

# CHAPTER ONE

TORONTO 1989

I was twenty five years old and I was dying. I had to be. It was the only explanation for the way I felt. It was four in the morning and I was running through a strange city in the middle of a blizzard. All around me the snow swirled to the ground, the millions of magic crystals seemingly becoming thicker and thicker as I stumbled through the night. Despite the cold, my face was wet with sweat. My heart was beating so strongly it seemed it was going to punch it's way out of my body. So this was it. With each step I sensed that my grip on life was becoming looser. With each step my feelings of panic and self pity multiplied. Everyone and everything I cared about was three thousand miles away, on the other side of an ocean. I'd never felt more totally alone.

But I kept moving. I had to. As I ran, the Spencer Davis group's "Keep On Running" kept cutting in and out of my fevered brain. I couldn't block it out. Why did everything in my life, even it's ending, need a soundtrack? It was too late to answer that one. So the turntable in my head kept spinning and "Keep On Running" kept on tormenting me while I headed nowhere. The old warehouse district I ran through lay blanketed in several inches of deep, fresh snow and my loafers made little noise as I skidded through it's deserted streets. My feet were numb with the cold but it wasn't the cold that was killing me. I kept running.

I had no idea where I'd started out from and no idea where I was. All I knew was where I wanted to get to . A public phone box. I had to call my parents - tell them that I loved them, tell them that I was sorry . A dramatic farewell from a frightened voice lost on another continent. But there were no phone boxes, no final call home. So I staggered and slipped from one pool of mellow yellow lamp post light to the next. I was gasping for breath, the pain in my chest becoming sharper, more threatening. It dawned on me that maybe I was running in circles. Trapped in my own little whiteout world. A tiny, insignificant figure endlessly skidding around in one of those souvenir paperweights that snowed when you shook them up. I stopped for a moment to grab my breath and put a hand over my pulsing heart. With my other hand I brushed the icy flakes and the warm tears from my eyes. Standing there in the lonesome snow I did something I hadn't done for years. I was no longer the little atheist, I needed help. I prayed.

"Please God, let me get through this. I promise I'll change. No more drugs, no more one night stands. Just give me one more chance...."

The girl I'd been chatting with at the warehouse party was the first one to notice it. I'd finished my set at the Copa Club and somehow ended

up in a taxi with a couple of the club's promoters. We drove out to the city's only late night dive, the imaginatively named Speakeasy. Speak easy, if only I could. Earlier, in the crass excitement and excess of a crazed evening, I'd smeared a couple of lines of cocaine over my gums and gradually my mouth had become numb. It had taken a long time to hit me but the first round of Tequila slammers we did at the bar must have acted as some kind of catalyst because my jaws suddenly felt solidified. I was trying to rediscover how to form words with my mouth when I was introduced to Claudine.

She'd been at the Copa and had liked the music I played. She started asking me which clubs to visit if she ever got to London. I was trying to answer her with a series of grunts and one word sentences. She must have thought I was the strong, silent type. That didn't really matter though. What mattered was that she's seen me in action at the club and was impressed. I had to admit that that night I'd been good. Really good. The booze and the cocaine had me thinking seven or eight records beyond the tune I was already playing. Every track had flowed perfectly into the next. From rap to house, funk to disco and all the off-the-wall stuff in-between, it all made sense. It all worked. The dance floor was heaving for the whole four hours. People screaming, shouting, applauding. Great crowd. God bless Canada. Claudine had been there, dancing with her friends. She'd tried to come up to the DJ box a couple of times to ask for a particular track but the bouncer on the door hadn't let her up to see me. But here she was now, at the Speakeasy bar.

"I just loved what you were playing tonight. The way you mixed it all up. You know some D.J.s play it way too intense. Your music made me happy."

She was still happy at the after hours party too, talking about remixes, which tunes were "hot" in Canada, and how she loved the London music scene. She was talking but I wasn't really paying too much attention to the questions. After six years of being a D.J. I was so sick of talking about records. Wherever I went in the world I got the same boring, bullshit, who-gives-a-fuck questions.

"Hey DJ, heard that tune by Kevin Saunderson?"

"What do you reckon on that new Todd Terry track?"

"Have you got that remix of De La Soul by that Italian guy?"

"Are you going play the dub mix of that blah, blah, blah.."

What wasn't boring about the conversation in the Speakeasy, though, was that Claudine was very cute in a punky, Tank-girl kind of way. She had spiky bleached white hair and a full lower lip I wanted to bite. Her blue, blue eyes stared unashamedly into mine and as she spoke and she kept squeezing my arm to emphasise whatever point she was making. I had that buzzy feeling you get when you just KNOW that you're going to end up in bed together. A faint vestige of social grace kept us at the bar though knocking back tequila shots. Shots. Shots.

As my legs pressed against hers and her hands kept stroking my chest and arms, I knew I should have been getting horny. But for some reason I started becoming agitated. Every word and sentence she came out with seemed laboured and so, so drawn out. As her pretty-in-pink, lipsticked mouth opened and shut I just wanted to dive down her throat and haul the words out, faster and faster. Every time she started speaking I knew what she was going to say before she finished it. I tried to think about sex, how her breasts would look when she pulled her T-shirt over her head. How her skin would taste as I licked her flat little stomach. But trying to fantasise about her did no good. I found myself constantly interrupting her, rudely finishing off her every comment. She was starting to get annoyed with me but I couldn't stop myself. And then, strangely enough, the one sentence I didn't finish for her, she sounded more worried than pissed off.

"Wow, there's a vein in your forehead that's getting kinda really big. And your face is kinda red. Are you okay ? Do ya want to come back to my place? Have a lie-down maybe?"

The note of concern in her voice and the racing sensation I was starting to experience in my chest got to me. The invitation to her place ought to have sounded like music to my ears but it didn't. I was feeling seriously weird. I said I'd be right back and headed quickly to the bathroom. I didn't want to be ill right then with the perfect end to the evening on the cards, but this was like nothing I'd ever felt before. Easing past a couple of evil-looking, ponytailed bikers who were negotiating a drug deal with a Dolph Lundgren look-alike in gold chains and a powder blue tracksuit, I got to the washbasins and stared into the smeared surface of the mirror. Claudine had been right. The vein in my forehead looked huge and my face was red and shiny with perspiration. As I stared at my reflection I tried not to panic. Under the unforgiving glare of the florescent lighting I looked like hell. Bad as I looked though I suddenly felt a lot worse. It was starting to feel like I was going to explode. I stood in front of the mirror for a few moments, staring at the face that used to be mine, trying to control the alternate waves of anxiety and euphoria that were washing over me. The swooping sensations inside of me were uncontrollable though. I wanted to shout so I could somehow release the tension that made me feel that my whole body was clenching like a fist. That fucking cocaine! Why had I done so much of it ? Line after line after line in that fucking DJ box. Mister Cool. Mr.Trendy. Mr.Dead !

I got out of the bathroom and back into the noisy mob that surrounded the speakeasy's one bar. As I pushed through the throng Claudine appeared out of nowhere and grabbed me by the arm. Clinging on to me as I just kept on going, she shouted over some naff Van Halen track.

"Hey where you going? You aren't leaving are you?" Shit, she looked disappointed. The sex would have been great but I just had to get

out of there. I tried to smile but I knew it must have come out as a grimace.

“No, no. I’ll be right back. I’ve just got to get some air.”

I didn’t wait to see her reaction. My one thought was to be outside. Away from the people, the clouds of choking cigarette smoke and the too loud, shit rock music . Shoving towards the exit I felt like I was wading through a quicksand of bodies. I had to fight the temptation to start punching people out of the way. By the time I got to the door I hated everyone in the place. As I reached the girl behind the cash register at the entrance, the bouncers opened the outside door to let a couple in and I pushed between them out into the cold.

My first thoughts on leaving the smoke and noise behind me weren’t about death. All I could think about was grabbing a couple of lung fulls of cold, crisp, fresh air. Anything to stop the raging in my chest. But once outside on the sidewalk, the pounding behind my ribs grew more intense. After a few moments of trying to calm my mind and my body....deep breath....hold it for ten seconds....exhale slowly....deep breath....hold it for ten seconds....I started to become panicky. The cocaine was killing me! I wasn’t sure you could have a heart attack at 25. It didn’t sound right, but then I remembered Susie’s friend Lance. A top male model - he’d died of a heart attack in Thailand, bought on by a coke overdose. And he was only 20!. 20 ! Shit, I was an old man in comparison. So this was what it was like. O.D. Suddenly I felt very scared, cold and alone. I should have listened to the TV adverts. I should have remembered to ‘Just Say No’.

So I stood there in the freezing winds of a Toronto snow storm, silently panicking, watching my breath turning into puffs of steam. I looked back at the parka-clad bouncers in the doorway of the Speakeasy I thought of asking them to call me an ambulance. No, too embarrassing. Besides in the snow it would probably take hours to arrive. I tried to kid myself I was over reacting. Maybe it was just a bad case of coke paranoia. Whatever it was, some primitive survival instinct told me I could run it off. I was suddenly certain that I could burn away the coke-fuelled energy that was threatening to overwhelm my rapidly thumping heart. And while I was doing that I was sure I’d find a phone box. Call home E.T. Tell the folks what you’ve done. Confession and salvation.

So, I turned away from the life and light of the Speakeasy and started along the sidewalk. As I walked, prior to building up to a jog, I could swear that my heart was pounding like the speaker cones on a hi-fi’s bass bins. I had to do something to get rid of the feeling that I was about to detonate. A nagging voice told me that with my heart racing dangerously fast already, physical exertion was the last thing my body needed. I ignored the voice and started running. Feet don’t fail me now. But even as my mind struggled for a way to keep me alive, my ego selfishly demanded attention. I could see the headlines back home.

“London D.J. Dies of Drug Overdose.” No, scratch that.

“TOP London D.J. dies of Drug Overdose” sounded better. Fuck ! What was I thinking? Should I be writing my own obituary already. Did that mean I was giving up ? I hadn’t really thought about death that much but I’d never imagined I’d end up dying like this.

Well, well. well. What a stupid way to go. What a fucking waste. Why the hell had I flown out to Toronto? I didn’t need the money and my ego hadn’t needed stroking by yet another long haul job.. I should have stayed home with Louise. What was that song?

*“If the world ended now, who would you turn to? If the world ended now, who would you call? “*

Well, now I knew. Parents, girlfriend, brother. In that order. They were the only four people in the whole world that I *really* cared about. I peered desperately through the snow, trying to spot a call box that would let me make my peace. I couldn’t believe there weren’t any, anywhere. Maybe I could stop a passing car. But nothing was moving. It was just me and the endless, relentless snow.

Finally I couldn’t run any further. I was barely able to catch my breath and my legs were shaky with tiredness. I found a street corner where the previous day’s snow fall had been pushed back into a four foot high drift. Slipping and sliding I clambered onto the pristine, powdery whiteness of the top of the drift and then twisted around and fell back, my arms flung out, my face pointing up to the sky. The snow gave a faint crunching noise as I sunk a couple of inches into the drift and then all was silent. I lay there for a moment with my eyes closed. The snow flakes felt good gently dissolving on my hot skin. The pounding in my chest eased slightly but the incredible tension that gripped my body felt the same. I opened my eyes again and tried to breathe normally. Maybe this was how it was at the end. Peace and acceptance. The last few years had been a hell of a journey but now it was over. I watched the endless shower of falling white, stardust drifting out of the blackness and tried to quietly accept my fate.