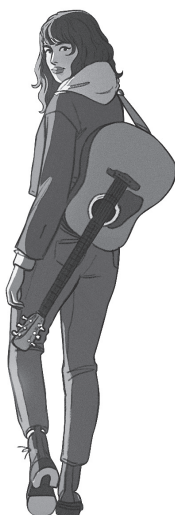


# 12 the Apocalypse



Susan Currie

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# Chapter One



*The opening chord* of the music exploded in Dennison Hall, shattering the silence.

And Iz Beaufort, sitting there in the audience, suddenly burst into tears like a complete idiot.

“Shut up,” she was whispering furiously to herself.

But as the music gained momentum, she found herself getting more stupidly worked up, not less.

It was the way the chord *looked*.

All charcoal grey and black, streaked through with sullen blue, with flashes of slicing silver. It was like some multi-storey building that loomed and morphed in Iz’s head.

Meanwhile, Audra Allen started kicking the back of her chair, saying, “Hey new kid, some of us are trying to watch the *show*.”

Which was a joke, because Audra Allen had been going around telling everyone how boring this concert was going to be.

“Sorry,” Iz muttered.

She hunched down in her chair, crossed her arms furiously and protectively, trying to get the music out of her head. But the trouble was, Iz and music were totally complicated. It was like some relationship in which they were always fighting or making up or ghosting each other.

Mostly ghosting for the last two years, actually.

That was when she’d shoved her guitar under the bed and vowed



not to play it again. It was right after she'd been in a really bad foster home, where playing the guitar had led to horrible things she mostly tried not to think about now. It had been a survival thing, hiding it away, going undercover, pulling a kind of fog around herself, and trying not to stand out.

And she'd mostly succeeded.

But here in Dennison Hall, at the most unlikely of moments, this extraordinary chord was smashing doors open in her head. Memories were spilling out.

She was thinking about the curve of her guitar under her arm.

She was thinking about placing her fingers on the frets in places that were *homes*.

She was thinking about the way she could pick out one melody line, then add others and see them like threads she was twisting together into some complex piece of weaving.

"Hey! New girl!"

Iz swung around.

Audra was smirking at her, and the other kids were doing that thing where you pretend not to laugh but you also want the person to know you are pretending not to laugh.

"Everything . . . okay?" Audra said.

"It's great," Iz said tersely.

"Cause we're getting a little worried back here."

"Sorry about that," Iz said.

She twisted back around to the front, ignoring their giggles.

Audra Allen had picked Iz out on the first day Iz arrived at the school. Audra, like so many other bullies, had kind of sensed that something was not quite normal about Iz. And, restless and bored, hunting around for something to dominate, Audra had settled on her, because she had known Iz wouldn't fight back.

She was right on all counts.

Iz was absolutely no good at normal. Other people didn't seem to get all tangled up like she did when they listened to music. They didn't seem to picture it as a kind of structure with additions and passages you could go down. Nor, as far as she could tell, did they

spend all their time fighting with themselves, wrestling between rebellion and fear and a weird kind of frustrated grief.

Applause exploded over the auditorium.

Iz raised her head then.

The musicians dropped their arms and grinned at the audience. They turned and slapped hands together, laughed, threw an arm around each other's shoulders. Released from the focus and precision of that wild performance, they were now loose-limbed and utterly cheerful.

And she realized with surprise—

They were scarcely older than she was.

*They were kids.*

A man strode onto the stage, amid the applause. He was tall, with a mop of black hair. He moved easily, like he was completely comfortable in himself.

When he spoke, his voice drifted out mildly, as if he was strolling around some flower show.

“Good afternoon! I am Dr. Aaron Perlinger, and this is Manifesto, from The Métier School. Let me introduce them. From the left—Becky, Ahmed, Rina, Jasleen, Kwame, Teo, Will, Bijan, LaRoyce.”

Applause burst out again while the performers shuffled around grinning somewhat self-consciously now.

Dr. Perlinger continued, “Everything is written and performed by these extraordinary young musicians. But that is not the most important thing about them. They *support* each other. They *build* each other. They hold each other up.”

“It all comes from you, Dr. P,” said one of the girls onstage. She was standing beside a large instrument that looked like an overgrown violin. “That’s what makes Manifesto what it is.”

“Ha! I just walk alongside you all, Jasleen,” he said. “I just encourage what’s there already.”

Iz was staring, trying to make sense of this conversation. Who were these kids who could write something as endlessly powerful and complicated and multifaceted as that chord? And who was this

man who directed them and spoke about how they all looked after one another? Why did they beam at him like they loved him?

A pain erupted in her out of nowhere, so strong she was bent over with it. It was a woken-up, broken kind of longing. Because she had the strongest feeling suddenly that if she tried to explain herself to these kids, to this man, they might *actually understand*.

Dr. Perlinger said, “That piece you just heard was called ‘Post-Punk Beethoven.’ It’s the creation of Ahmed and Will and Kwame here. Tell us about it?”

He ushered three boys to the front, who were shuffling around and bashful but with eyes like intelligent arrows.

They started talking at top speed, filling in each other’s thoughts. “Yeah, we were kind of riffing on the idea of *rebellion*.”

“And post-punk is like rebellion on top of the original rebellion of punk. Joy Division, Talking Heads, The Cure—”

“Then there’s Beethoven. He ushered in a whole new era by basically blowing up the rules for how you write music—”

“So we kind of mashed them up together, like rebellion on top of rebellion on top of rebellion!”

*Rebellion on rebellion on rebellion.*

She had seen that in their music—piled-up strata that were all about refusing to accept the way things were and fighting against what held you back.

Maybe that was why she had burst into tears.

Because it had been like seeing her own complicated self looking back at her.

All at once, she wondered—what would *her* life have been like, if Dominion Children’s Care hadn’t spiraled her through twenty-six foster homes and fourteen schools? What if she had not learned to be afraid of writing songs and playing her guitar because of what had happened in That Place? What if there had been a group like Manifesto for her to join, and a leader like Dr. Perlinger to walk beside her and bring out of her what was already there?

For the first time in ages, she longed to actually take out her guitar. She longed to play alongside them.



*Iz the Apocalypse*

It was like that chord was the Big Bang or something.

The universe inside Iz was suddenly expanding outward at an unthinkable speed.

## Chapter Two



*When Iz entered* Pat's house after school, Pat and Britnee were sitting in the living room, surrounded by mountains of fabric and sequins. They were laughing and cutting and gluing.

Pat looked up with a gentle, unseamed face, like the moon on a clear night. "Hi, honey. School good?"

Britnee held up a ruffled thing. "Butter dish holder!"

Britnee was Pat's daughter. She was marrying Vance in only a few months. Pat and Britnee spent most of their time working on wedding favours and phoning people to sort out issues. Vance spent most of his time being silent.

Iz found herself saying, "We had our field trip today. It was these kids from this place called The Métier School. They auditioned to get into it."

"That's the one downtown," Britnee said in her husky, luxurious voice. "Fancy schmancy international high school for music. My friend tried out but didn't get in."

"Probably dodged a bullet." Pat peacefully bit off a seam.

"Oh, totally. She said later she would have hated it."

"Why?" Iz said.

"Just, you know, places like that can be a little full of themselves. A little too-too." Britnee folded a blue ribbon like an accordion between her fingers and deftly pinned it.

"Right." Iz shifted from foot to foot. She wasn't planning to say

anything more, but somehow heard her voice talking anyway. “How . . . how did she audition?”

Britnee flicked her lashes up at Iz and asked humorously, “Why, are you going to try out?”

“Ha! No!” Iz flushed.

Pat smiled kindly at her. “Oh, hon, can you even imagine?”

Iz swallowed, pushed everything down. “Yeah, that would be crazy. Well, I’ve got a lot of homework. Think I’ll go upstairs and get started.”

“Take a snack, Iz. There are cookies. Chocolate chip. I made them this afternoon.”

“Thanks, I will!”

Iz grabbed three cookies from the plate on the counter, then backtracked through the living room and up the stairs, past the portraits of Pat and Britnee beaming on a cruise ship, on a beach, in a restaurant.

She entered her bedroom, closed the door softly. Then she sat down on the floor and peered under the bed.

“There you are,” she whispered.

It had been living under beds for the last two years.

It looked lonely, rootless, like it had been starved for affection. She pulled it toward her, pushing aside crumpled papers and food she kept on hand just in case. Then she opened the lid, lifted the guitar out at last, and simply held it against her chest. She rocked it, like an abandoned child.

“Remember when I found you? In the dumpster. And you didn’t have any strings, till I made a deal with that guy. He stole them from his brother, and I did his math worksheets for a month.”

No one would want her to do their assignments now.

It flashed into her head then, a sudden clear memory of back when she’d been eager to go to school each day, when she’d been creative, optimistic, curious about things. That had been before everything had happened in That Place. Before the things that Iz was not going to think about right now.

She crossed her legs and drew the guitar into position. Ran her



hand along its curved side. Played a cluster of notes, tuned it, played again, head practically resting on its comforting wood. At last, her fingers picked out a series of darting fragments, like someone escaping.

Her old notebook was in the guitar case too. She drew it out and flipped through the pages, looking at all the songs she had written.

Then she turned to a blank page and stared at it.

After getting out of That Place, she had not ever written songs again. Melodies and ideas had slowed in her mind, like sap that had been chilled. But now, for the first time in ages, a new tune was gnawing at her, and rebellious words were forming themselves.

Slowly at first, and then more quickly, she scribbled. She went back and crossed some words out, added others. Then she created a little meandering guitar line that played against her voice, looping above and below. She could picture it in her mind—two bright strings flying together and apart.

Softly, under her breath so Pat and Britnee wouldn't hear it, Iz sang.

*My compass is not the same as yours  
I will not walk the roads you choose for me  
You say my road's not there at all  
Although it seems to me that it is all I see  
You say my compass is lost like me  
But I'm running from you  
And I am  
A joyful refugee*

As she played and sang, Iz felt like she had joined some kind of living current. She was filled with it, urged on by it.

She had no idea how much time had passed when she finally let her hands drop. It was only then that she decided for sure what she needed to do.

Iz opened her door and looked up and down the hallway. No one was there. Finally she crept across the hall and right through the open door opposite her own room. Her heart was pounding.

The walls in the room were dotted with photos of Britnee in each grade at school, at first dressed up in frilled outfits like a doll and later wearing trendy designer clothes.

But none of that mattered. The important thing was the heavy laptop computer sitting on the little table by the window. It looked like it was a thousand years old, but maybe it would still work.

Iz inched into the desk chair, pressed the ON button. At first nothing happened. But then, grudgingly, the laptop began making resentful waking-up noises. After what seemed like forever, a logo appeared, followed by a desktop view of several icons.

Iz fumbled around until she found her way online.

Then she typed quickly into the address bar.

*The Métier School.*

First the screen was black, and then words appeared: *A new vision of musicianship.* Then a picture gradually emerged—young people running down a rocky hill with energy and purpose and rawness. With a shock, she realized she was staring into the faces of the kids in Manifesto. It dissolved into other photos. Rehearsal halls. Orchestras. Choirs.

Her eyes flicked ravenously through the list of links, till she saw it.

*Auditions.*

She slammed her finger down on the mouse.

“Iz?”

Britnee’s voice was soft, but Iz leapt out of the chair, twisted in the air so she landed facing Britnee like a cornered animal.

“Ha!” Iz said. “I’m sorry! I should have asked.”

Britnee gazed at her with pale-blue eyes. “Oh, baby, I’m sure my mom doesn’t care if you use the computer. At least someone’s using it! But what are you doing?”

“I—” Iz said. “I just was doing some homework.”

“What homework? Need help?”

Her mind raced. “No, thanks, I-I think I know what to do. It’s for music. We have to write a report about the concert today. I was just looking up the website of that school.”

Britnee gazed at Iz a bit more with those uncanny eyes which seemed to be cataloguing everything about Iz. Finally she said, “Cool.”

They smiled at each other.

“I, uh, so,” Iz said. How did you politely tell someone to go away?

Britnee turned and walked to the door. As she was heading into the hallway, she said, “Hey, if you have any trouble figuring that old thing out, just call me. I had to use it all through school because Mom was too technophobic to upgrade to something decent.”

“Okay,” Iz said.

Britnee drifted down the hallway, leaving the door open as if Iz might get into some kind of criminal activity if she wasn’t watched closely.

Iz sat there all rustled and confused, wondering what on earth was wrong with herself.

She couldn’t audition for The Métier School. Pat and Britnee had laughed out loud at the idea—with good reason. After all, Iz had been in twenty-six homes and fourteen schools by the age of fourteen, always arriving in classrooms that were in the middle of things and leaving before anything was completed. Her knowledge was all fragmented and piecemeal.

Also, she’d never had music lessons.

And then there was the fact that she hadn’t even written anything or sung or played her guitar in two years.

But she stared again at the faces of Manifesto. They looked so confident, so happy. Everything in her yearned to be with them.

And suddenly she knew she was going to audition whether Pat and Britnee thought it was stupid or not. And she wasn’t going to tell them—not until after, and only if she got in.

Her eyes raced over the instructions on the screen. There was an online form to fill out. That was easy enough. And she had to attach a transcript and two letters of reference.

It didn’t take long for her to learn that a transcript was a list of all of your school grades, and a letter of reference was something an



adult wrote to tell people how great you were. Which sounded simple, except that Iz's grades were terrible and no adults knew her well enough to say anything particularly enthusiastic.

She sat there feeling completely discouraged for a few minutes, until something hit her.

It was so audacious that all she could do was sit there and let out a low, appalled whistle.

"Hey," Britnee said from the door.

Iz's heart practically flung itself out of her chest.

"H-hey!"

"I don't think the printer's hooked up. This cord should work."

"Oh! Good! Thanks!"

Hastily, Iz clicked the registration form closed, as Britnee leaned behind the laptop and fiddled with the cord. She turned on the printer and it made chugging noises. "Okay, I think it's good, if you need it. How are you submitting your work?"

"Uh," Iz stammered. "I'm not sure. They didn't say."

"Just print it off then. That's the safest."

"Perfect!" Iz said tensely.

"Let me know if there's anything else."

"I will!"

Britnee stepped lightly back into the hall, leaving the door open again.

Iz let out a long, slow breath.

She thought again of that outrageous thing.

What if—

*What if you created a school that didn't exist?*

Her brain started to race. She could probably find examples of transcripts online and create her own, with the kinds of marks that she *might* have gotten if everything in her whole life had been different. She could write letters of reference from teachers at that imaginary school—Compass Community School—who would have known her since she was very young.

It shouldn't be so hard. Iz hadn't really had much experience

with computers in any of the foster homes—too scared to ask, and nobody ever offered—but at school she had learned how to create documents and how to insert images. She knew how to upload things.

And obviously she could create a fake address and phone number, and fake email addresses for her fake parents, when she filled in the registration form.

It was all pretty basic.

It was also completely illegal and wrong.

And she had not felt so alive in ages.