

Red

By Isabella Frey

The sticks felt heavy in my hands. I turned them over, admiring their smooth curves and edges. I looked around the room. The drum kit was pressed against a wall. It was bright red. It shone where the light hit it and the cymbals gleamed. There was a stand right behind the bass drum and a wooden chair off to the side. I sat down on the stool. It was black cushiony leather.

I held the sticks tight and hit the snare drum. It made a sharp sound, like a scream or brakes on gravel. I tried out all the other drums, memorizing their sounds and tightness. I tried playing a pattern and then another. I was hypnotized instantly.

We were standing in a semi circle around the drum kit. I was the only girl in the room. Everyone else was a guy, and around sixteen years old. They all looked like they'd rather be somewhere else. That wasn't the case for me though. I started drumming when I was twelve years old, three years ago. I had worked hard everyday to be my best and I would give up anything to get even better. I had to work twice as hard as anyone else here because no one takes female drummers seriously. It took me two years just to find a teacher who actually believed in me.

The door slammed and the clinician strutted in and over to the kit. He eyed us all up and down, but his gaze lingered on me just a second longer than everyone else. No one else noticed but I did. I looked away and he moved on.

"My name is Ryan. Welcome to my clinic. We're going to be playing hard for the next 4 hours. If you get tired or want to take a break, the door is just over there; and don't bother coming back." He looked at me. Everyone always underestimated me. I wasn't the best, but I had earned my place here. "We're going to start with rudiments. You should all be warmed up so I'm going to jump right in with paradiddles. You should be playing at 180 beats a minute on eighths or sixteenths."

Half the group stared at him and the rest waited to be queued but Ryan didn't queue us, so I just started playing. Everyone else joined in eventually and Ryan walked around criticizing our technique and posture. It was hell.

After the clinic I went to ask Ryan about a Latin rhythm I was curious about. That was the main reason I was there. He told me that he couldn't play it and to keep dreaming. I guess I was pissed about it but I wasn't going to let it ruin my day.

I went outside to wait for my girlfriend, Ruby. Her dad bought her a car so she drives me everywhere. It's a really old Punch Buggy but she loves it, so I do too. Ruby's hair is red, almost like blood. When she smiles at you, you feel like to most special person in the world. Her eyes are green with some brown mixed in. She's so welcoming and beautiful. I don't know how I scored a girl like her. My hair is cut short, like a boys, and is wiry and thin. I'm not very pretty, and most of the time I'm wearing cargo pants or pyjamas, but for some reason Ruby loves me almost as much as I love her.

Most of our school hates us because sometimes we hold hands or kiss and most people think we should just burn in hell. It kind of bugs me but Ruby's pride is enough for the both of us.

Ruby pulled up to the side of the building and I slid into the car beside her. She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek, then started driving.

"How did it go?" She glanced over at me while I stared out the window at the passing streetlights. "Did you learn that beat or whatever?"

"It was good," I replied, "but the guy didn't know the rhythm that I need. It's fine though. If I keep practicing I'll eventually get it on my own."

"Well if anyone can figure it out, it's you." She flashed me one of her legendary smiles. I couldn't help but smile back. I turned on the radio and fiddled around with it a bit until I found a good channel. For the rest of the ride home we sat in silence and occasionally belted out the chorus to whatever song we were listening to. After Ruby dropped me off at my house I went upstairs to work on some songs before I went to bed.

I lied there for what seemed like hours before my eyes began to droop. I was thinking about a lot, and my brain just wouldn't shut up. Eventually though, I must've drifted off.

After school I went straight over to Ricky's house. He was the lead guitarist in our band, *Influenza*. The only other member was Tony, the lead vocalist. I was the drummer but I occasionally did backup vocals too. We were rehearsing for this annual music fest our city held. It was a big deal for small bands like us. The top 3 bands got to go to a state wide music fest and play on a real stage for a real crowd. I wanted to win more than anything.

Tony and Ricky were already getting ready when I got there; they were warming up and tuning the instruments.

"Hey guys. I have some new chord progressions I wanted to look into today." I actually had more than just a few. I'd had a rough week, and when things are rough my music's at its best.

"Sweet. We were gonna warm up with Something to Live For and then work on Your Arms so after that we'll start developing on new ideas." Tony was the brains behind the whole operation. He organized everything and kept us on track. If it weren't for him Ricky and I would just screw around for hours without getting any actual work done.

We stayed at Ricky's house for at least four hours. We did almost everyday. It was becoming tradition. We would go over and practice for a few hours, then order pizzas for dinner, then we'd keep practicing. No one was willing to work as hard as we were to make it as a band. After rehearsing and practicing for hours Ruby would usually come and pick Tony and me up. She'd drop Tony off first and then most of the time she'd come over to my house to help me with homework. When your whole life is music it's hard to keep up in school, so Ruby helped me a lot.

We were almost at my house when I noticed the smoke in the sky. It was impossible to know what house it was coming from, but I had this weird feeling that I knew which it would be. As Ruby slowed the car to a crawl and we turned the corner my fears were confirmed.

There were flames crawling up the sides of the house, reaching up towards the sky but escaping towards the ground as well. They were red and seemed to gleam in the sunlight. I heard sirens in the distance but my focus didn't waver.

I jumped out of the car and ran towards the house... my house. Red flashed in front of my eyes, not from the flames, but from shock. The red was so bright and shiny, I thought about my drum

kit. It was so beautiful and intense, and I thought about Ruby's hair. It was so sinister and evil, and though I tried hard not to, I thought about blood.

I knew my mom would've been home and so would my brothers. I started searching for them in the crowd of people, calling their names, but all I could see was red. My eyes were tearing up and all I could see was a sea of blurry faces and a red sky. Ruby grabbed my shoulder and pulled me close to her. She held me like that until the faint sirens became profound sirens. She held me close while the firemen put out the fire and went inside to search for my family. By the time they came back out my mind was in another place; my eyes were closed and my arms were limp and my thoughts were in dreamland.

In my dream I was on a stage with my drum kit. Ruby was the only person I could make out in the audience. Even in the dark her red hair gleamed. I was playing, not by choice but by something beyond my control. The flames started small. They were mainly on the ground barely licking the bass drum and cymbals. Then they grew, hiking up the bass drum and infesting the snare. I couldn't feel anything but I could see the fire wrap itself around my foot and leg. I watched my jeans crumble and the skin underneath turn red and sticky from heat and blood. I tried to move but I couldn't. I looked up to see Ruby looking at me. They were all just watching but no one came to help me while I struggled. Ruby smirked, her hair looking more and more like fire every second. Our gazes met and while she sat there smiling, a single tear rolled down my cheek.

About 5 years ago my dad was diagnosed with cancer. They said it wasn't bad and that he was likely to recover. A year and a half later it got really bad and spread into his lungs and he died. My mom took it pretty hard and kind of zoned out for a while. I felt like I was all alone because we were all grieving in different ways so it felt like we didn't have each other. I started becoming depressed. It got so bad that I didn't even want to be alive. My oldest brother, Elie, took charge and brought me to a doctor. I got a therapist and started taking medication and learned how to play the drums. I still had issues but I managed to be happy. I learned how to channel my anger and sadness into music instead of wallowing in it.

After the fire I spent the next week or so doing nothing. I didn't play any music or write anything down. I was turning back to my old ways of handling my feelings and it was really wearing on me. My mom was still in the hospital and so were two of my brothers. Elie had come home after a few days and was trying desperately to keep our lives together.

Ruby came over almost every day but her legendary smile just didn't affect me the same way. Her hair that once was beautiful now just reminded me of the flames. She would sit by me and try talking to me and I would just stare at a wall, avoiding conversation.

Everyone told me to try playing some music. Deep down even I knew it would help. But the drum kit was like Ruby's hair. Instead of it exciting me and lifting me up it would shatter me and drag me back down from whatever progress I'd made.

Ricky and Tony came over to and I tried to be positive for them, they were like family, but it was hard enough to not start crying when they started talking about their new songs and ideas.

Weeks past and my other brothers came home but my mom remained in the hospital. I was getting worse and my brothers were all trying to help me but I just pushed them away. I didn't like being this way. It wasn't any more fun for me than it was for the people around me. I knew I wanted to get better I just didn't know how.

Me and Ruby broke up. She said I was pushing her away and she just couldn't deal with it anymore. That's when I truly knew I had to pull myself together.

I invited Tony over and told him to bring his guitars. I knew music would help me but for now the drum kit was only making things worse. It reminded me of what used to be and I needed to move forward. He taught me some chords but I just wasn't feeling it. It didn't have the same effect on me that the drums had.

It had been a month and a half since the fire. My mom was coming home in a week. I was sitting on the couch, staring at the drum kit. The shiny red casing glistened. It called to me; I knew it missed being played. I cautiously walked up to it and placed my hand on the snare. It was so smooth and slippery. I hit it with my finger and heard the sharp sound I knew so well.

I owed it to my band to get it together. They need me to perform with them at the music fest. My heart was pounding. Red flashed before my eyes. I was reminded of the fire, of Ruby, of the blood I accidentally saw dad coughing up. I tried to push it aside but I couldn't.

Then I realized, I knew this kit better than anything. I had played it with blistered hands in front of hundreds of people before. I could play it while singing and with my eyes closed. Who did I think I was to stop myself from this? I didn't need to see to play. I stopped trying to force away the red and instead welcomed it. I reached for the sticks, and they were there, resting on the windowsill like always. I felt for the stool and sat.

The sticks felt heavy in my hands. They felt right. I closed my eyes and sat up straight. I would come back from this even stronger. I decided to play Caravan. It was extremely difficult but I knew the charts backwards.

I took a deep breath in, then out. With my eyes closed the redness took me over, and I began.