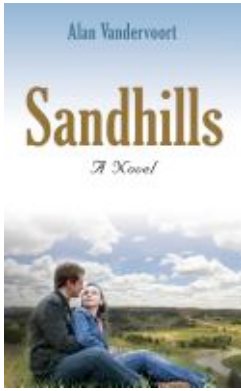


Alan Vandervoort

Sandhills

A Novel





"In the midst of a harsh environment, beauty can be found." It is a recurring theme and a lesson learned. For Jeremy, disappointment on athletic fields led to success in music. The freedom to pursue his passion was endangered by a domineering parent. Jeremy was also distracted by a green-eyed girl in his neighborhood. Enlightenment will come from an unusual source. Answers will be discovered in a land of grandeur, history, and mystery - the Sandhills.

Sandhills

A Novel

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Sandhills – A Novel

Alan Vandervoort

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First Edition

Chapter Ten

“You’re as cold as November and my heart is filled with clouds.”

Jeremy, “Eric, what are you mumbling about down there?”

“It’s damn cold out here. When are they going to finish with the special little Sousaphone practice?”

“They’re having problems getting into position for the finale.”

Eric was eager to demonstrate his wisdom, “You know what they say: the bigger the instrument, the smaller the brain.”

Aaron in the squad behind the trumpets took exception. “You want to repeat that?”

“I’m sorry. I meant to say smaller the penis.”

Joey reached in his pocket, “Anybody want some left over Halloween candy?”

Most everyone took a fun-size candy bar, except Nicole, “That would mess up my diet.”

Stephanie took an approving look, “Have you lost a little weight?”

“Yes, I’m working on a new diet. For lunch, I eat an apple, some celery and walnuts.”

“Then what do you eat for dinner?”

Eric jumped in, “Everything else.”

Nicole, “You’re going to weigh next to nothing once I beat the shit out you.”

Eric yelled down the row, “Mr. Squad Leader, I’m being threatened down here. What are you going to do about it?”

Jeremy responded, “Take video.”

“Real nice. Thanks a lot.”

“I’m thinking, an internet sensation.”

Stephanie started laughing with the group, but was interrupted/stopped short by a powerful sneeze.

Mac asked, “Are you catching a cold?”

“I hope not. I’m hoping to go to the Senior Dance!” loud enough to be heard by Jeremy.

“I recommend complete bed rest, and I know just the right bed for the job,” said Eric.

“In your dreams.”

“Do those dreams include moisture?”

“I’m telling Robin.”

“Enough said.”

Nicole turned to sentimentality, “I can’t believe this is the last game of the season.”

Joey asked Mac, “What are you going to do after the season?”

“I just joined the Drama Club.”

Eric was intrigued, “You did that on purpose?”

Mac responded, “Have you seen the girls in the club?”

“Enough said.”

Mac had heard something about Eric, “I hear we have an aspiring jock in our midst – star guard Eric.”

“I’m going to give my all for the team.”

Aaron took a shot, “This would be the right time to place good money on our opponents.”

“Speaking of opponents; do we have a chance against the Trojans?” said Ben.

Joey asked, “Eric, no joke about Trojans?”

“Too easy.”

Aaron said, “They’re bigger, stronger, meaner, and faster. It won’t be easy.”

Ben added, “I’d like to beat those jackasses just once. People still talk about the great upset of 1991.”

Nicole said to the group, “I’m going to miss the band. Basketball season just isn’t the same.”

The melancholy seemed more acute in the band member standing next to Jeremy. This was unusual since she was a sophomore who could look forward to two more seasons. Emily looked paler than normal. “Everything okay, little sis?”

“I’m fine,” came the faint response. She went through the practice with very little enthusiasm. “I’ll be right back.”

Emily stepped to the squad behind them to talk with Chad the drummer. She looked upset. Jeremy spoke with another squad member, expecting a brutally honest answer. “Ben, do you know what’s happening with Emily and Chad?”

“Rumor is a breakup. Do you think she would go out with me?”

“Before the body’s cold.”

“What?”

“I mean, thanks for the information.”

A little more emotion haunted each band practice. The one bright spot in this sobering period was the anticipation of the Senior Dance on the Saturday after the last game. One more time for them to be together. A celebration of carving out a tolerable existence in a clique-prone society.

With the Sousaphone moves finally perfected, practice ended and everyone scurried off to somewhere warm. Jeremy walked over to the building to put his trumpet in the case. As he bent down to open the case he heard someone crying softly around the corner. He stopped. There was a moment of thought. Before this year there would have been no decision to make. He would have walked away and avoided involvement. Involvement meant interaction with other humans – a most uncomfortable situation. Turning back the clock and walking away was not an option. Now it was his concern. The sound of the crying would not fade with distance. It was an awakening. It was a new year. He was a leader. More importantly, he was a friend. There would be no turning away. Jeremy took a deep breath and turned the corner to find Emily sitting on the ground, her back against the building, with her face in her hands. He sat down beside her and asked her what had happened.

The final two instrument cases left on the ground belonged to Kate and Robin. They walked up to the cases and heard the conversation around the corner. Robin put up her hand, gesturing silence. They both listened for a minute. They heard Jeremy soothing Emily's feelings. "I know you are a special person, little sis. Someday soon the right person is going to notice that too. Actually, I saw Ben looking your way. You might want to follow up on that."

The tears stopped flowing. Emily felt better knowing her big brother cared. Jeremy was relieved that Emily felt better. “Ben? Really?”

Robin turned to look at Kate with wide eyes and an open mouth. Kate was frozen where she stood. She quickly wiped a tear from her eye before Robin could notice. They moved quickly away so their presence would not be noticed. Robin was impressed, but not enough to admit it.

The end-of-season traditions started with the Thursday night bonfire pep rally. The last game of the season needed some extra inspiration. On an especially dark night, people started wandering into the school’s parking lot. In the center of the lot was a pile of logs standing 20 feet tall. The crowd collected in sub-groups – the cheer club and cheerleaders, the band, the parents of the football players, other students. People would warm up one side toward the fire and then rotate to warm up the other side.

Band members, wearing their black and gold band jackets, extracted their instruments and piled the cases in the grass at the edge of the pavement. Doug kept an eye on the school. When the football team appeared from the building, he led the band in the fight song. The football team stopped just short of the county park’s mobile stage next to the band. They were more civil to the band than normal, enjoying the spotlight and not wasting their time on inferior beings.

Jeremy, surprised by the silent treatment, spoke to the player nearest to him, “Hey, Brian. I didn’t hear you sing the fight song. What’s up with that?”

“It may surprise you that I know all the words, even the ones with two syllables.”

“I am impressed.”

“By the way, that soda straw in your spit valve – well, it’s just disgusting.”

Jeremy couldn’t help but laugh. “There’s no possible comeback for that.”

“You’re a smart little twerp. You’ll come up with something.”

The team was called up to the stage. Eric spoke to Jeremy, “You had a conversation with Brian, the football captain.”

“Yeah, apparently we underestimated their ability to communicate.”

“Beyond grunts and belches. Who would have guessed?”

First to the microphone was Cheri, the head cheerleader. She thanked everyone for attending and the cheer club for building the bonfire. She then mentioned something about beating the pants off the Trojans that brought out a chuckle from the less mature members of the crowd. Eric and Jeremy looked at each other with an expression that said the remark was too lame to mock. The look made both of them laugh. Emily interjected, “Are you guys three years old?”

Eric said, “In many ways, yes.”

Unaware of the gaffe, the cheerleader forged ahead, introducing her boyfriend, Brian, the football captain.

Brian stood behind the microphone and started by thanking all who attended. He went on to thank the cheerleaders, the coaches, his team mates, and especially the offensive line who he introduced by name and position with a round of applause after each name.

In a move that surprised everyone, he thanked the band and congratulated them on the third place finish at contest. The band cheered while the rest of the crowd engaged in tentative applause.

Brian ended his speech with a message to the team. "We will have to focus on one objective – every down, every play, each one doing his job to ensure a victory."

Another round of applause and a cheer from the cheerleaders. Brian introduced the head football coach.

"Thank you, Brian for the inspirational and overly comprehensive speech. I don't have to tell you that we face a very important game tomorrow night. I will try to impress on you just how important it is. Think back to your days in youth league football; the afternoons in middle school ball. Think of the times in summer practice working your asses off until you dropped from exhaustion and dehydration. For you seniors, think back to three years of sweat and blood in varsity ball. All that comes together on the field tomorrow.

A whiff of glory is all most people will ever have. They will only be able to dream of real glory. There are those that stand on the sidelines of life facing years of regret for the lack of one great moment. Cemeteries are loaded with rotting corpses full of regret. The moment of glory justifies holding your head high. It separates you from the ordinary uninspired, waste-of-space individuals that clog this planet.

You are presented with the opportunity to capture glory that will remain with you for the rest of your lives. Many years from now, when you look back on this day from a position of success, you can say, ‘This is the day it turned around. This is the day I stepped up to take a risk and grabbed the eternal exhilaration of a winner.’

When you have a house so big you can’t decide what to do with a couple rooms. You take Spanish just so you can converse with everyone taking care of you and your property. Your car idles faster than most cars run at top speed. Every night you make love to a beautiful woman instead of jerking off to a porn site. You are the ultimate example of success. Go Bears! Beat the Trojans!”

In the middle of the thunderous applause and cheers, Jeremy turned to Eric, “What the hell did he just say?”

“I don’t give a shit what he said. I’m not giving up my porn sites.”

There were other players and school officials to step up to the microphone. The night was for the

football team. This was of little interest to Jeremy and most of the other band members. His attention started to wander. The noise onstage and the cheers from the crowd disappeared. He looked down the line of his band mates. He looked at each visible face as if the world was moving in slow motion. Maybe it was a moment he wanted to remember. He could see and enjoy each smile that was lit from the flickering light of the bonfire. Everyone was talking and laughing. Eric whispered something in Robin's ear. She playfully smacked him on top of his head. Ben and Emily were seen holding hands. Abbie showed the other majorettes a beautiful necklace that was a birthday gift from Doug. These were the faces of friends in a bittersweet moment, knowing the season was coming to an end.

His eyes were drawn to the largest grin in the group. He found himself staring at Kate. The glow of the firelight accented her beauty in a way he never imagined. Her warm smile was penetrating to a point where he was feeling a new wave of warmth. He felt that time stopped, allowing him a fresh perspective on a good friend. He suddenly realized he was not breathing. His trance was broken when Kate turned and their eyes met. Her smile grew and her eyebrows lifted as she gave a little wave in his direction. He was a little embarrassed at being caught and returned the wave with a salute with his trumpet. He began to wonder about the source of the surrounding warmth – the fire or the smile.

Doug snapped Jeremy's dream-like vision as he ordered the band "instruments up." After a couple choruses of the fight song, the event was over and the crowd began to disburse. Kate noticed Jeremy talking with Stephanie. They were both smiling as they talked. While watching them, Kate felt a strange knot in her stomach. For some reason, she could not understand why she was annoyed. She caught herself staring and looked away just before being caught in an embarrassing moment. The conversation didn't last long. Jeremy began walking down the sidewalk toward home. Kate looked up in time to watch him walk away. The plan was to call mom for a ride home. She decided to put away her phone and come up with a different plan. She ran down to the sidewalk to catch up with him. "Are you walking home?"

"Yeah, didn't have a car available tonight."

"Can I tag along?"

"Sure."

It was a simple answer to her question. She found herself smiling larger than was appropriate for the occasion and quickly toned down the look on her face. Even after having a pleasant conversation with Stephanie, Jeremy was happy to have Kate's company. They walked down the sidewalk side by side. Jeremy started the conversation, "Are you sure Toby won't get jealous?"

"We've been on one date. It's not a boyfriend – girlfriend thing."

An unexplained relief came over Jeremy.

"What about you? I saw you talking to Stephanie. Anything going on?"

"Don't know. There seems to be promising signs."

Kate took in a deep breath followed by a long exhale.

With some uneasiness in the conversation, Jeremy changed the subject. "Are you sad to see the end of marching band?"

"A little. We won't be as tight with our friends as much. But there's always Pep Band. "

"Interesting spin."

"Spin here, spin there, everyone gets dizzy and falls down."

Jeremy looked puzzled. Kate explained, "It's a political joke."

"So, you've read the great philosophers of our time."

"Sure, George Carlin, Doug Adams, Jon Stewart, Tom Robbins."

Kate noticed a smile on Jeremy's face. Her next statement was slow and serious, "Do I amuse you?"

"I believe the correct answer is – 'No, of course not.'"

"Wise move."

Kate did not want the conversation to lag. "And what do you read?"

"Concentrating right now on the 'Carnival of Venice.'"

"A book?"

“Supposedly the most difficult piece of music for the trumpet.”

After a few more steps Jeremy kept the conversation going. “Do you have plans for the rest of the year?”

“Band has been a big part of my life – larger than I expected. I guess it’s because of all my friends. After Pep Band I’ll play softball. What about you?”

“I’ll miss everyone, too. The end of the season will give me more time to spend on different music.”

“What kind of music?”

“Doug and some of his relatives have a small jazz band. They want me to join. Play some music, maybe a couple performances.”

“You’re a good trumpet player. Are you considering going professional?”

“Might be able to do something with that.”

“Do something with it? Are you always this vague about the future?”

“Just concentrating on getting out of high school.”

“So maybe my question was too far into the future. What are you doing for next 10 minutes?”

Jeremy was amused by his friend’s bluntness. He thought of an answer to respond, “Walking a friend home.”

Kate’s eyes brightened, “A friend; I like that.”

Jeremy caught himself smiling. They stopped at the walkway leading to Kate’s house. “Thanks for walking me home.”

“Anytime.”

Kate turned toward her house while Jeremy walked down the street toward his house. She turned and watched him walk away. She said to herself, “*Anytime*. I like that, too.”

Kate’s words started Jeremy thinking about the future. He started thinking about his trip. For brief moments his mind would drift to the walk home with his cute neighbor. He tried to shake it and return his thoughts to his future mission. What about the walk? He had a nice talk with Stephanie at the end of the bonfire. He also enjoyed the walk home with Kate.

Kate also thought about the walk home. She fought with herself to not think about it. He was interested in Stephanie. I would be torture to think about Jeremy. She constantly recalled their conversation. She found herself smiling – then would snap out of it back to her perceived reality. Then she came to a realization. The walk was fun. Why not remember it for what is was and not what it will not become. She regretted one thing about the evening. In their conversation she held back from asking a question that was kept rolling through her mind. At the Pep Rally, his eyes were on her. Why?

It was the Friday abbreviated run-through practice before the last game. Kate and Robin were standing at the edge of the field waiting for practice to start. Kate turned to Robin, “I guess you’re going to the Senior Dance with Eric.”

“Yes, I am. I heard Toby asked you.”

Kate used a soft monotone to reply, “He asked, but I haven’t given him an answer yet.”

“Your enthusiasm is inspiring.”

Stephanie walked over to the two and began talking, “Hey, I think Jeremy might ask me to the Senior Dance. I’ve been trying to drop some hints. You know him well. What do you think?”

Kate jumped right in, “Well, you know he’s been seeing a doctor recently.” While she made her statement, she made a couple of glances toward the groin area.

Stephanie was astonished, “Really? Oh....oh. Thanks, guys.” She made a fast retreat onto the practice field.

Robin was even more astonished. “Kate! Why did you say that?”

Kate was just as astonished, “I don’t know. Even as the words came out, I couldn’t believe it.”

Doug the drum major called them onto the field.

Robin said as she walked on the field, “Damn girl, if I didn’t know better, I’d think you want him for yourself.”

Kate stood frozen for a moment. She thought hard on what Robin had just said. It was a revelation. “Oh, my God. Oh, my God.”

With that unusual conversation on her mind, practice seemed to go on forever for Kate. She marched around in a daze the rest of the afternoon, making a few obvious errors. In one intricate maneuver she turned the wrong way and ran into Jeremy’s side. “I’m sorry. I’m soooo sorry.”

At the end of the session, Kate was eager to leave and forget the afternoon. Robin walked over to point out a happening across the field. "Look, Jeremy is walking over to Stephanie."

"Should I stop him?"

"It's too late."

They both watched in horror. They saw Jeremy begin to talk and Stephanie take a short jump back. Robin started to giggle. Jeremy spoke again and Stephanie waved him off and walked away quickly. He held out his hands palms out in body language saying 'I don't understand.'

Robin still watching, "He coming over here."

"Oh, no."

"Kate, what have you done?"

"I'm going straight to hell."

Jeremy had confided in Kate on their walk home. He thought she may have a perspective. He walked up to the two girls with a look of total bewilderment on his face. "What's up with Stephanie?" Robin was shaking in an attempt to hold in the laughter.

"I thought she was sending positive signals, so I asked her to the Senior Dance. She looked at me like I was diseased."

Robin burst out laughing.

He stared directly at Robin, "At least my humiliation is a source for your amusement, so that makes it all worthwhile."

Kate was barely able to keep her composure, "I'm so sorry, Jeremy."

Robin was laughing so hard she had to walk away.

Kate and Jeremy were alone; it could be an opening. She tried to be comforting while trying to leave a hint. She looked up at him, batted her eyelids and with a cute puppy face and said, “You’ll find the right girl someday.”

Jeremy didn’t even look in her direction as he walked away, “If recent history is any indication, there’s not much chance of that.”

Kate’s shoulders dropped as she watched him walk away.

Robin returned to the scene. “What were you guys talking about?”

“I told him he would find the right girl someday.”

“Is the right girl you?”

“I would have to walk across the field nude for him to notice.”

“Do you think that would be enough?”

“Robin!”

“Have you ruled out implants?”

Kate held out her clarinet toward Robin. “If this instrument didn’t cost so much, I’d break it over your head.”

A few days later in history class, Jeremy was sitting in the back of the room with Kate and Robin in the middle. Since electronic devices were not allowed in class, Jeremy had to revert to an old fashioned means of communication. He passed a folded piece of paper up to Kate. It read:

“Stephanie came clean. I’m telling everyone that YOU gave me the undisclosed disease.”

Kate turned around and looked at Jeremy with a wide-open mouth. Robin grabbed the note, read it and started laughing. Kate grabbed the note back, wadded it up, and threw it at Jeremy. She mouthed the words, ‘I’m sorry.’

Jeremy pointed at her and mouthed the words, “You owe me.”

Mr. Harrison walked into the room to begin the lesson and sensed that something was going on. “Did I miss something important?”

Robin spoke up, “We were just talking about Kate and Jeremy giving each other diseases.”

The whole class cracked up as Kate and Jeremy tried to hide their faces.

Mr. Harrison quipped, “That might be a very important event in history, but I suggest we switch to a different topic.”

Friday night was cool with a slight breeze; perfect weather for football. Amelia gathered the band next to the bleachers for an announcement, holding a trophy in her right hand.

“I need your attention for just a minute. The officers of the band have chosen a Band MVP for the year. Because he was so quiet his first three years, there was some question to his leadership ability. His trumpet playing and leadership have been exemplary, which is a tribute to his hard work and, of course, my

genius. The MVP trophy this year goes to the squad leader of Row 4, Jeremy.”

Amelia walked over to shake Jeremy’s hand while the rest of band applauded.

They walked out of the dark to the edge of the field. The band members lined up in their normal pre-game formation. It felt different than any other football game. There was a finality that felt both exciting and empty feeling. As they moved into formation they looked at their position on the field and also, looked at each other.

The drum major Doug gave the end-of-the season pep talk. “This is the last pre-game. Make it one you’ll remember.”

The whistle blew, the drums started, and the group moved down the field with two choruses of the fight song. They stopped in front of the flagpole and waited for the Trojan band to join them at the south end of the field.

There was little to cheer about during the first half. The Trojans team ran over the Oak Springs team. The game was a blowout for the visiting Trojans. No chance for the Bears Band to celebrate a score.

The halftime-show was simple with a tribute to the seniors. It ended with the traditional crowd-pleasing “Floating Diamond” performance.

While George’s friends watched their sons and nephews play football, George tried to ignore the success of the Trojan team and anything the band was doing.

This rivalry game was particularly bloody. An offensive tackle came out of the game with a fractured ankle. The inferior frontline protection allowed the defense to harass Brian the quarterback. He came out of the game with a gash in his forehead. Some stitches at halftime allowed him to return to the game for more punishment. His gallant play in the face of overwhelming adversity impressed the hometown crowd and college scouts in the stands.

In the stands George was surrounded by the same group of friends that occupied those seats every game. The insults tonight cut deep. George tried to avoid the halftime show. This time he was waiting for someone to bring back some food. He was there to catch some grief from his gang of friends.

“Hey, George. Is that your boy out there? He toots a mean horn.” Most around him had a good laugh. George was not amused.

“George, your boy is taking a lot of chances. He might trip over one of those white lines out there.”

“There’s a lot more danger than that. I once saw a trombone player run into a Sousaphone. It was not pretty.”

As the laughter grew, so did George’s anger.

With the team bloodied and exhausted, time ran out on a painful loss to end the season.

No victory march at the end of the game. Band members hurried out the stadium to prepare for the Senior Dance the next night.

Jeremy walked into the house holding a tall trophy with the school colors and a gold figure of a marching band person on top. Mia grabbed the trophy and read the inscription with pride. She attempted again to bridge the gap between the two men of the house.

“George, Jeremy was presented the ‘Band MVP’ this year.”

The only thing George could remember was the humiliation he suffered at halftime that night. “Your classmates are sacrificing their bodies out on that field for your school and all you can do is toot your little horn.”

“It’s ok Mom, I wouldn’t expect anything more.” Jeremy took the trophy from his mother and left the room.

“What is wrong with you? Your son has accomplished a great thing and all you can do is tear him down.”

“His whole life I tried to make him strong, make him a man!”

“You goddamn fool. You don’t make people, you love them. If you can’t love them, you lose them. You may not see it or even care anymore, but you have lost your son – maybe forever. You tried to make an imaginary super hero and you’ve ended up with what you deserve - nothing!” She stormed out of the room.

Jeremy went to the garage. He took a long look at the trophy. It should have been a moment of great pride. As he looked at it, his hands gripped it tighter and tighter. He fought back tears though he could not

control his arms shaking. He lifted the trophy over his head and with great force brought it down on the workbench, smashing it into many pieces. He picked up the pieces and tossed them into the trash can.

There was little time to push aside the anger of Friday night. Jeremy worked at his uncle's bookstore Saturday afternoon. While many were preparing for the big Senior Dance, he worked hard to impress his uncle and forget his father's slight.

Even though the event was titled the "Senior Dance," in a tribute to the seniors, every band member was invited. There were the shy freshman who stood next to the wall most of the evening. There were the seniors who celebrated too much with some liquor smuggled from their parents' liquor cabinets. There were the solid couples who hung on each other in the middle of the dance floor all night.

Jeremy walked into the school gymnasium alone. Even with the date fiasco and problems at home, he wanted to enjoy the evening with his friends. He wore a sport coat, not feeling a tie was necessary for the occasion. He walked over to the punch bowl. From across the gym, Kate saw him alone. She walked over to him, prepared to do whatever was necessary to gain forgiveness.

She was in a short, pink, high-waisted dress – not elegant, but very adorable. Kate's beauty was normally hidden behind a pair of black-rimmed glasses with her auburn hair pull back into a ponytail.

Tonight, her hair flowed freely and the glasses were missing. Normally, she had little time or tolerance for mating games. Her look and personality broadcast loud and clear that only serious suitors should bother.

Her opening line to Jeremy was a little awkward. “Is the punch any good?”

“It will give your dad a lot of business.”

Kate used a soft quiet voice that was out of character, “I noticed that you’re alone.”

A smirk appeared on his face. “I wonder who I have to thank for that.”

Kate’s face turned a little red and she asked the question while dreading the answer. With an even smaller voice she asked, “Do you hate me?”

“No. But I am curious about a motive for sabotaging a possible date.”

Instead of giving the right reason, Kate side-stepped the question. “It was a very bad joke. I’m surprised Stephanie fell for it. It wasn’t meant to hurt you.” She looked up at Jeremy with those wide puppy dog eyes. “Are we okay?”

Jeremy made her wait a moment for his reply, “I think you owe me a dance.”

That was not what Kate expected. She fell back a step. “Really? Sure.”

“Will your date mind?”

“There’s a new video game to talk about. He’ll be busy most of the night.”

Jeremy looked across the room to see Toby next to some fellow geeks waving his arms wildly to demonstrate the different levels and weapons to get to

the imaginary treasure. The DJ started a slow song. Jeremy smiled and offered his hand and Kate put her hand in his. Her hand felt much warmer than he anticipated. There was a comfort level that surprised both of them. A slight jolt of electricity went through their hands and traveled up their arms. It was actually a familiar feeling. It was similar to experiencing the sound of an outstanding piece of music. Could touching someone be as pleasurable as music? It was a question he was eager to explore.

They walked out onto the dance floor. She put her arms around his neck and he put his arms around her waist. He felt her arms and wondered if she noticed the hair on the back of his neck standing out. She wondered if he noticed a slight tremble in her arms.

They began to move with the music at a normal distance apart. It was a slow song, a regional favorite – *My Heart Beyond the Hills*.

Suddenly Kate exclaimed, “I know this song.”

Puzzled by the statement, Jeremy replied, “*My Heart Beyond the Hills*?”

“It’s from a movie. A boy leaves home because he hears voices across the river. He leaves his love heartbroken and eventually dies of exposure.” She became aware of her rambling on and looked at his eyes. “And you have no idea what I’m talking about.”

“Did I at least appear interested?”

Kate laughed with a slap to his right shoulder, “Stop it.”

The couple resumed their embrace and moved slowly to the music. Kate started humming the

melody softly. She whispered one the lines of the song, “The heart you left behind was mine.”

Her pretty voice and the words made Jeremy pause. She noticed his reaction, “Oh, was my singing annoying?”

“No, just the opposite. Keep going.”

“Now, I’m embarrassed.” She hid her face in his chest, which pulled her much closer. His reaction was to reciprocate with a tighter embrace. The hold on his partner was much closer than when they started. He was not sure where this sudden surge of affection came from. Would she push away? This risk in a human encounter felt good and terrifying at the same time. Kate’s eyes widened and her mouth fell open at his aggressive move. She surprised herself by following his lead tightening her hold while smiling uncontrollably. He was in turn surprised by her tighter hold. While he was enjoying her reciprocation of his touch, he wondered if his action was based on loneliness or real affection. The hint of lavender from her hair and the general warmth of her body next to his pushed his mind toward the affection answer. The warmth of the experience was so different than the cold existence of his life that he had come to accept, and for the last few years he had perpetrated on himself. As they slowly moved on the dance floor, an unusual word kept popping into his head to help him try and analyze the situation. It was a word so strange that he tried to dismiss it only to have it return again and again. The word was “Home.” He continued to hold her close - much closer than either had expected.

The mind of the other dance partner was trying to make sense of her feelings. She recalled the evenings in Montreal, watching the lovers along the Rue de St. Denis and so wanting to feel what they were feeling. A word came into her head as well. The audacity of the word frightened her. She quickly moved beyond her fear and held her partner in an embrace that did justice to her word, "Passion."

Near the end of the song, Kate laid her head on his chest. She could hear his heart beating. She turned her head to look at his face. "Your heart is beating fast."

"See what you do to me?"

"Don't tease."

Realizing she took this seriously, "Okay."

After the short conversation, he gently pulled her close. Kate thought about how she was feeling. She enjoyed his firm hold. She enjoyed a barely-noticeable smell of cologne. Why would a loner come to a crowded dance and wear cologne? She tried to clear her head. In her mind Jeremy was interested in that little freshman bitch, Stephanie. Jeremy tried to dismiss his feelings. Kate was dating that little geek, Toby. When the song finished, they did not immediately let go. As they slowly moved apart, Kate was able to shove something into Jeremy's pocket. She looked into his eyes and smiled.

They were both a slightly embarrassed by what they were feeling. As Kate backed away, Jeremy said, "Thank you for the dance."

Kate smiled, raised her eye brows and said, “Anytime.” And she meant it.

Jeremy pulled a CD out of his pocket. Hand-written on the CD was *Carnival of Venice*. Jeremy was stunned and pleased. She remembered their conversation. She took time to look up the song and download it. All this effort for him. He held onto the CD as if it were a priceless artifact.

She walked across the room to find her date. Toby was still busy over-analyzing the latest video game. A very popular rock song started playing. Robin ran over and pulled Kate and some other girls onto the dance floor. The group started some inspired dance moves. Jeremy walked to the edge of the dance floor to watch. He was especially impressed with the dance moves of his recent dance partner. Aaron soon joined him.

Aaron started, “They’ve got some nice moves.”

“They do.”

“Do you have your eye on someone special?”

“Just watching.”

“Right. I saw you two dancing very close.”

“You mean Kate? She’s a good friend.”

“If you say so.”

“And you’re spending time with Denise?”

“As much time as possible.”

Jeremy decided it would be a good time to talk to Aaron alone. He asked the bass drum player, “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure, what’s up?”

When Jeremy was sure they were alone he gave Aaron the news. "I've made a decision and I need your help and I especially need total secrecy."

"I can keep a secret."

"I'm leaving in the spring."

"What do mean 'leaving'?"

"I'll be 18 in May and I'm going to leave Portsmouth. I don't know where I'll go."

"You're leaving and have no idea where you're going?"

"All I know is it has to be mileage in the four figures – south or west, I haven't decided yet."

"Things are that bad at home?"

"The musician vs. athlete battle is alive and well. It's one of those 'live by my rules or live somewhere else.' I'm choosing the somewhere else."

Aaron was intrigued, "How can I help?"

"First, I need a plan, somewhere to go."

"Hey, I got a cousin in California. He owns a coffee shop in a quaint little town on the coast. He's always looking for good help."

Jeremy pulled out his wallet and retrieved a dollar bill. "I will give you this crisp dollar bill if you'll say the word 'quaint' in front of witnesses."

Aaron smiled at the statement and gave Jeremy a push on the shoulder, "Shut the fuck up."

"California coast – that will certainly cover the distance qualification."

"How do you plan to get there?"

"I figure the best way is by car – that you'll help me buy."

“It’s a lot faster to fly.”

“No public form of transportation. Nothing that can connect my name to a destination.”

“You’ve really thought about this. How do you intend to leave unnoticed?”

“Prom night. We’re expected to be out late. There’s an after-prom party. By the time I would be expected home, I’ll be hundreds of miles away. I just have to find a date who will only hate me for a short time.”

“What about Kate. You two seem to get along.”

“No, I like Kate. I couldn’t do that to a friend. If you can check with your cousin and look for a car, we won’t talk about this too much.”

“One question. Do you have a price range for the car?”

“What do you think? Three thousand?”

“How far do you want to push?”

“Four thousand?”

“This thing will have to climb mountains.”

“Five?”

“That will give you a better chance of success – although no amount will guarantee a smooth trip.”

The fast dance was breaking up and people were walking toward them. “We’ll talk more later. Thanks for helping.”

“One band boy to another.”

Aaron found Denise for a dance. Jeremy found Stephanie. Even though they were not able to make final arrangements for a date – given the huge misunderstanding – Jeremy was still able to have a

dance with the girl he fancied. As they moved around the floor, one fact had him perplexed. This felt nothing like the previous dance.

If time had a personality, it would laugh at the frantic activities during the holidays. The band started practices for basketball games. Jeremy worked more hours in the bookstore. Kate had lots of relatives visiting and church services to attend. A light snow helped accentuate a holiday feeling in the town.

One highlight of the season was the date that Jeremy was finally able to arrange with Stephanie, taking her to a fine restaurant in Portsmouth. Robin broke the news to Kate. "They're date is not 'til Saturday night. You still have time to spread a leprosy rumor."

Kate did not laugh. She resigned herself to a senior year of studies and looked forward to the softball season to take out her sexual frustrations in physical exertion. Her spirits lifted when she heard the date was a disaster.

For two solid hours during the date, Stephanie talked. She talked from the door to the car, on the ride to the restaurant, during dinner, and on the ride home. After one hour, Jeremy's eyes glazed over. His mind drifted away. It didn't matter. Even if Stephanie asked him a question, she would answer herself before giving him a chance to reply.

Stephanie did ask one question and let Jeremy answer. "Are you going to be in the Pep Band again?"

“Yeah. What about you?”

“Not this year. I’m going to be a wrestling cheerleader.”

“They have those?”

“You know they do. You’re strong. Did you ever think of trying out for the wrestling team?”

“I have no desire to grab some sweaty guy.”

Stephanie was shocked that someone would have an opposing opinion. “It’s not about grabbing a sweaty guy. It’s about overpowering your opponent.”

He paused for a thought he did not have to pause for, “Still not selling me.”

Stephanie turned to the defensive, “Wrestling is a legitimate sport. It’s in the Olympics.”

“This is the way I see it. A professional ballplayer has to hit a 90 mile-an-hour fastball. A professional wrestler has to hit someone across the back with a chair.”

“I think you’re missing out. You know they give college scholarships in wrestling.”

Jeremy suddenly felt that he was not on a date with a cute freshman. He had the very uncomfortable feeling that he was hearing a lecture from his father. The mood could not have died a more painful death.

Stephanie went on, “It’s going to be a lot of fun. I like the other cheerleaders. Mindy is probably my best friend. We talk about everything. She thinks there’s a ghost in her garage. That’s amazing because there was a ghost in my house. It was a middle-aged woman who I think lived in the 1800s. I saw her three times when I was younger. The last time I talked to her and

told her it was alright to go to the other side. She heard me and never returned. Maybe she'll return as someone else. You believe in reincarnation, right? I'm sure of it. I can envision in my mind a couple past lives. One is in France and the other is in colonial Virginia. I think I met John Smith at one time. And you know, I knew before we met that we would meet. It was a dream when I was only nine. It happened in an Italian village on the coast with narrow cobblestone streets with pastel-colored buildings on either side. There was a cafe with only two tables on the sidewalk. We sat there and ate warm bread and drank sweet coffee. There has to be some psychic ability there, don't you think? There must be, because I feel it now. For example, I just knew you were going to ask me out."

Jeremy thought, "*She can't be a true psychic or she would have known how bad this date would go.*"

"I can see things before they happen. Like on this trip to New York, I knew the cab driver was going to get lost and he did. We ended up across the river in Brooklyn and we were trying to get to Madison Square Garden. We went to a concert, but before the concert we stopped at a very expensive shoe store. My mother and I walked around for maybe an hour. We could only buy one pair each because they were so much. Can you believe it? I think you would like New York."

Jeremy thought, "*Can I go there now?*"

"There's a lot of music in New York City. Every block there's a café with live music. Even on the

street corners there's live music. You probably wouldn't want to play on the street. They have world-famous orchestras. You should think about going to New York. I can tell that you really like music. Did I tell you that my dog can sing? It's the funniest thing. When we sing a particular song, he will sing along. His name is 'Ringo,' like Ringo Starr. Maybe that's why he's so musically talented. He's trying to live up to his name. My cat, I didn't tell you about my cat. My cat, Hermione, is psychic. You know cats have a special connection with the universe. You can see it in their eyes. You know, eyes can tell a lot about a person. They say they're the windows to the soul. I wonder sometimes when I'm putting on make-up, does that disguise my true feelings. I wonder when people wear too much makeup if they are trying to hide their soul. Take Robin, she wears so much dark eye makeup. Do you think she has a dark soul? I think colors are very expressive. I like to wear lighter colors to tell the world I'm a total optimist. I know the school colors are black and gold. I wish we would use more gold than black. The wrestling cheerleaders have a home uniform that is black with gold trim and an away uniform that is gold with black trim. I think I'll enjoy the away games more than the home games because the colors will put me in a more enthusiastic mood. Happy cheerleaders cheer louder. It makes me think of when I'm the happiest. It's on our sailboat in Lake Erie. The whole family goes to the lake every other weekend in the summer to sail around South Bass Island and Kelly's Island. I just love the wind in

my hair as we race across the water. Darby and I lay out on the bow in very tiny bikinis to get a real good tan. Sometimes we'll meet boy counselors from the 4H camp. They love to party in Put-in-Bay. The town is just one big party all summer long. There's also a big monument there for some reason. Did you notice these earrings? I bought them in a cute little shop next to the dance hall."

Jeremy was full of wonder – when will the check arrive, when did she have time to eat anything, and was there an off switch? For the rest of the evening, Stephanie's words droned on into unintelligible noise. It took extraordinary concentration to be able to response to her ramblings. This continued all the way to her house.

He did hear her last question at her door when she asked, "Will you call me tomorrow?"

He didn't want to hurt her feelings. He was unable to endure any more. "No, I don't think so."

The answer was kind, but not enough to keep her from feeling bad. "You didn't have a good time?"

"Honestly, I don't think I was even there."

"I talk too much, don't I? I've tried to slow down, I've tried to stop. Maybe I just get nervous and I go on and on. I should just tell every date, 'Just stop me when I've said too much.' I don't know if anyone would do that. Most people don't want to be rude."

Jeremy interrupted, "Stephanie, you're a very pretty girl and I just know you'll find a handsome wrestler to make you happy."

Stephanie made a little smile.

Jeremy continued, “You’re smiling. I bet there’s a wrestler you have your eye on already, right?” The second he ended the sentence with an open-ended question, he regretted it.

“Well, there is one wrestler who is kind of cute. He wrestles in the 145lb division. I don’t know if he’s noticed me yet. Maybe I’ll have to leave a hint. You know sometimes it’s hard to be subtle about your feelings. Some believe in body language. I’m not so sure. In order for body language to work, you have to look at a person. And then you have to observe. There’s a big difference between look and observe. Men don’t really observe. They look alright. They look at all the wrong things, if you know what I mean.”

Jeremy had only one thought. *“If there is a piece of space debris hurtling toward earth, I would gladly offer my head as a landing site.”*

The night did eventually end. Jeremy shook off the experience by spending as much time at the bookstore as possible. The holiday season was busy with good customers, demanding customers, and indecisive customers. He handled all with grace and patience. He needed to save as much money as he could for the future trip. There was the car, insurance, gas, food, and on top of all that – the cost of the Prom. Skimping on the Prom would be too noticeable. Nothing must look out of the ordinary, so Prom would take a substantial amount of savings.

Other than his time in the bookstore, Christmas was uneventful except for the snowball that Kate pelted hit him with square in the back. Robin called it ‘foreplay.’

The holiday season ended with New Year’s Eve and all the parties to celebrate the occasion. Considering how badly his date with Stephanie had gone, Jeremy did not have the energy to contemplate another social outing so soon. He decided to stay home for New Year’s Eve. Both Eric and Aaron urged him to come to a party. Without a date he would feel out of place. There were so many things to think about in association with the upcoming year, romance dropped on the priority list. George had purchased a 12-pack for a party at a friend’s home, and in an unexpected act of generosity, he left one beer in the refrigerator for Jeremy.

Robin urged Kate to come to a party. “It’s the best way to get out of your funk. Besides, you might meet somebody at the party.” Kate was disappointed with the lack of romance in her life; a disappointment so profound it discouraged the effort for a relationship. After turning down Toby, she thought she’d feel out of place without a date. A quiet evening at home and a good night’s sleep might be the best way to leave her year behind.

Kate snuggled under a blanket dressed in her softest flannel pajamas to watch a celebrity-filled TV special. Only the light from the television illuminated the room. She clutched a small novelty bottle of

champagne as the light from the television flickered on her face. Later in the evening the reflection of the crystal ball dropping in Times Square was visible on Kate's closed eyelids.

Jeremy was in sweat pants and a sweatshirt. He watched an unknown bowl game with two unknown teams sponsored by the latest dot com sensation. The crushed beer can lay empty next to the couch. The reflection of the crystal ball dropping in Times Square was visible on Jeremy's closed eyelids.



"In the midst of a harsh environment, beauty can be found." It is a recurring theme and a lesson learned. For Jeremy, disappointment on athletic fields led to success in music. The freedom to pursue his passion was endangered by a domineering parent. Jeremy was also distracted by a green-eyed girl in his neighborhood. Enlightenment will come from an unusual source. Answers will be discovered in a land of grandeur, history, and mystery - the Sandhills.

Sandhills

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