



The Frail Days

Gabrielle Prendergast



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Summary: Stella and her newly formed band must decide whether to change their edgy rock sound to get into a conservative summer music festival.

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ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS
PO BOX 5626, STN. B
Victoria, BC Canada
V8R 6S4

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS
PO BOX 468
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For Jessica, Maury and Graham

One

“**N**ext!”

I don't say it loud enough for the bimbo with the Disney Princess cartoon voice to hear me. She's halfway back out to her boyfriend's truck by now anyway. Probably about to tell him what a great audition she did. How she's sure to get the gig and join our *adorable* band. She actually said that: “You guys are so *adorable!*” I wanted to tell her the great lengths I have gone not to be adorable. Pierced nose. Fire-engine-red hair. Doc Martens. A different fake tattoo on my shoulder every week. Vintage T-shirts and black skinny jeans. Leather jacket. I know I'm pretty small for a sixteen-year-old girl, but adorable? Barf.

Mom calls my look “nihilist chic,” “neo-punk” and “post-everything.” As far as punk goes, she

should know. She was there the first time punk came around, even had a mohawk, probably the first Chinese Canadian punk girl ever. She still has all the old records. The Clash. The Sex Pistols. The Dead Kennedys. It's wicked cool, though obviously I'd never tell her that. Dad, meanwhile, used to build his own synthesizers and listen to New Order. Both my parents are way more conservative now. A teacher and an engineer. And, of course, they have to tell me "music today is nothing but noise" every once in a while. But even they would have thought the cartoon girl was awful.

"She wasn't that bad," Miles says. He's pretty diplomatic for a fourteen-year-old who hasn't even hit puberty yet. Maybe he just liked the look of the cartoon girl. But I'm not entirely convinced that he's going to go for girls when his voice finally changes and he grows some armpit hair.

"Are you kidding?" Jacob says. Jacob is the same age as Miles and only a few hormones further along in the puberty department. "She was so sweet I think I'm going into diabetic shock." His voice squeaks on the word *diabetic*.

I try not to laugh. Miles and Jacob hate it when I tease them about being little boys. And fair enough. Between the two of them they've got enough rocker chops to reduce Justin Bieber to a watery puddle of maple syrup. Jacob on guitar and Miles on bass have turned out to be a miracle match for me, despite their tender age. With me on drums, we pump out a rock sound straight from 1978—real guitars, real amps and real drums. Feedback, power chords, thumping bass and banging snare. It's nothing like the hip-hop and country twang that has cast a clichéd cloud over this sad little nowhere town. Miles and Jacob love old rock and punk, the seventies, the eighties, the Seattle grunge of the nineties, even some recent good stuff, as much as I do. Totally in synch in our tastes, we're a dream team. Except for one thing.

As if to illustrate our deprived situation, Miles starts to sing. He sounds like a soloist in the Vienna Boys' Choir. Pretty, but hardly compatible with guitar rock. Jacob is even worse. Puberty has turned his voice into an unpredictable mess, like a piano with half the keys broken, missing or tuned wrong. He and Miles think it's funny as hell, but to me it just reinforces the fact that

I can't sing either. I mean, I have an okay voice. It's just that, in front of more than two people I start to squeak like a mouse. I can't seem to pull it together. If I could, we wouldn't be having this problem.

"The problem is," Jacob says, like he's reading my mind, "every person who wants to sing in a band is either a poser or a diva or a wanker."

"Oh, you noticed?" I say. This morning we've jammed with no fewer than ten aspiring vocalists for our band. Two were not-very-talented rappers. Three couldn't sing at all, even with their giggling friends egging them on. One was a forty-nine-year-old opera singer. She was awesome, actually, but *really*? She had her baby *grandson* with her. Three others were okay singers—just okay. But their tastes ran so close to the middle of the road, I'm surprised they haven't been run over by a truck. If I have to hear someone sing "Viva la Vida" again, I'm going to cry. Then there was Disney Princess singer. She sounded like she was in a contest for the loudest, most emotive diva in the world, competing against Celine Dion and Mariah Carey. Big voice, big boobs, no soul. Thanks but no thanks.

“Maybe we could be an instrumental act,” Miles suggests, giving up on his cherubic solo.

“Name an instrumental act that anyone has heard of or cares about,” I say.

“The London Philharmonic,” Jacob quips.

I flick a guitar pick at him.

“Miles Davis,” Miles says, predictably. He’s named after Miles Davis, and he actually looks a bit like him. He can even play most of his jazz tunes.

“Both of you, bite me,” I say, clambering out from behind the drum kit. It’s hot in this garage/excuse for a studio that we rehearse in. We’ve been here for hours and we still don’t have a singer. I need coffee and air and, most of all, sugar. The real kind. Not the kind the Princess girl was serving.

* * *

I hate the mall and everything it stands for. But it’s air-conditioned. And summer seems to have arrived early this year. So it’s the best place to go for my caffeine and sugar fix. I couldn’t convince the boys to come with me. I don’t mind though.

I'm an only child, so I'm used to doing stuff by myself. I stride past the girly boutiques, slowing down only to look at a cool pair of purple Chucks that I don't really need. I have three pairs of Chucks already. In the food court I combine my addictions into a giant iced-coffee extravaganza. I slurp it back in the bookstore, browsing the music section. It's mostly books about country singers and rappers. Like I care about their plastic lives.

I'm about to take a closer look at a book about concert posters when an announcement comes over the PA system.

“Attention, shoppers. Please join us for a special performance by our own Fantalicious! Two o'clock in the central forecourt.”

I suppress the urge to gag. Fantalicious is a ridiculous girl group put together by one of the local dance studios and the radio station. The girls wriggle their butts and lip-synch to their own Auto-Tuned voices in malls and supermarkets all over the district. It's disgusting and tragic. Of course, I have to go and check it out.

By the time I get to the forecourt, the speakers are already pumping out a fake bassy rhythm. Fantalicious is “singing” about a cute boy and

his hot car. Ugh. They are so embarrassing to every part of me that's female. The four members pose and wiggle through three more sound-alike songs before, mercifully, stopping. Then they mingle with the crowd and sign autographs for the tweeniboppers who squealed through the whole performance. I don't remember being like that when I was a tween. I asked for Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* for my ninth birthday. For my tenth I got *Regatta de Blanc* by the Police. For my eleventh I finally got my own MP3 player. After that I downloaded whatever I wanted. Never anything like Fantalicious though. God no.

As I lurk about, watching the fan frenzy, I wonder what it would be like to be mobbed like that. Part of me wants to be famous, but I don't know if I could handle all the attention. I don't even like answering questions in class. But I love music. I want to do it for real. I hate to admit it, but I was a tiny bit jealous of Fantalicious as they were performing. I wonder if they know how silly they are and just don't care. The little kids love them. Maybe that's all that matters.

As the crowd disperses I see Chad Banner sitting behind a table, handing out CDs and

posters. *Chad Freakin' Banner*. Even though he's probably only twentysomething, he's the big music czar in town. As well as promoting various acts, he owns the one decent nightclub and deejays a pretty cool Sunday-night radio show. I recognize him from his bus-stop ads. Hopped up on caffeine and sugar as I am, I don't even hesitate to go over to talk to him. I mean, musicians need to schmooze, right? Plus, Chad is sort of hot, for an older guy.

But when I get there, I can't think of anything even remotely cool to say. "What are the T-shirts?" I finally ask, leaning against the table. No way am I going home with a Fantalicious CD, but the black T-shirts might be all right.

"Just for the station. CZLL," he says with a smile. "Want one?"

I take an extra-extra small. "Didn't Fantalicious used to have five members?" I remember seeing them on the local morning show last Christmas, singing lame-o dance-y Christmas carols in stupid sexy elf outfits.

"One of the members dropped out," Chad says. "They haven't had time to replace her." He looks me up and down. "Do you sing?"

Gross. Even if I did...gross.

"I'm only sixteen years old," I say. My parents would buy a minivan before they'd let me prance around dressed like that. And they are *never* going to buy a minivan.

"The girl who quit was only fifteen."

Ew! Double gross.

"I'm not into fluff pop. And I don't sing. I'm a drummer."

"A girl drummer, huh? Cool. You have a band?"

Chad Banner asked me if I have a band. *The Chad Banner*. What can I do? I lie, of course. "I have an awesome band. We're like early Green Day meets Paramore." Where in hell did I get that from? I don't even like Paramore or Green Day.

Chad seems unconcerned about or unaware of my ridiculous lie. "That sounds sweet," he says. "You should try out for the Parkland Summer Music Festival. I'm one of the selectors this year."

This would be a moment to flirt my way into an awesome gig, I guess. But I suck at flirting. Every time I've tried, the boy has practically run screaming in the other direction. "Maybe we will," I say instead. That seems safe enough. I ball

the CZLL T-shirt up in my sweaty hands and turn away.

“Hey, what’s your name?” Chad says as I start to leave.

“Stella Wing,” I say. Strictly speaking, it’s Wang, but it’s Chinese, right? And we’re speaking English. I can pronounce it any way I want. And Wing is just cooler.

“See you at tryouts, Stella Wing,” Chad says, turning to sign an autograph for a guy on crutches.

I try to put the idea of the summer festival out of my mind. I mean, he was just teasing me, wasn’t he? Right?

Now I *really* need to find a singer.