



HONEYCOMB

Patricia McCowan

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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Summary: Nat loves to sing and hopes her newly formed trio will win a chance to play at a big music festival, but first she has to learn to trust her own voice—both on and off stage.



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*For my parents, who always encouraged my love
of the arts, no matter what.*

One

I don't have butterflies in my stomach; I have big flapping pelicans. I've never been so nervous. In the dark backstage of an old church auditorium, Harper stands in front of me, watching the act that's before ours. She's pulled her dark, curly hair into a pile on top of her head, and excitement sparks off her like a meteor shower. Jess waits beside me, rock-steady as always, her guitar slung toward her back, her hands in her jeans pockets.

The three of us are the last act on the last day of March-break music camp, and I'm hoping the act onstage will never end. Not because five guys doing an all-horns version of "Smoke on the Water" is great. It's weird. But once Brassed-Off is done, we're up.

Why am I so nervous? I've sung in front of tons of people at school choir competitions. But it's easy to blend in with a choir. In three-part harmony, if I suck, I'll stand out. It's the standing out I'm afraid of.

Harper stage-whispers, "We are so gonna bring the house down after these goofs." She glances at me, winces, puts her hands on my cheeks. "Nat. Girlfriend. Breathe."

I take a deep breath.

"Now put your stage face on."

I do my best to smile as if I mean it. I can't let her and Jess down. "It's okay. I'm good."

"You're gonna be more than good, Nat. You're gonna be great. *We're* gonna be great." She puts her arm around my shoulders. I've known Harper only a week, but already she treats me like her best friend.

Still, I look to Jess—Jess and me and singing have gone together since grade one. "Harper's right," she says.

The pelicans in my stomach stop flapping so hard.

Applause. The Brass-Off guys bow and come bouncing past us, high-fiving and fist-bumping one another. Harper rolls her eyes.

Darrell Bishop, the head of the camp, bounds out of the audience and onto the stage. The lights shine off his wire-framed glasses and perfectly bald head. “Was that not awesome?” he shouts. The audience claps.

He glances toward us, making sure we’re ready. Jess pulls her guitar into position. Harper flashes a huge smile. She grabs my wrist and squeezes. I can’t tell if it’s to reassure me or to keep me from bolting.

Darrell gives us a thumbs-up and turns back to the audience. *Our* audience. “To finish off tonight’s showcase of terrific young musicians, let’s welcome to the stage three velvet-voiced gals. This trio couldn’t agree on a name for their group”—the audience laughs, and Darrell raises one hand—“but that’s okay, because they only came together this week, and hey, they sure find harmony when they sing. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Harper Neale, Natalie Boychuk and Jess Lalonde.”

Harper pulls me into the light. Jess follows close behind. Pelicans or not, it’s time to sing.

Harper takes center stage behind the microphone, with me and Jess flanking her. We’re tight

together in a bright circle of light. It makes Jess's smooth black ponytail shine. Harper's caramel-colored skin seems to glow. I'm probably half-invisible beside them, all wispy blond hair and pale eyes.

Harper cozies up to the mic. "Fellow music geeks and gods," she starts, her voice silky, relaxed. At home. "I can't believe we've been together for only a week. It already feels...I don't know, like we're a family." She shades her eyes to look out at the other musicians, who have joined the audience. "Is that corny?"

"No!" they cheerfully yell.

Wow. Harper is only a year older than Jess and me—she's sixteen—but she can banter like a pro. Down in the front row, Darrell beams.

Harper smiles and nods. "Cool, cool. So, to keep this family-groove thing going, the girls and I have a song to share with you. Sound okay?"

The audience whistles and cheers. I quietly clear my throat and hope no one can hear my knees knocking together.

"Sweet," Harper says. She looks over to Jess, who smiles her easygoing smile as she strums the intro to "Four Strong Winds."

I take a breath, and we dive into the song.

I have to watch Harper's and Jess's mouths to make sure I stay in sync, see the cues for when to breathe. We worked hard on this all week, from the moment on Monday when Darrell discovered how our voices fit together to our pre-show rehearsal today.

I remember not to push the higher notes so they don't sound harsh. During the first chorus, Harper's fingers tap my back—a hint to move closer to her so our voices meld. My mouth dries out. So much to worry about. At least my knees have stopped shaking.

The second verse. Something shifts in me. The song takes over. Jess's voice is a deep current for Harper and me to sail on top of. It's suddenly easy to know when to breathe. I risk a look at the audience—smiling faces, a few people singing softly along. Everyone is together in the song. Nothing matters but all of us right here, right now, living the music. And my voice is helping to make this happen.

Too soon, the song ends. Jess's last chord vibrates in the air. Then, a beat of thick silence.

“Thank you,” Harper murmurs into the mic.

Cheers break the spell. Relief washes over me like a sweet, cool shower, and I laugh.

I did it. I remembered the words, I got the harmonies, I didn't suck. I *performed*. I want to do this again. No, I *have* to do this again. I stand there, grinning, until Darrell waves us forward. "Take your bows!"

I practically fly to the front of the stage, and the clapping gets louder. Harper gets there next. She shoots me a dark look, freezing me for a second, then smiles out at the audience. Jess joins us. We all hold hands and bow. As the clapping dies down, Harper pulls her hand away and blows a kiss to the audience, triggering one last wave of applause.

"That's how it's done," she says so only I can hear, and she heads backstage.