but the pounding music from the speaker cabinets two feet from his head made listening, if not thinking, impossible.

Charlie guessed there were about five hundred patrons in the Big Ditch Club. The downtown Boston nightclub was not quite sold out (which would have been an achievement for a local band on a Thursday night) but the numbers were very respectable. Pistonhead had attracted four hundred-fifty people to their last gig here six months ago, so at least they were building their audience. What mattered most to the club owners, of course, was how much the audience drank, because the club made most of its money selling alcohol. The bands were hired just to fill the place with bodies. Pistonhead played heavy rock music, and their fans drank—a lot.

At the rear of the club, to the right of the back bar and the coat check room, were the restrooms. It irritated Charlie that the Big Ditch

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Club didn't have a private bathroom in the band's dressing room, or even one adjacent to the office. And Charlie had to go. Not terribly badly, but just enough for him to know that if he tried to hold it in, he'd be tense and uncomfortable during the hour-long set. There was nothing worse than trying to act relaxed and confident while feeling as though you had a bowling ball crammed into your bladder.

On the other hand, he wasn't looking forward to walking to the restroom. Between him and relief stood five hundred Pistonhead fans, some friendly, some not so friendly, and some who would love nothing better than to talk to him for half an hour. And then there was the restroom itself—dank, smelly, overcrowded, and full of God-knows-who doing God-knows-what.

"Hey dude, how's it going?" A hoarse shout into Charlie's right ear startled him because it was even louder than the house music. Charlie turned and instinctively leaned away from a guy in a red flannel shirt holding a beer bottle. Standing next to the guy was a girl about twenty-five with red hair, granny glasses, and an oversized Foo Fighters t-shirt. They were both grinning broadly, which was reassuring because generally male fans accosted him for one of two reasons—they either wanted to suck up to him or challenge him in front of their girlfriends. Only a few were genuinely interested in a normal conversation.

"Uh, fine, just fine. We're going on in a couple of minutes," shouted Charlie in reply. He recognized the two from other shows. They were nice and quite harmless, and the road crew let them hang around near the stage. Charlie thought their names were Ray and Shaina, and they were from Lexington, a half-hour drive from Boston. Ray worked as a mortgage broker or something. Charlie tried to imagine him wearing a white shirt and tie.

"I have to go to the men's room," shouted Charlie. Seeing Ray and Shaina spurred Charlie into action and he plunged into the dense crowd, looking for a way to snake through the fans by skirting the front bar area. He did his best to act invisible and only a few fans noticed him and tried to engage him as he pushed through. He waved, smiled pleasantly, and pretended not to hear what they were saying. Near the back of the room was the soundboard, raised on a platform

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and enclosed on three sides with plywood painted flat black. Pistonhead's sound engineer Rex was adjusting the settings on the board. He noticed Charlie and gave him a nod.

At the back of the club there were only a few people loitering near the men's room door. Charlie quickly pushed past them and was careful not to brush up against the grimy red cinderblock walls. As soon as he walked into the men's room the smell hit him. It was sour and thick, and it made his eyes involuntarily squint. The lights were glaring against the white tile walls. To the left were three sinks with a single mirror hung above, but only one sink worked. The one in the center had no faucet, and the one to the right was full of grey, cloudy water. There were three urinals along the wall separated by avocado-green dividers, and one toilet stall with a broken door so that any guy who dared use it had to sit there in full view of anyone else in the room. The blue tile floor was wet and Charlie stepped carefully to avoid slipping. Luckily, since it was almost show time, there was only one other man in the room, standing at the right-hand urinal. He was wearing a white sweatshirt, black Levis, and had a couple of dragon tattoos around his forearms. Charlie took a deep breath and slid up to the left-hand urinal, being careful to leave a vacant urinal between himself and the other guy.

They both finished and the white sweatshirt guy walked out. Charlie felt compelled to wash his hands or at least make an effort to rinse them off. He hated having gummy hands when he played guitar. If they were clean they slid up and down on the strings better, but of course after a few minutes onstage he'd be sweating anyway and he'd be lucky to have a good grip on the neck. He hit the button on the hot air dryer and the warm blast felt good on his hands and wrists.

Suddenly the men's room door opened. It was Sock Boy, the Pistonhead roadie who also worked the lights. Sock Boy wore shorts year 'round, along with huge black Dr. Martens boots and thick wool socks. His short-cropped blond hair was edged with blue, which matched his turquoise-capped nose ring.

"Hey Charlie! We can't find Rips. We've got to do something." Sock Boy's voice had an urgent edge.

Charlie left the hand dryer running and quickly followed the

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roadie back through the crowd to the metal door next to the stage. They went up the stairs and entered the dressing room.

Dino was standing by the table. He took a bite of a cheesesteak sub and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "I took a walk around the parking lot," he said. "Couldn't find him. Don't the Dust Twins have a blue van? I didn't see it."

The dressing room door opened. Jason, the owner of the Big Ditch Club, leaned into the room, keeping his emerald-ringed hand on the doorknob. "You guys going to do a show tonight, or just stand around jacking off?"

"Just give us a second, Jason. We're almost ready," said Dino.

Jason looked around the room with a frown. "Do you understand that I'm paying for a show, and if I don't get a show, I'm going to be unhappy? You're twenty minutes late. I don't care if you have to go out and play kazoos. Two minutes and you're on, or else." He paused for a moment and then sharply closed the door.

"Man, this is ridiculous," Charlie said bitterly. "We're screwed if Rip doesn't come back. I cannot believe that we let him out of here."

"What are we going to do if he doesn't show up?" Fritz asked.

"What do you mean?" Charlie replied. During the past year Rip had become increasingly less concerned with professional conventions such as show times, but the idea that Rip was too stoned to remember that he had to perform was difficult for Charlie to accept.

"Just what I said," Fritz repeated. "What if he's not going to show up?"

Charlie thought for a moment. Then he said decisively, "Well, we got five hundred people out there who expect us to put on a show. We got a club owner who's going to break our legs if we don't. So, we go out there and do a show. We just tell the audience that Rip is sick and we start playing. I can sing a couple of the songs and we can stretch them out. Try to give these people something for their money."

Fritz snorted derisively. "Oh, come on, that's not going to work. People come to see us because they expect to hear what they know. They buy the CD and they have expectations. No offense, Charlie, but

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hearing Rip sing the damn songs is a pretty reasonable expectation.”

He placed his bass guitar on its metal stand. “Besides, we’re not the kind of band that has members come and go. We depend on each other. Like it or not, if one person screws up then we’re all sunk. I say we cancel this show, give the audience their money back, and kiss Jason’s ass so that he doesn’t bust our heads. Get the Untouchables to go back on again. Either way we’re screwed, so we might as well keep our image intact. We’re not a jam band.”

Charlie turned to the drummer. “What do you say, Matt?”

Matt gave a wry smile. “I think he’s going to be here. But, just for argument’s sake, if something happened, I guess I’d want to go out there. We’re a club band, you know? We’ve got to deliver every time, regardless. We could play instrumentals. I don’t know—I don’t want to think about it.”

They sat in paralyzed silence, listening to the relentless thump of the house music.

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