

Ask

(Tales of Westgate #5)

by

J.D. MacLeod

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Ask

Chapter One

I don't always know what to say. In times like that, I just say nothing. Other people seem to have no trouble talking even when they're not saying much, and sometimes I envy them. It looks like that makes life easier, somehow. But I don't feel like anyone's missing out on anything when I'm quiet – a lot of the time, I wonder if they even realize I'm there. And it doesn't mean I've got nothing ever. When someone asks me the right question, they can't shut me up. I guess the trick is finding someone to ask me.

T minus 207 days

Y2K

That's what Steve wrote, really big, with a fat red marker on the whiteboard mounted on the wall. Then he clacked the marker into the metal tray at the bottom of the board, turned to face Patrick and me, and tucked his hands in his pockets.

Steve was Chief Information Officer at Westgate's Institute for Paranormal Studies, which made him our boss, but I suspected that few people would take him for management material. When I started here, I called him "Dr. Wagner" – I always address the executive here by their titles, but Steve was the only one who kept insisting that I not, and twisted my arm til I finally listened. He was Steve to everyone, and he was going to be Steve to me, or else.

For a second he just blinked at us, slender and boneless but somehow managing to stay upright. To me he always looked like he would've been one of Frankie and Annette's sunbleached-blond, permanent-tanned beach buddies thirty-odd years ago – and also like someone who spent a lot of his carefree youth smoking up. Maybe he still did, who knew. His pale polo shirt and khakis were just as rumpled and calm as the rest of him. Never knew a guy so chill: he always seemed like, no matter what he was doing, on the inside he was lying on a beach somewhere while Frankie and Annette were off canoodling somewhere else. He made me wish that I knew his secret.

Finally he spoke. "I don't need to tell you guys what that is, right?" Patrick and I shook our heads, Patrick with a bitter half-smirk like he was trying not to roll his eyes. The Year 2000 Problem, The Millennium Bug – Y2K was the shortest name for a computer problem that the trade magazines had been discussing for years now. Many computers around the world, still using programs that were written decades ago, stored dates with the year indicated as two digits only, the final two of the year with the "19" in front taken as a given. When the year rolled over to 2000, in just over six months, those computers would interpret that year as 1900 – with the potential for serious malfunctions and crashes, especially in date-sensitive institutions like banks, stock markets, utilities, air traffic control. A lot of companies were already well under way trying to fix it; a fair number of others dismissed it as paranoia and weren't bothering to do anything. I'd been reading about this issue, and thinking about it, for a long time now, and in fact I had wondered why no one here at the office had mentioned anything about it long before this. But no one asked me.

Steve went on. "Inez, in her infinite wisdom, has finally granted that we should be, like, actually doing something about it." [Inez was Ms. Szabo to me, the Institute's Director, Chair, and CEO – basically the Final Boss.] "I've been running it past her for over a year now, but she just sorta waved it off until she read about it in *Macleans* back in the spring. Then she talked with Financial for a while about what sort of budget we can scare up for this project. Now that that's sorted, she has given us the official go-ahead."

Patrick growled (he always growls), "So this means we're getting some money to work on this crap?"

Steve raised an eyebrow. "Ahh, no, it means they talked about it. And decided that we can manage to squeeze it in between all the other stuff we do every day."

Patrick thumped the heel of his hand on the table and jostled our coffees. "Typical!" His Monday had just gotten Mondayer.

Steve pulled a hand out of his pocket and scratched his chin. "Ah, they're probably right, Patrick, barely. I have faith we can get it done. And yeah, I recognize that you guys are already working really hard, and you'll be sweating the rest of the year. Just remember that I will be, too, right along with you, okay?" We both nodded: we knew that Steve wasn't nearly the slacker he looked like. "I'll need you two to handle most of the gruntwork doing the

programming for Admin here. I'll be riding herd on Research and Facilities, making sure their folks are keeping up with you. And I'll be doing coding for everyone as much as I can fit it in.... Questions, comments, or concerns? And please keep 'em clean."

I looked down at my scratch pad and tapped my pen on it.

Steve looked down at me with a lazy smile. "You got something, Ward?" He knew how to read me pretty well by now, which helped a lot.

I cleared my throat. "Um, yeah, I... I was just wondering if you wanted to have, like, progress reports on this or anything? Do I need to keep notes for them? All that."

He shook his head slow. "Naw, man, the last thing we need around here is more meetings. Spend your time actually working on things, right? But yeah, don't be surprised if I peek in a bit more often and ask how things are going. We'll keep in touch about this, don't worry. So, is this something you've already been thinking about?" I just nodded back. Steve pulled his other hand out and made one soft clap in front of his chest. "Very cool. I guess that's it for the time being. We can do this, dudes."

I had to move steady to keep up with Patrick on our way back from the meeting room to our office. "Dammit, Iggy," he muttered, not wanting to be overheard.

Patrick called me Iggy. He hadn't once called me Ward since the day we met, two years or so ago. When I first came to IFPS and started working under him, and he found out my last name is Noble, he immediately started calling me Ignoble and used that for a while. After about a week, he morphed that into Iggy and stuck there ever since. Even in front of other people, he'd refer to me as Iggy, like he was trying to get them on board with it. But it never caught on with anyone else. And I'm fine with that – I don't feel like I am much of an Iggy, really.

Once we got into our office and shut the door, Patrick flopped back into his desk chair so that it rolled a few inches. "I can not *believe* that they are pulling this shit on us *again!* Where are we supposed to magically get the time from to do all this extra shit, huh? Every year they give us more and more like we're frickin' jugglers or something!"

I blinked and shrugged. "Or plate spinners, maybe."

He laughed once, short, but it didn't sound happy. "Yeah, more like. Geez. They really oughta be getting us some temps in for something like this." He drained his coffee and tossed the empty at an overflowing waste bin beside his desk. Then he made a dainty little belch and said, "Welp, first thing is thinking cap time, I guess. You lemme know if you get any ideas, okay?"

I nodded, and finally spun my chair around so I was facing my own desk. As it happened, I did have some ideas, but right now I wasn't sure that they were solid enough to be worth sharing – I mean, I didn't want to sound dumb. So I would work on them a bit more first.

And once I turned, I finally noticed the sticky note on my keyboard. A big one, yellow. I admit, I felt a little satisfied glow when I saw that the sticky was left on my keyboard and not on my monitor. I keep telling everyone: never put a sticky note on a monitor, it's bad for it – but so many of them just don't get it. The fact that this someone did, gave me a clue who it was from.

The handwriting was one more clue. And of course what the note actually said:

A damsel in distress beseeches Schmendrake the Mage to come to her rescue with all speed!

~ D

I could feel myself smile a little. Because I knew: that D didn't stand for damsel. It was Dawn. As in Wilton. And being summoned by Dawn Wilton was never a bad thing. At least, not in my estimation.

So I pulled open my desk drawer and rummaged in it for my gear. Exit Ward Noble: enter Schmendrake.

Chapter Two

T minus 207 days

Way in the back of my bottom desk drawer, behind the boxes of paper clips and staples, and the rainbow of highlighters and a few CDs and a bottle of Tylenol, is where I keep my magic outfit. I pulled it out and plopped it all on my desk beside my mouse. A too-small cardboard cone hat, dark blue with badly-made stars of gold glitter and a stretchy string to go under your chin; a sheer black toddler-size cape stencilled with stars and crescent moons, and which fit me more like a shawl; and a clear pink tube filled with water and glitter, capped at the top with a dull gold plastic star – my magic wand.

All of it was cheap junk I picked up at the dollar store, just for a giggle. I don't even remember exactly when I decided to become Schmendrake the Mage. But when I first started working here, I was fond of telling everyone that computers are actually sorcery, and us IT guys (all over the world, in fact) just pretended that they were all technological and sciencey. I guess I thought a place like IFPS would be tickled by the idea. And before I knew it, I was proclaiming myself Schmendrake the Mage when I showed up to fix someone's computer. And then eventually I added the outfit. And so people knew that, when you asked me to come fix your computer, Schmendrake was going to show up.

Archiving email folders and debugging and whatnot all day can get tedious sometimes – you have to find your laughs where you can.

Patrick watched me put the hat and cape on, then just looked away and shook his head. I knew he thought I was lame – I was nowhere near as cool as he was and I never would be. But I thought we still got along okay.

When I walked through the common area beside the lunchroom, I saw a big rectangular slab cake sitting on the counter. White frosting. A little pile of little plates beside it. It took me a second to remember that, on Friday, Dawn was passing around a birthday card for everyone to sign for Dr. Singh. So I guess that was today. Elementary, Watson.

Then I came into the main Admin area and headed to Dawn's cubicle in the middle of the foyer, surrounded by the executive offices. Officially she was secretary to the Director, but in practice her central location made her the Admin

receptionist for anyone who came in, and secretary to all the other executives as well. Seemed to me like a lot to have to juggle, but she never complained about it.

Once I got close enough to catch her eye, she laughed. She didn't have one of those tinkly giggles: she laughed from the diaphragm, and I'm sure all the bosses in their offices heard her. She put her heart into her laugh – it seemed to me she did that with pretty much everything. "O mighty Schmendrake!" she called out.

I gave her a casual wave of my glittery wand. "Hail, o damsel. What, uhh, troubleth thee?"

"My rassin frassin computer is one hundred percent stuck." [Yes, she actually said "rassin frassin" – only person I ever knew who did.] "Come into my tower and behold forsooth!" And then she laughed again.

So I went around her low cubicle walls to the entryway and squeezed into her domain. Once again I was struck by how personal she managed to make a space like this feel. A pink sweater was draped on the back of her desk chair, even though she already had another, pale green one on. Her desk was crammed with little framed photos of her chihuahua, or her with her chihuahua, or her on the beach with a bunch of girlfriends and her chihuahua. [If any of you are wondering, she wore a black one-piece bathing suit to the beach and looked very nice.] And let's not forget the unicorns. There was a unicorn poster pinned up on one of the dividers, a unicorn desk calendar, several impossibly cute, fat, stuffed or rubber unicorns peeking from under her monitor, a ceramic unicorn mug where she kept all her pens and highlighters... there was never any doubt that it was Dawn, and no one else, who worked at this station.

I leaned over her keyboard and peered closely at the monitor while Dawn stood behind me. I tried moving her mouse and the cursor didn't even twitch. I tried Alt-Tab a few times. A few times with the space bar. Enter Enter. Nothing. While I was hitting Escape dozens of times, she leaned in close to me til I felt her hair brush my cheek and shoulder. Dawn had thick wavy auburn hair which she kept tied back in a ponytail... but that ponytail spread out in a wide magnificent fan, like it was trying to fly her away somewhere. And it just barely had a nice gentle smell, too soft to call perfume. I hoped she didn't hear me swallow.

"I already tried all that," she said.

I glanced beside me, saw her watching the screen as if it might change any second. I wanted to say, "Sure you're not a mage?" If I were lucky, that might make her smile. But somehow it just didn't come out.

I straightened up carefully, giving her the clue to move back; then I crouched under her desk to hit the power button on her tower. I had no idea why her computer had locked up. Could be anything. Could be nothing. Like I said: sorcery. But I knew this classic old trick was the first thing you try.

I backed out from under the desk, held my left hand up in front of me, and started waving the wand in my right hand like I was chasing a fruit fly with it. Just killing time while I counted off ten seconds in my head. Behind me, I heard Dawn choke back another laugh. Then, trying to sound all pompous, I said, "*Illegitimi non carborundum!*" and gave the wand a vigorous shake toward the monitor.

Next, of course, I crawled under her desk again for a second to turn the tower back on. When I came back out and up, we stood there waiting for the login screen to come back. Once or twice I felt like she was looking at my hat – I didn't mind playing the goof for her.

When the workstation was ready for Dawn to login again, I stepped aside so she could sit at the keyboard, and very properly looked away while she typed her password in. While startup ran, I couldn't help noticing the picture of galloping unicorns she had set as her monitor background.

She moved her mouse and we both immediately saw the cursor moving as snappy as it's always supposed to. "Working!" she said, like she just won ten bucks in the lottery. She turned her chair, looked up at me, and gave me a singsong "Thank you, Schmendrake!"

I just bowed my head.

Her grin got a little wider and brighter. "You are the mightiest wizard in this whole town!"

I looked at my wand and my fingers fidgeted with it. "Uh, if I ever see another wizard in this town, I will tell him you said so."

Once again, she laughed. I was just starting to wonder why she called me in for something this simple. I mean, she seemed like a smart enough lady to me – surely she had figured out the off-and-on trick by now. Why not try that herself before asking for IT?

Just then, Dr. Singh came into the building, looking serious and stern and a bit frazzled, as always. Here it was, almost summer, and he was in a dark suit and tie, just like every day all year – trying to make us IT guys look slovenly, maybe. And, as always, he was carrying a briefcase – sometimes I wondered what was in it that he would need to have with him wherever he went.

When Dawn saw him, she called out, "Oh! You're here! Come on!" and waved him over.

He gave Dawn the gentlest of scowls and kept heading for his office door. "I'm just going to drop off my briefcase first, Dawn. I'll be right there."

Dawn looked back over her shoulder and called, "Cake time, everybody! Let's hustle!" Ms. Szabo's office door was closed but, even though she surely heard that anyway, Dawn went over to the door and drummed on it with the heels of her hands. "Hoot hoot!" she yelled. (Yes, literally "hoot hoot".)

I saw Steve and Ms. Hemphill already coming out of their respective offices when Dawn dashed back into her cubicle and yanked me by my sleeve. "C'mon! Cake, cake!" she said, then ran on past everyone saying something about going to get Patrick and the Outreach girls.

I heard Ms. Szabo's door open behind me, and felt a bit awkward as I wandered out toward the common area with her. I thought about going on back to my office and taking off my wizard get-up before doing this little birthday gathering. But before I got past the lunchroom door, Dawn was already back, with Patrick behind her and a couple of cheerleaders disguised as temps behind him. She even gave me a *You're not going anywhere, buddy, we're all here now* look.

Ms. Szabo cleared her throat to get everyone's attention, stood tall and elegant, gave a very brief and very competent little speech announcing Dr. Singh's birthday and wishing him well, and then she handed him a small envelope while the rest of us made a few polite golf claps. Not sure how old Dr. Singh was, but the distinguished white flames in his neat beard made me guess at least forty-five. He fidgeted with his glasses, glanced at the card quickly, found a gift card

tucked inside it, and, with an uncomfortable smile, gave quiet thanks to us all.

I remembered that nothing like that happened on this day last year. We never used to acknowledge anyone's birthdays here at work. Until Dawn started working here back in February.

At her old job, birthdays were always A Thing, and she thought it was a shame we didn't do likewise here. She had a few words with Ms. Szabo, who I guess eventually conceded that it would be good for morale, and that the department could afford to put a modest amount toward such modest celebrations. But only for the executives – forking out for the entire Institute was too big of a stretch, I would think. Still, it always looked to me like no one enjoyed these little dos more than Dawn. Like it was a personal triumph that she made something nice happen here.

Or maybe she just really liked cake. Can't fault her there.

Dr. Singh started to cut the cake – I thought he looked almost as uncomfortable as I felt. While he was pressing the knife in, he happened to glance over at me, and I saw him grimace before he looked at his hands again. I knew that he didn't approve of my dressing up like this. In fact, the first time I showed up in his office as Schmendrake to fix his computer, he made it clear that I had better not ever do that on his turf again. But at least he said please.

I got the impression that the dignity of the Institute was very important to Dr. Singh. He was not only the Chief Operations Officer here, but continued to work as one of our primary researchers. Maybe he got frustrated about not being taken seriously by all of his colleagues out in the wide world. In any case, IFPS was Serious Business for him, and he'd prefer that it was that way for everyone else here. And here he was spending part of his workday cutting and dishing out cake. But he wasn't a total killjoy, and went along with at least this much, for the sake of his fellow officers. Or maybe he just really liked cake.

After the doctor handed me my plate, I backed away into a far corner of the common area and looked around. People had formed little clusters of quiet conversation. Ms. Szabo and Dr. Singh stood near the cake, both looking mild but focused as they spoke low. Steve and Ms. Hemphill were leaning on the wall near the copier, both looking more relaxed and carefree. And Patrick was half-sitting on the edge of the counter near the sink, with the two girls from Outreach clustered at his elbow. But he was turned a bit away from them so he could talk

to Dawn at his other side. She was looking up at him, listening at least as often as she was talking, punctuated with her usual frequent laughter.

I couldn't help wondering what she saw when she looked at Patrick. Something very different from when she saw me, for sure. He was well over six feet tall, one of those lean, hard-looking guys where you just know that his muscles are like armor plates. His hair wasn't super long, but it was thick, shaggy and black, where mine was more limp, stringy, and mouse-coloured. He had a strong jawline, a crooked smile, olive skin, and a five-o'clock shadow that thought any time was five o'clock. You could see more black hair when he had his sleeves rolled up, which was all the time, or where his shirt was open, one button more than I would do ever. The guy just exuded Raw Animal, even with the way he moved, slow and smooth. I never once saw him hurry. Not like Steve's serenity, though: more like he was holding back for something, like a panther on the hunt. Whereas, when you looked at me, panther would have to be the last thing you would think.

Something Patrick said made all three of the girls laugh. The blonde Outreach girl – I could never remember their names, partly because they changed over so often – made a sidelong glance at me in my hat and mini-cape, and that got another giggle out of her. I looked away, and felt like I blushed. I needed to focus on getting this cake eaten and getting back to work.

It was pretty tasty, though.

I was interrupted by an "ahem" very close by. I looked up to see Dawn right in front of me, reaching up for the point at the top of my hat. She pulled it up, let it go so the elastic popped it back down onto my head, and grinned at me shamelessly.

"Hey," she said. "I got my confirmation today: I get to be United Way co-ordinator for the department this year."

I cleared my throat. "Uhhh, congratulations. I hope whoever did it last year isn't mad at you for stealing their job." When she was this close, I noticed that her eyes, which I always thought of as green, actually had a lot of gold in them.

She swatted my shoulder. "*Apparently*, you Admin guys didn't *do* United Way here last year. Or like ever."

I blinked and thought back for a second. "Oh yeah. That's right."

"Back when I was at Gyaos, I did it all the time. And the Facilities guys here already do it, so I dunno why you folks never did. So I finally got it all worked out with Inez and good to go."

I nodded. It didn't surprise me that Dawn would be interested in doing charity work. Ever since she came here, she had a jar sitting on the counter in front of her desk, collecting donations for Westgate Furry Friends (a local animal shelter). I guess she had room for a United Way jar there, too.

"Anywayyyyyy," she went on, "I was wondering if you might be interested in joining the committee, too? They can always use more people."

"Uhhh...." The first thing I thought was that this would mean meetings, where I would be expected to say things. Luckily I already had a plausible out. I swallowed and said, "Actually, Patrick and I just got saddled with a monster mega-project that means we won't even have time to breathe until January. I'm completely swamped this year, sorry."

She gave an easy little shrug. "Well, if I do catch you breathing later on, is it okay if I ask for a hand with a short little something, once or twice maybe? I'm talking like in September October."

"Sure, uh, worth asking, at least."

"Okay then. I'll feel you out on that subject when the time comes." She gave my shoulder another, gentler swat, and then turned away to head back to her desk, leaving a soft, nice smell behind her. A really, really nice smell.

Chapter Three

T minus 204 days

There was a reminder note waiting for me when I got home after work on Thursday. It was stuck on the fridge with a little magnet – and it was stuck there by me, because I live alone. It just said "CATS", but that was enough. There was a key on a loop of pink ribbon sitting on the counter beside my toaster. I picked it up and went back outside to go next door.

I rent one half of an old, brown-brick duplex up toward the north end of Westgate. Cheap neighbourhood and not too far from work. Living in the other half is the most archetypal Little Old Lady you could imagine. Four-foot-six I'm sure, frail and skinny, always wears a knitted shawl and has her white hair pulled back in a bun, meek quivery voice, the whole bit. Her name is Mrs. Goodenough (and she will immediately tell you that the name is "truth in advertising, because I *am!*"), and I admit she is one of the sweetest people I ever met.

Anyway, Mrs. Goodenough was away out of town for two days, and she asked me if I would feed her cats while she was gone. Because of course she has cats. As near as I can tell, though, she only has two, so I don't think she qualifies as a Crazy Cat Lady. At least not yet – maybe she's still in training.

So last weekend she had me in to show me where the cans and can opener and dry food were (even though I sort of remembered, because I had done this for her before), and left me the key, and made a point of telling me not to worry about changing their box because they'd be okay for that short of a time. (Like last time, I said a silent prayer of thanks when I heard that.)

I didn't feel agile enough to climb over the divider between our front porches, so I walked around the front of the building and came up her steps like a proper citizen. Her front door unlocked smoother and opened quieter than mine did, which made me wonder yet again if I was doing something wrong with mine.

A few seconds after I closed the door behind me, and got reacquainted with the odd stuffy smell of Mrs. Goodenough's place, one of the cats slunk into the front room from the kitchen: the mottled orange-and-white one. I could never remember their names, even though she told me, so I just called this one Spacey. Spacey was the one that always liked to climb up on the dividing wall of the porch when I was sitting out there trying to read, and she would take a stroll around my porch railing and say "reer" at me. But when I asked her "What?",

she'd suddenly dash back to her own porch like I threw a bucket of water at her. No idea what was up there.

Spacey kept weaving around my ankles and saying "reer" while I tried to walk back to the kitchen. Once I made it there, I noticed how loud the fridge sounded. Mrs. Goodenough kept a much neater house than I did: the kitchen was spotless except for some dry crumbs on the floor around the cats' dishes. Put there after she left, no doubt. "Ya sloppy beasts," I said.

Sitting in a corner near the dishes was the other cat, a big fat gray one I called Lump. She hadn't moved since I came in, didn't make a sound, didn't look at me. Barely blinked. But I know she was alive, because I'd seen her in different corners in different months. And her food was disappearing somehow.

I took hold of a little can on the counter, fitted the opener to it, and started to crank. I winced a bit at the smell. Just then, Spacey jumped up onto the counter, sniffed at the can, then pushed her face toward mine until our noses were almost touching, and stared at me.

I stopped opening the can. "I'm not doing this til you get down."

Spacey jumped down off the counter, but after I turned the handle a couple of more times, she hopped up and was back in my face again.

I stopped what I was doing again. "What did I just say?"

"Reer."

"Yeah right, *you're* a rear. G'wan." This time she got down and went over to her dishes, pacing.

Once I had the can open, I grabbed a spoon and crouched over by the cats' dining lounge, putting half in each dish. I remembered that Spacey liked her wet and dry food mixed together, but Lump had two dishes to keep things separate. So when I got the box of dry food, I was careful to arrange everything to their satisfaction.

While I was putting fresh water in their bowls, I noticed that they had splashed a little on the floor, and I wondered if I should try wiping it up. But I couldn't see any paper towels around, and I didn't want to use the wrong cloth and maybe

upset Mrs. Goodenough, so I just left it to evaporate and hoped she'd understand.

Spacey sniffed at her bowls, then looked over her shoulder at me like she wasn't going to actually touch any of this until I stopped spying on them. Lump still hadn't budged – I guess dinner wasn't enough incentive to get her to actually expend any energy. At least yet.

On my way out, I looked over at the mantel in the front room, like I had to do every time I visited. Mrs. Goodenough's half of the house still had a fireplace, but bricked in and painted over. And she liked to use the mantel to display a photo in a plain, antiqued gold frame. And every time I was in here, which wasn't all that often, I liked to look at that photo.

It was a sepia portrait of a man – Mr. Goodenough, my guess was. To me, he looked like the kind of guy who would've been an aviator in the thirties. Sometimes I would wonder if maybe he actually was, and what life would be like for a pilot back then. Maybe the idea of an aviator with a name like Goodenough, would give his buddies ideas for lame gags they could tease him with, back at the hangar. And maybe his wife would reassure him when he came home from work and remind him that she was crazy about him.

For whatever reason, that pic reminded me that Mrs. Goodenough had lived a full, real life for decades before I ever showed up, a life that I knew nothing about. And that she was still living a full, real life right beside me in the here and now, which I knew nothing about except cats.

When I let myself out, I was extra careful not to let Spacey out with me. But, at that moment, she was showing zero interest in the door, and even less in me.

After this diversion, my evening resumed a, shall we say, more customary dramatic arc:

For dinner, I nuked some leftover breaded chicken strips and boiled a little pot of ramen. When they were hot and ready, I sprinkled on a bit of parmesan, because I am a sybarite. Then I took my dish over to the couch and flicked on my stereo for some dinner tunes: the CD changer was loaded with the first three Alice in Chains albums which, I admit, were in there more often than a lot of

other things. (And I did have a lot of other things.) Some people tried to tell me grunge was dead. Yeah, well, so's Latin, but there are still people who like to listen to Gregorian chant sometimes. "Like" being the key word there – I don't care if what I listen to is *au courant* or not.

Before I settled down to eat, I rifled through a pile of magazines sitting near the arm of the couch, looking for an article on Y2K I wanted to re-read. Then I ate, and gently headbanged, and occasionally turned a page. I was trying to decide if the best thing to do was edit and patch the Institute's existing programs, or replace them with brand-new Y2K-compliant ones. There were people tackling the problem both ways, and a lot of argument back and forth about the pros and cons of each approach. For me, this stuff was more exciting than watching football.

I dug up a few more magazine articles and pored over them, then took a break when *Frasier* came on. (Yeah, even though it was a rerun. Worth it.) After that, the TV went off, the tunes came back on, and I went over to my desk and booted up my PC to go online for awhile.

Checked my email first – nothing worth mentioning there. Then I opened ICQ to see if my friend Bill was online and up for a chat. Apparently not. To be fair, he wasn't on nearly as often as I was, because he usually preferred to be out and about. (He was a lot more gregarious than I was.) But I left him a note letting him know I was here for a while if he came on and wanted to buzz me.

I thought it might be a good idea to try logging in to the servers at work, just to check and make sure everything was okay there. But they could be cranky sometimes about logins from outside of the Institute, and tonight was one of those times: I just kept timing out, and finally gave up.

Then I realized I had a bit of an idea for an entry in my journal. A few months ago, one of those new online-diary websites, **OpenBookTriCities.ca**, had launched, and I was one of the early adopters to sign up for it. From what I could see, most of the folks with accounts there were using it as a journal more than an actual diary *per se* – not posting their most intimate secrets, but just talking about whatever they felt like. One lady was always talking about American politics, some other guy posted pictures of his dog being cute, and so on. And the rest of us were free to browse around and see if any of it interested us.

I logged into my account – username *SchmendrakeTheMage* – sat there for a

minute, then opened up a new entry for the day and wrote:

June 10, 1999

One of my co-workers told me today that she has started doing United Way fundraising at our office, and she asked me if I wanted to volunteer to be on the committee. If you've read any of my earlier entries, you know that I am way too shy to ever want to do anything that would involve being stuck in a room with a bunch of strangers if I didn't have to be. So I said no, that I was too busy. And as it happens, I am. I will probably say something more about that sometime later. Bet you can't wait, eh?

But tonight, I'm sitting here thinking, and this just occurred to me. This co-worker is really nice, and nice to be with, and if I were on the committee with her, it would mean that I could spend more time with her, as well as with the bunch of strangers. So now I'm sort of kicking myself wondering if I blew a golden opportunity. Not sure if I can just go up to her and say I changed my mind, though. Maybe I need to wait and see if she ever brings it up again.

And like I said, I AM pretty busy already anyway. At least at work.

I read it over, then clicked on Post Entry. Then while I was on the site, I browsed some of the other journals that often had something good. There was a new entry tonight from one of my favourite accounts, *MrsNatHiken*. She was talking about remembering when she used to get harassed by catcalls when she was walking down the street. That bothered her, which figures, I guess. But tonight she said she realized that, somewhere along the way, that stopped happening. And now she was missing it, in a weird way, and she wondered if anyone else would understand that.

I debated leaving a comment for her, but didn't really have a good one put together yet. I had done so before, just as she had done for me. A lot of her entries were simple on the surface, but it seemed to me they were really about our culture and society and how we interact with them. That sort of stuff interested me. If I managed to collect my thoughts later, I'd come back and drop her a line.

By now, it was close to bedtime. Or at least it ought to be, if I were well-

behaved. But since I wasn't always, I started playing StarCraft: one of my weaknesses. There was this one Protoss level that I just could not get through without using cheat codes, and I was determined to beat it fair and square. One of these days.

I'm not sure how long I sat there, hunched forward, my fingers hitting keys so fast that I sounded like one of those genius hackers on a TV show. I was fighting battles on two fronts at once – if I had two heads and four hands I might be able to manage it, but man, this level was tough for me.

I was interrupted by a gentle chiming sound, telling me an email just came in for me. I stopped the game, flipped over to my account, and saw an automated notification from OpenBook. Someone just posted a comment on one of my entries, and the email provided a link to take me straight there.

I clicked, and my journal entry for tonight pulled up onto the screen. Below that, in the Comments section, it showed the username MrsNatHiken, her user icon – a painted portrait of Jimi Hendrix – and this comment:

Don't fret about it, Schmen. It isn't good to twist yourself too far out of shape for a woman. To thine own self be true. You're better off looking for more opportunities to spend time with the nice co-worker WITHOUT the bunch of strangers around. ;)

I felt a warm little flush, and I smiled a bit. I guess just because it felt nice to be heard, really heard. Maybe that's why all of us on that site were there.

Then I noticed the time, cursed myself for staying up too late yet again, shut everything down (leaving my Protoss with victory still beyond their grasp), and finally got myself into bed for a few hours.

And so, welcome to the breathless excitement that is my daily life. Thank you for closing the door on your way out.

Chapter Four

T minus 203 days

When I shuffled into the office the next morning, Dawn looked and sounded considerably more perky than I felt. "Good morning, Lord Ward!", she called. (What she got from my last name Noble was that I was therefore a nobleman, pause for laugh track, and you can get the drift from there.)

I replied more quietly, "Good morning, Don Cherry." When I saw she had refilled the jar of M&Ms on her counter, I veered over to grab a few. And, even though technically this wasn't required, I got a quarter out of my pocket and dropped it in the jar for Westgate Furry Friends.

Today Dawn wasn't quite done with greeting me. "Ward the Lord, Chairman of the Board."

I raised my eyebrows at her, just a little. "Pretty sure Ms. Szabo is the Chairman – I mean, Chair."

She bowed her head toward me for a second. "As you wish, Your Lordship."

I nodded back. "As you were, Don Johnson." With that, I was just turning to leave when I was stopped by a rough voice calling from the direction of the copier: "Iggy!"

I looked over and saw Patrick striding toward me – slowly, of course. It got me curious that he was here earlier than I was – that didn't usually happen, most days. But I just blinked and looked up at him as he came over to Dawn's cubicle.

He fished out his wallet, pulled out a twenty, and pushed it into my hand. "Hey, go down to the cafeteria and get me a coffee, eh? You remember how I take it."

Dawn piped up. "Get it yourself, you lazy! And why don't you go out to Tim's and get a *good* one?"

I feebly waved my hand toward her. "No-no, it's okay, I don't mind. I mean, I'm not settled in yet, but Patrick's probably already in the middle of working on stuff, right?"

Patrick gave me a decisive nod. "I was just about to say that or something like

it."

I looked back at Dawn. "It's okay, really."

"Well hey, if you're going anyway, get something for me!" she said.

"Uh, sure, what do y– "

"No! I'm just kidding you, geez! Go on!" And she laughed. I could hear Patrick speaking low to Dawn as I passed through the common area and out the back of the office.

I went past the Lecture Hall and out the back of the building. Across the compound was the Research Building, the long low older section running across the front, the taller concrete addition stretching way into the back field. Off to the right and a little further back was the Facilities Building – the cafeteria took up one end of that, so that's where I headed.

As usual, the cafeteria was pretty quiet this time of morning: I saw no one using any of the tables, and just one guy ahead of me at the coffee machine. The nice lady at the hot counter looked like she was doing some prep work for later on, but had no customers at the moment. She lit up and gave me a smile and a nod as I walked past. I smiled a bit and nodded back – I guess things were so dead for her just now that anything at all happening was something she welcomed.

When I got to the coffee machine, I prepared a large one-and-one for Patrick and carefully pressed a lid onto the paper cup. I thought about whether I wanted one, too. I mean, I maybe did, but I wasn't going to make Patrick's twenty pay for it when he didn't offer to get me one. So that would mean me making two separate payments and two separate bundles of change back and it just all sounded like more fuss than I wanted to deal with. So I just did without for now.

Working the cash register this morning was another nice lady I recognized, with short wavy gray hair that reminded me a bit of my mom. The guy in front of me was just leaving her as I sidled up with my cup and my twenty. "Good morning!" she almost sang. She always seemed to like her job, and for some reason that made me feel good.

I just gave her a nod back and hoped it looked amiable enough.

She rang in the coffee. "Your friend isn't with you today?" she said. Which reminded me that she was often working the till on those occasions when Patrick and I would happen to come in here to grab some lunch at the same time. Whenever that happened, Patrick would always greet her with a cool, gravelly "Heya," and he'd address her by name, and ask her "how it was going" or somesuch. And she'd flush a bit, and smile bigger, and banter back at him while he paid for his food. I still could never remember her name, but somehow Patrick could always remember everyone's. The ladies, at least. Me, I wished she would wear a nametag to help me out. Actually, everyone who worked at the Institute. No, actually, just everyone. I would love that.

I cleared my throat and handed her the money. "Um, no, he, he's busy with a big new project today."

She handed me the change and said, "Well, you tell him I said not to overdo. And you have a good day."

I nodded a thank you and headed for the exit. I was careful to keep Patrick's change separate from my own money: I knew he was going to count it. I guess I would, too, if I were him.

Patrick didn't even look up from his monitor when I set his coffee and change on his desk. He just peered at his work, clacking a few keys now and then, frowning and muttering. I couldn't help catching a glimpse of his screen: looked like he was browsing one of the directories where Admin's program files were stored. Working on this Y2K thing, I would say. So, good on him.

I sat at my desk and booted up my workstation. While I waited for it, I heard a small scrape and clink, telling me that Patrick had just scooped up the change from his desk and stuffed it in his pocket, without counting it. Wow, he *must* be concentrating extra hard.

Once I was logged in, I checked my mail first. Only thing of note was a message from Tina, one of the IT folks over at Research, asking if any of us knew COBOL. (Some of their machines over there were still running it since the sixties, despite upgrading their hardware. Seemed to me that the professors and

researchers liked to stick with what they got used to.) I remembered a bit of COBOL from school, and I was pretty sure Patrick knew it better than I did. But I figured he was too busy for something this trivial, so I wrote back to Tina and told her to run her problem past me. I could always interrupt Patrick for a second if I was in over my head.

Since things were quiet then, I spent a while looking through the program files along with Patrick, mostly just thinking. There were a lot of programs to get sorted out, and not tons of time. Right now it felt so intimidating that I wasn't sure how to start.

"Hey, Iggy," Patrick spoke up behind me. "How do you feel about us looking for new off-the-shelf stuff to replace all these?"

I blinked at my screen for a few seconds, thinking. "Actually, I feel like we're better off doing edits on what we've got. That's how I've been thinking about it."

"You think we have enough time to do that? Awful lotta shit to wade through here."

I turned my chair around so I faced him. "I know, but... all these programs here were custom-made. How do we know that something out of a box will do every thing our old program was made to do? We could replace it and then find out that some critical function has just like disappeared."

He gave me a thoughtful scowl and a nod.

"I think that trying to check the new thing, in enough detail to be sure it covers our old thing, that will take at least as long. Plus all the patches and workarounds we always have to do once the box thing starts running. I think we save time in the long run doing edits and rewrites on what we have."

His mouth went crooked and he just said, "Hrmf."

"Just my gut feeling." I shrugged.

He ran a hand back through his hair and let out a long, gravelly sigh. "Yeahhh, you're probably right. Shit."

We got back to work browsing through folders for a while, until Steve showed up

at our open door and knocked on the frame. He was looking straight at Patrick when he got our attention, and he didn't pay me any notice. "Patrick, I just heard from Carlos. Remember a while back when Research's network calendar was getting reset back to default whenever the Financial overnight ran? Sounds like that's happening again, and the kids over at Research can't seem to get a handle on it. I told him you'd get it sorted out. Can do?"

Patrick gave one quick little nod and growled, "Can do."

Steve blinked, and smiled a little wider. "You're the man, man." Then he turned and left.

Patrick let out a long loud sigh and drummed his fingers on his desk. I could see his mouth was tight.

I felt like I had to say something now. (And once I had worked with someone for a while, I found that a bit easier to do.) "I, uhhhh.... I could look after that for you if you want, Patrick?"

He rubbed his temples, not looking at me. "Naaa. He asked me to do it, that means he wants me working on it. I'll get on it in a bit." Then he grumbled something I couldn't catch, and started clacking on keys.

Oddly enough, it was this moment, seeing how he needed help digging out from our avalanche of work, that triggered an idea in me: a direction we could take to tackle our Y2K problem. I told myself that I was going to get this pulled together and tested soon, so I could show it to him and help him breathe easier. After all, I understood how important breathing easy can be.

First thing I did when I got home that night was go next door to feed Spacey and Lump. Lump was sitting over by the fridge today, and her food from last night was mostly gone, so I knew she wasn't dead – just shy, let's say. Once again, Spacey needed some encouragement to leave me enough elbow room to prepare her dinner. And once again, I paid my brief respects to the memory of flying ace Mr. Goodenough on my way out.

My quiet evening at my computer was interrupted a bit after eight by my cellphone warbling: incoming text. I didn't get a lot of texts, so each one that

came in was kind of a novelty and made me curious. I flipped open my phone and saw it was from Patrick – one of the last people I'd expect on a Friday night.

ovrnite run by now check if research cal ok

I could feel myself frown a little. The overnight, the program that updated the Institute's financial accounts with all the day's transactions, usually ran between six and eight at night. So, yes, by now it was likely finished. But he was the one working on this – why was he asking me to check it? I laboriously clicked back:

cant u?

A minute later, another warble:

away wont b back til real late

I admit, I huffed. Checking that the fix on the calendar worked okay was part of the job: if Patrick knew he wasn't going to be available to do that part of it, why didn't he say so when Steve asked him? I wanted to text back and say all of this to him.

But all I said back was: *ok*

I clapped my phone shut, shoved it back in my pocket, saved StarCraft and closed it, then tried to login remotely to the IFPS servers. Once again, they were cranky and all I did was time out. I was going to have to drive down to the office and take care of this there.

Not like I had anything better to do, right?

When I unlocked the main door of Admin, I could hear the alarm inside start chirping, so I went right over and punched in my passcode before it actually went off. Then I shuffled through the foyer, dim with only a few emergency lights on, unlocked my office, and flicked on the lights. Not the first time I worked here alone after hours, but the stuffy quiet of it always felt weird.

While I booted up my workstation, I debated putting some tunes on, but hoped that this job would be so short that it wouldn't be worth my while cuing up a CD.

There was a short email from Tina thanking me for sorting out her COBOL tangle. Logging in to Research's server from here was no problem at all, of course. Admin IT, by default, had administrator authorization over the other departments' IT, and lucky for them that we did. Tonight being a case in point.

A quick glance at their network calendar told me that it was now reset to default: the overnight had mucked it up and Patrick's patch didn't work. I knew the first thing to look for: chances were that someone in Research IT tried to tweak their calendar, and added some code that interacted badly with the overnight when it ran. It had happened a few times before this. And no, there was no reason why the overnight should have anything whatsoever to do with Research's network calendar; it made no sense at all. But it made for damn powerful sorcery.

I found the source code and had a peek. And there it was: a cute little formatting adjustment. And wonder of wonders, it was commented. More than that: they went so far as to include a signature and date in their comments, so I knew that it was added yesterday morning, by Carlos. (Their IT manager who came calling to Steve because he couldn't figure out what the problem was.) I had a feeling that it wasn't Tina; I wanted to think that she knew better.

So, now what I really needed to do was think of a way to make that new formatting work without tripping over Financial's overnight. It would take a different approach, but I was familiar enough with the calendar that I figured I could do it. Worst case scenario was put the old formatting back and tell Research to look at an ugly calendar for a while longer.

This would take a little while. I opened my drawer, pulled out *Gretchen Goes to Nebraska* by King's X, and slid it into the CD tray. Not my favourite way to spend a Friday night, but still.

One thing I couldn't help thinking: that new-format glitch was kind of a red flag, and I wondered how Patrick could've left something like that sitting in there. Like, he knew this stuff better than I did – it would've jumped out at him that this was a problem. It was almost like he had never looked at this job at all. But that didn't make any sense.

Ah, well, look on the bright side. If I was going to be stuck in the office on a Friday night, at least I had great music.

Chapter Five

T minus 203 days

June 11, 1999

Well, technically it's almost June 12, but hey. Just got back from putting out a late fire at the office, which gave me a lot of time to ruminate. Read that carefully. I said ruminate, not urinate. And here is where you reap the benefits of it, lucky readers.

In spring, a young man's fancies turn to thoughts of love. Well, I dunno how young I am, and spring is almost over, but I did find myself thinking about ladies this evening. A specific few, in fact. In order not to embarrass them, I will refer to them here as X, Y, and Z. Makes my thoughts sound more scientific.

X and Y, as it happens, I met both of them on the same day just about three years ago, but in some ways they have haunted me a little ever since. They were a musical duo, and on that day my friend B roped me into roadieing with him for one of their concerts. I didn't tell him at the time, but I felt kind of roped into that gig, I knew he needed a hand but it didn't sound like fun, and I wasn't looking forward to it. But before long it felt like one of the biggest favours B ever did for me.

X was a singer, and you could tell the second you laid eyes on her that she was a star. She was gorgeous, had this bright energy all through her, and I think this is the closest I ever came to falling in love at first sight. I've written here before about how much trouble I have talking to people at first, but I was so dazzled by X that I swear, I did not say one single word to her the whole time from when we picked her up for the concert til we brought her back home.

And when she performed, she blew me away completely. Most of her stuff was synth-pop but incredibly well done. I know I talk a lot here about metal and grunge and hard rock, but there is also a lot of pop and new wave and other things I get into. And a couple of times X did really rock out, and that was when she finished me off for good. B and I have talked about that day, and X, a few times since then, and I am pretty sure that she got to him as well.

Y was X's musical partner, a synth player, and I guess what I would call an interesting contrast. Where X was all about raw animal spirit and in-your-face beauty, Y was more quiet and restrained. Which I identified with immediately, of

course. She was tall and blonde, with glasses, looked like Galadriel The Librarian or somebody. She had more of a spiritual beauty that slowly sneaks up on you. She was also talented enough to make you gape, which just added to everything else. Once again, I couldn't say a word to her, either. I hope they didn't think I was a blithering idiot or something. Sometimes I feel like Y and I maybe had a lot in common, and could've gotten along really well. But then one of us would have to be the first one to speak, and I'm not sure how that would've worked out, when I think about it now.

I have seen both of them a couple of times since then. They never became the superstars I thought they should've been, but they still play together in small places once in a while, and sometimes I go. They are still really really talented and they look like they're having a good time, and I'm happy for them. Part of me wishes they would rock out a little more, though.

Which finally gets me around to Z. I admit I am starstruck with both X and Y, and I admire them from afar. By comparison Z is more what people would call A Normal Real Girl and she's actually a part of my life. She's a co-worker, started in our office a few months ago, and I know this is not the first time I have mentioned her here. Things started to change (for the better) almost as soon as she settled in. To me, she looks like a magazine cover, but one those magazines for high school girls giving them pep talks about how wonderful and empowering adulthood is going to be. Wholesome and upbeat. Never knew anyone who smiles or laughs so much.

Since I have been working with Z for a while now, sometimes I actually manage to say something to her. Go me. And I always feel like she listens, too. And she's always so nice to me. Sometimes I wonder if maybe she likes me. But when I think about it, she's always nice to everyone there. Maybe she likes everyone and I just happen to be one of them. Everyone else seems to like her, too. I think that the whole office has gotten more relaxed and in a better mood since she came.

I guess I just need to be really careful not to read too much into what she says and does. That's a road I don't want to go down again.

Right now it strikes me as kind of funny, how different each of them is, and yet they all appeal to me, in different ways. It makes me feel like I still have a long way to go, sorting out who I really am and what I really want.

After I clicked Post Entry, I let out a long breath I didn't realize I was holding. Then I nosed around OpenBook for a while, and saw that MrsNatHiken made a post while I was at the office this evening. Her day's entry was shorter but not sweeter:

When a man makes the first move, that makes him confident and/or assertive. When a woman makes the first move, that makes her desperate and/or a slut. That is all. (Why, yes, I AM in a mood.)

This time I had a comment ready to type in right away:

Sometimes, when a woman makes the first move, that makes her a godsend.

I hoped that would get a smirk or a snicker out of her.

Then I opened up StarCraft – yes, still at that same Protoss level – and hammered away at it while I had some eighties-era Judas Priest playing in the background. (To me, that felt like a fitting soundtrack for this battle.) After about half an hour, a chime told me that there was a new comment on my journal. I let it sit for about ten more minutes until I lost the battle on that level again. I guess that was like a sign to take a break.

Once again, MrsNatHiken had feedback on my musings:

Sorting out who you really are and what you really want is a lifelong rollercoaster. Welcome to the human condition, my friend.

One of those unhelpful truisms? I hoped to live long enough to acquire a taste for those.

Suddenly, a different soundbite spoke up and my ICQ pulled up in the bottom corner of my screen, telling me that User Number So-And-So had just added me. I had the option to authorize, block, or get more info. I got more info.

This user number bore the username *WAYCar54* and the email address *WAYCar54@royalfal.net*: the same ISP I happened to use at home for my own email. And that address rang a bell – and also made the inside of my chest perk up a little.

I flipped back to OpenBook and looked up MrsNatHiken's profile page. She had her email address listed there, as so many of us on that site did.

No wonder I thought it looked familiar.

And she was asking to chat with me on ICQ. Can't say I saw that coming.

I admit, I felt my pulse grow a bit stronger as I clicked on Authorize. Then I just sat and tried to breathe and sort out my thoughts. But before I could finish doing that – as if that job could *ever* be finished – a message came through:

Good evening, Schmen. This is your fairy godsend. ;)

I felt wider awake than I had for the past few hours. I grabbed a quick swallow of the lukewarm Coke sitting far enough away from my keyboard, thank you, and finally managed to reply.

Schmen73: Ah, so you read my comment.

WAYCar54: *I always read your comments. And your posts. Maybe I don't always comment but I am there.*

Schmen73: Same here.

WAYCar54: *Thanks. I had a feeling. ;)*

Schmen73: So on OB it's MRS Nat Hiken – so you're married?

WAYCar54: *WAS – not anymore. You?*

Schmen73: Never.

WAYCar54: *BTW you ARE a man, right?*

Schmen73: Well, I have passed for one my entire life and only been questioned on it a few times.

WAYCar54: *I'll take that as a yes. And FWIW, when I WAS married, it wasn't to Nat Hiken. That's just my wish.*

Schmen73: Is that someone I should know?

WAYCar54: *Ever watch Sgt Bilko or Car 54?*

Schmen73: Sgt Bilko yeah. Great show, classic.

WAYCar54: *Nat Hiken created both of them. Comedy genius. I am smitten.*

Schmen73: Car 54 is where you got your ICQ handle, then?

WAYCar54: *Yep. Car 54 Where Are You. ANOTHER classic show, you should watch it.*

Schmen73: Maybe someday, yeah, if they rerun it anytime soon.

WAYCar54: *Good man. I had a feeling you'd listen. You're one of the most interesting men on OB.*

Schmen73: I'm flattered you think so but also mystified.

WAYCar54: *I still remember one of your earliest posts, where you were talking about communication and openness and how it's so much easier on here compared to IRL. I really connected with that. And a lot of the time I get the feeling that you really think about things. Not many do.*

Schmen73: Flattered again.

WAYCar54: *I just call it as I see it. Causes me grief sometimes but still.*

I paused for a minute, to work up the nerve to ask:

Schmen73: So what made you decide to buzz me tonight?

WAYCar54: *Some of it was boredom TBH. I'm here home alone with a computer on a Friday night when I'm supposed to be out whooping it up and picking someone up. And then there's an interesting man ALSO home alone with a computer on Friday night. You ARE alone, right?*

Schmen73: Yep, just like Gilbert O'Sullivan.

WAYCar54: *LOL nice one. Fellow music nerd.*

Schmen73: Yep. I'm guessing you like Hendrix, because of your OB icon?

WAYCar54: *Well, I really love that painting but yeah I do dig Jimi.*

Schmen73: I don't meet that many people into retro around here.

WAYCar54: *If you want to call it that LOL But I've been sort of wanting to reach out and touch you for a while now. And I was pretty sure that YOU weren't going to.*

Schmen73: Oh, you figured that out, eh?

WAYCar54: *You've said enough about yourself on OB to make that pretty clear.*

Schmen73: So you know that much about me and still want to chat? I'm impressed LOL

WAYCar54: *Self-deprecating is cute, and on you it's kind of attractive, not going to lie. But I also know it's a shield. I hope that someday you'll realize that you don't need that shield here with me.*

That made me blink for a few seconds.

Schmen73: I'll try.

WAYCar54: *Good man.*

And then she pulled the conversation back into a safe corner where we lost track of time gabbing about music, til we started nodding off and noticed it was the wee hours and said good night but it was Saturday so it was all good.

It was all unusually good.

Chapter Six

T minus 200 days

When I got into work on Monday, Dawn greeted me with, "Good morning, Lord Ward." To which I replied, "Good morning, Don Henley," and passed on through to my office. Patrick wasn't in yet, which is more along the lines of what I would expect. So I just enjoyed the peace and dug into my email. There was a thank-you from Tina in Research for fixing their network calendar. Also, she agreed with my email (which I sent her on Friday after I finished the repair job), where I said that the folks over there should run it past us guys first, any time they felt the urge to monkey with that cranky calendar. But, she said, given that Carlos was her immediate superior (he was basically her Patrick, you could say), there was only so much she could do to keep him in line. And I had to agree there.

When Patrick finally slunk into the office with a cafeteria coffee, he looked like he hadn't rested well over the weekend. At least when I stayed up too late on Friday chatting with Nat [as I thought of her now], I made up for it the next night. But Patrick looked like he had either been working too hard or playing too hard. And he didn't seem like he was about to tell me which: he just greeted me with a grim, wordless nod, which I returned.

Neither of us said anything while he got his workstation up and running, and before long I heard a few grudging clacks from his keyboard. Then finally he spoke up, sounding even more growly than usual. "Hey Iggy, if any cries for help come in, you handle 'em. I really gotta get dug into this Y2K shit, eh?"

He wasn't looking at me and couldn't see my nod, so I actually spoke. "Okay." He may have grunted back.

I decided to spend a while troubleshooting along with him. We figured that our financial programs were guaranteed to have date-sensitive calculations and references in them. So we'd spent the last week focusing on those for starters, producing updated alternate versions we could swap in, once they tested out okay. I opened up that directory and clicked on the source code for the new overnight to give it another read-through. Instead of the file opening, I got an error message: *File locked by user pmilner*.

So Patrick was ahead of me, already working on double-checking the overnight. Didn't surprise me a bit. He knew his stuff.

Before I could choose another financial file to look over, an email showed up in our shared help-line inbox. One of the Outreach girls was having trouble finding a PDF she needed. Pretty sure I could handle that without calling on Patrick to rescue me.

I pulled open my desk drawer to grab my Schmendrake outfit, then stopped for a second and closed it again. First time I went to Outreach to problem-solve, I was in uniform, and all I got from those ladies was tisks and *What a weirdo* looks. No point in pushing that again: if it wasn't fun for them, it wasn't fun for me. So they'd get just plain Ward. Patrick didn't even look up from his work as I left my desk and our office.

Outreach's office was right beside ours, so it was only a matter of a few steps and a few seconds. The two girls were seated at their desks. The dark-haired one was busy on the phone; the blonde one saw me at their door and beckoned me over with a tinkle of her fingers, but I couldn't help feeling like she looked crestfallen, seeing it was *me* coming to her rescue.

As I said, I always forgot their names, but to me this one was Barbie. Bright hair, blue eyes, and she always wore either a pink or purple T-shirt tight enough to remind you that it was tight. (Pink today.)

"Not being a wizard today?", Barbie said. But something in her tone sounded like she was maybe disappointed that I was giving her one less thing to laugh at me about.

I just shook my head and sat in her chair, ready to help find her file. Turned out, her Windows was set to Hide File Extensions so that her filename didn't actually say PDF at the end. Since she was expecting that, she didn't recognize the file even when she was looking right at it. So I took about five seconds to switch her over to Show File Extensions, then stepped aside and watched her face light up in amazement.

"How did you do that?" she said.

I gave her a bland shrug. "Sorcery."

She looked at me as if she was seeing me for the first time. "Well, thank you."

I just nodded, then turned and left as she sat back down.

When I came back into our office, Patrick actually looked up. "Service call?"

I nodded. "One of the Outreach girls. It was nothing."

His eyes got a little bigger. "Which one?"

"I, um, Barbie?" When his nose scrunched up, I went on. "The, uh, the blonde one, I can never rem– "

"Rachel? Damn." Patrick rubbed his forehead. " 'Kay look, lemme know next time a help call comes in from them – or Dawn. I'll take those." He took a swallow of his coffee. "It, ahhh, it'll be like a reminder for me to take a break sometimes."

I just nodded and we got back to work.

After dinner, I was putting my dishes in the sink and trying to talk myself into washing them now rather than let them sit, when I heard my front doorbell. I wasn't expecting anyone – when *am* I? – so I stepped over to the door, a bit gingerly, and tried to peek through the little window without being seen by whoever it was.

I could just make out the top of a white bun of hair. Mrs. Goodenough.

The first thing that flashed through my head was that she was here to complain about the noise from my side, and my stomach fell a little. I had Soundgarden playing the whole time I was eating, and somehow I couldn't imagine them being her favourite. I didn't think I had them cranked that high, though. I eased the door open and peeked around it.

Even in the June heat, Mrs. Goodenough was wearing a knitted shawl. Gray. And she had what looked like a bundle of aluminum foil in one unsteady hand. When she saw me, the lines of her face changed into a prim little smile. "Hello, Warren," she said, all quavery.

I gave up trying to correct her on my name long ago, and by now I found it strangely endearing. "Hi. Is, is everything okay?" And I blinked at her.

Her eyes got squished up tighter by her smile. "As far as I know, yes, dear." She handed the foil bundle to me; I opened the door wider and took a step closer to her to take hold of the package. (One thing I admit I enjoyed about talking with Mrs. Goodenough is that she always made me feel tall.) "I just baked some date squares today, and I wanted to give you a few to say thank you for feeding Aggie and Dorothy last week."

I could feel my eyes get a bit wider and I hefted the foil gently. "Wow, uhh, thank you very much." Mrs. Goodenough made the most amazing date squares in the world – sorry, mom, but it's true. I was looking forward to working through one of these during *22 Minutes*.

I heard "reer" off to my side. Spacey was on the railing that ran along the top of the porch's dividing wall, switching her tail, watching me, then Mrs. Goodenough, and back, like we were playing tennis.

Mrs. Goodenough turned her head, said, "Aggie", in that *aww-aren't-you-the-cutest-thing* tone, and made a little chuckle that sounded like *hn-hn-hn*. She reached over to tickle behind Spacey's ear, then looked at me again. "You know, I think Aggie misses you. When I was getting her supper ready tonight, the whole time, she kept looking over at the door like she was waiting for *you* to come in! It was so adorable."

"That's, uh, nice," I said. If either of those cats felt kindly toward me, I thought they kept it fairly well hidden. So, hearing this was something of a surprise.

"And I just want you to know how much I appreciate it when you can help me with things like that." Mrs. Goodenough reached out to rest a hand on my forearm, but she actually took a deep tight grip on it, maybe without even realizing. I tried not to wince. If she felt like it, she could take that arm home with her and I don't think I'd be able to stop her. An unexpectedly powerful little granny. "I am so grateful to have a nice young man like you living nearby." Then she gave my arm a little shake and mercifully released her clutch.

I flexed my fingers without meaning to. "Thank you, that's very nice of you to say."

"Well, I won't keep you any longer, Warren. Now you enjoy those."

I nodded. "I'm sure I will, thank you."

"Good night, dear." And she turned and toddled so slowly and so carefully, sidling down my front steps, her knuckles white where she took a hold of the stair railing. Which was wooden, so I half-expected to see it splinter, but it managed to hold fast. Spacey gave one final "reer" before hopping down onto her side of the porch.

I closed the door and realized that, not only did Mrs. Goodenough not complain about the noise, but, in the two years I had lived here next to her, she never had. So it was odd, how that was the first thing that would come to my mind.

Still: date squares.

Chapter Seven

T minus 195 days

The week passed with a few service calls, a lot of searching for Y2K edits, and some flowcharting to help hammer my secret weapon into shape. Still a ways to go with that, though.

On Saturday evening, I drove out to Belvedere to go hang at Bill's place over a pizza. It had been a while. When I still lived here, and was working with Bill at the cable TV studio, we saw each other a lot more often, of course. But when I moved away to work at IFPS, I was determined that Bill and I were not going to drift apart, as so often seems to happen with work friends. And I got the impression that this was just as important to Bill, too. So we kept in touch – when ICQ came around, it was extremely handy at helping to get around those long distance phone bills – and we still got together fairly often (we only lived twenty minutes apart). I admit, though, that, after a couple of years, it was possible that our get-togethers were happening a bit less frequently. I told myself I would keep an eye on that.

When I knocked at his apartment's front door, he yanked it open, punched me in the shoulder, and bellowed, "Hey, Warden! Watch out, I'm gonna escape!" And so I made noises that were supposed to be like jailbreak sirens, and he guffawed. By now this was ritual.

He looked just the same, of course. I'd known him about six years now and in all that time he never changed. Still big and beefy, still sleepy-eyed with the hint of a scruffy smile, wearing a very tired Judas Priest T-shirt, his dark hair in his eyes and grown partway down his back. (Like mine used to be back in our day, but I cut it up off my shoulders when I applied for the job at the Institute.) Seeing him again always felt a bit like a time warp.

I performed the rest of our ritual. "Hey, Billionaire. Watch out, they're gonna raise your taxes." Which earned me his big toothy grin and another punch.

"Get your skinny butt in here, buddy," he said, turning and trudging back into his breathtakingly untidy front room. I trudded after him. Already the tiny place was filled with the blast of The Cult's album *Electric* and the exquisite aroma of our traditional double-pepperoni pizza from Bel Gusto – underlaid with the hint of dirty laundry that always permeated Bill's home. Some other things also never changed. And that was part of what I enjoyed about being here.

I picked up a hoodie off the seat cushion of one of his huge, decrepit-but-comfy stuffed chairs, tossed it toward a corner, and flopped into it with my leg over one of the chair arms. Then I leaned and stretched til I could reach the pizza box on the nightstand which he used as a coffee table. I didn't bother with a plate – I just held a slice with one hand and held the other hand under it to catch any dangling cheese. Bill was doing exactly the same; we gave each other knowing nods and hoisted our slices in a toast.

Hanging with Bill was just about the only time I could ever really relax and be completely loose. Not sure what it was about him. But I remember that, even that first time I met him, my first day working at the studio, I felt like he accepted me, completely and immediately, and was willing to take me exactly as I came. And that made me want to do the same back to him. I got comfortable with him faster than anyone else I ever knew, before or since.

It helped that we had things in common, such as me liking all the music he liked. But when I think about it, Bill treated everyone with that same acceptance. It seemed to me like a good way to approach life. There was a difference, though, between "trying to be accepting of everyone" and "finding yourself just naturally doing it". For me, it was a conscious effort; for Bill, it was breathing.

While we ate, we started to gab, almost-yelling to be heard over the tunes. Conversations between Bill and me were subject to frequent interruptions – they kept you on your toes. For instance, when "Peace Dog" came on, we had to stop and headbang to the intro. Once the vocals kicked in, we kept headbanging but were allowed to resume our train of thought then. But more pauses when we played air guitar for the fills in the choruses, and the solo. And we stopped for the long, drawn-out last line of the song, to lip-sync it along with Ian Astbury, and then grin at each other. There were many songs with similar requirements. Ritual.

Bill called over, "So how's your Y2Whatever going?"

I shrugged. "It goes. I wish they would've got us started on it sooner."

"Yeah, eh?" Bill slurped at a can of Sleeman's, then belched delicately. "Sometimes I think people in charge aren't allowed to know what they're doing. Like it's a rule."

I thought I heard a hint of bitterness that I usually didn't get from Bill. "How do you mean?"

"Well okay. I told you how they gave George the boot upstairs to be with the suits, right?" I nodded. "So they made Crazy Cathy chief camera to take over from him, and yeah that figures. And I wanted to be second camera and take over *her* old spot – I already told Evan that, like over a year ago. But he hired in some new guy from outside!" Bill shook his head, wearing the closest thing to a scowl I had ever seen on him.

I sipped carefully at my own beer and sat quiet for a few seconds. Then Bill and I performed a short air-guitar duet, and finally I spoke. "Well, I'm going to try and see this from Evan's perspective for a minute."

"Oh, no!" said Bill. "You're gonna be sensible on me!" And he laughed.

I smiled back. "I mean, you're chief audio, and you're really good at it. Who's going to cover that if you move over to camera? Do you think What's-His-Face is ready to take over audio from you?"

"Uhhhhhhh...." Another swig. "I dunno."

"So Evan probably figures he can't spare you. And besides, you don't really have all that much experience with the cameras – I remember you shadowing George a couple of times, but that's not such a lot. Am I right that the new guy from outside has more experience than that?"

Bill's eyebrows went up as he looked down. "Um, yeah, I think so. A lot, actually."

"So it's not like Evan is saying you suck. He's just trying to be as smart about this as he can."

Bill burst into a huge grin and yelled, "Stop making sense, Warden!" Then he grabbed the little white plastic table out of the pizza box, threw it at me, and roared laughing. (It missed.)

When side one of the album finished, Bill stood up with a soft grunt and shuffled over to the stereo to flip it over. His turntable and tuner were big, heavy things that dated back to 1973, the same as Bill and I did. He inherited the stereo from

his dad, along with some Hendrix and Cream and Zeppelin LPs. Bill hadn't switched over to CDs like I did – his old beast still worked fine, and vinyl was plenty good enough for him.

And so Bill sat back down, we blasted some more Cult, and ate more pizza and some barbecue chips, and gabbed and laughed and headbanged, until I tipped my Sleeman's back and there was a satisfying rattle when I emptied the can. Apparently that was Bill's cue, because as soon as my beer was done, he stood up and roared, " 'Gypsy' time!"

While he lifted the needle off the album, he said, "Do it, Warden! C'mon! Roof roof roof!" I could feel a sheepish grin on my face as I got to my feet. Bill slipped *Electric* back into its sleeve, then pulled out the familiar yellow cover of Mercyful Fate's *Don't Break the Oath*. Here was some more ritual: our metal karaoke.

Bill knew that, once I got a beer into me, I was loosened up enough that I would be willing to sing. The thing is, I can't actually sing. At least, this is what I tell everyone. But long ago I learned that, while I can't sing, I can somehow do a pretty fair imitation of someone who *can* sing. So, once I have a little lubrication, I can get up there, sing along with the record, and pretend to be someone else. And "Gypsy" was one of the most fun imitations I could do.

Bill cranked up the tuner and then there was a heart-stopping loud thump as the needle came to rest in the groove. He quick-stepped back to his chair during the opening chord, and I let out a breathtaking shriek.

Obviously, if you haven't listened to "Gypsy" by Mercyful Fate, I urge you to, for context if nothing else. Their vocalist, King Diamond, has an impressive voice, which he twists into snarls and growls and wails and a piercing falsetto, which is all supposed to sound eerie and horror-movie. But Bill and I just find it supremely funny. And when I stand there and make all those otherworldly noises and hit those hilarious notes, and swivel around in dramatic heavy-metal poses, Bill will sit back and laugh until there are tears down his face.

Too bad you'll never hear me. The whole thing is truly a hoot.

When "Gypsy" ended, I stepped over to the stereo to turn the volume down to a conversational level – or what passed for conversational with us. Bill was gasping between laughs when he said, "Warden, you rock like no one else rocks." I just giggled, and got back in my chair, and tried to get my breath back.

Not for the first time, I found myself wondering if anyone at the office would even recognize me if they saw me here now.

We finished off the Mercyful Fate album and followed it up with some Ozzy-era Black Sabbath. Partway through that one, we also finished off a second beer.

"Hey," Bill said, "I was telling Leroy and Shawn I might meet 'em down at the Gates later tonight. You wanna come?"

"Ah, no, not tonight. I'm kinda beat so I wasn't planning to stay in town too long, sorry." I at least knew that trying to deal with those two would take more out of me than I felt I had in me at that moment.

"C'mon, Warden! Maybe they'll play some King Diamond and you can dance on the table!" He cracked himself up with that one.

"Well, I know that Shawn loves a good table dancer, but no, I gotta get back."

Bill gave me one hearty nod and said, "Rock on." We both stood up. "If you're heading out now, I might as well too at the same time, right?" He walked over to the stereo and shut it down.

I reached in my pocket and felt for my keys. "I can give you a lift there if you want."

He shook his thick mane. " 'Sokay, I was gonna walk anyway. Really nice out tonight, right?"

"Sure is."

Bill saw me to the door and gave me a hearty slap on the back when I stepped into the doorway. "Thanks for comin' over, good buddy. You rock."

I looked back over my shoulder at him. "Thanks. I'll buzz you later. Rock on."

He gave a solemn nod. "Rock on." Then he closed the door behind me with a gentleness that other people might find surprising.

When I got home, I felt pretty metalled out – often happened after a visit with Bill – so I put on the first Duran Duran album while I booted up my PC. (Eighties synth-pop is something else that I am into a bit. Like I said, I have a lot of other things.) I found myself singing the *bah-bop-bahs* to "Planet Earth" and, before I knew it, hacked around with my Simon LeBon impression for a minute. But not loud enough to disturb Mrs. Goodenough.

There was an ICQ message from Nat waiting for me:

WAYCar54: *I was rereading your entry about Ladies X, Y & Z. I got the impression that at least some of them are younger than you. Just a feeling, I don't know. Does this mean you're into younger women?*

Her icon said she was online now, so I thought for a second and replied:

Schmen73: Some of them might be a bit younger than me, I guess, but I don't really think about age that much.

WAYCar54: *Ah. What DO you think about?*

Schmen73: Well, I like when they have some depth, like brains or creativity or social awareness. Or some spirit, or like a lust for life.

WAYCar54: *Music nerd. And I like those things, too. I think you have all of those, actually.*

Schmen73: I think you do, too.

WAYCar54: *Louie, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.*

Chapter Eight

T minus 188 days

The following Saturday, I was gabbing with Bill again, but this time on ICQ. I had news:

Schmen73: Remember Mariko and Gwyn?

668Metal: *duh! just remember I saw Mariko first buddy so stay in your lane LOL*

Schmen73: I found out they're playing here in town tomorrow night. You want to come?

668Metal: *where are they playing*

Schmen73: Someplace called Film Gris. I've never been there.

668Metal: *never heard of it. are you yanking my chain warden LOL*

Schmen73: I looked it up, sounds like a jazz bistro or something like that.

668Metal: *then why are you even bothering me. how dare you say the j word in my presence LOL*

Schmen73: If it were anyone else, I wouldn't have bothered you. But they're really good and you know it.

668Metal: *maybe if Mariko was rocking out like Joan Jett or something Id go but come on buddy. tell me when Ikiru is playing I'll come to that*

Schmen73: You should come to this one anyway. You haven't been to see them since that show where we did their sound. You don't know what you're missing.

668Metal: *I do know! non metal is what Im missing! I think I'll live*

Schmen73: Mariko is still mighty cute, though.

668Metal: *fuck yeah I bet she probaly still is*

Schmen73: Too bad you never called her, buddy. I mean, you had a shot there.

668Metal: *that train left the station a long time ago warden. I never had a real decent shot anyway. besides do I really want to get mixed up with a beatnik? maybe I dodged a bullet there LOL*

Schmen73: I always heard that beatnik chicks are really hot. ;)

668Metal: *well we already know Mariko is right*

Schmen73: Do we ever.

The next night, after dinner, I parked my car downtown on York Street a little ways up from the café. The sun was still up but low, casting the shadows of buildings all the way across the street. After a warm day, it was comfortable in the shade and the soft breeze. I noticed more pedestrians out than usual this late in the evening; a number of them seemed to be heading toward Film Gris, same as me.

Movement across the street caught the corner of my eye. I turned a little to see a young woman jogging down the sidewalk, going in the opposite direction from me and just pulling up directly across from me. After a split-second I recognized that it was Dawn.

She wore a white T-shirt, dark green shorts, and white athletic shoes, and her magnificent ponytail swept back and forth behind her in a steady rhythm. I was just able to make out the relaxed, absent look on her face, as if her mind were far away or far ahead. She held a thin line in one hand, and at the other end I saw a pale galloping speck which must be her dog, just as focused as she was.

It occurred to me that, if she was jogging in this neighbourhood, chances are she lived not far away. It was the first time I ever really thought about where she lived, or how she lived. For a second I thought about calling and maybe then waving, but I didn't want to disturb her when she was in the zone that way. Besides, what if she didn't recognize me? So I just stayed quiet and watched for a moment as the two of them shrank into the distance up the street.

Film Gris was a few doors down the street from Vito's Restaurant. Above there,

in Vito's attic, was The Loft, a very tiny and very informal music venue where I had seen Mariko and Gwyn perform a couple of times before. (In case I hadn't made it clear by now, they were the X and Y I discussed in my journal.) Walking past The Loft triggered memories of seeing the two of them perform, and sharpened my anticipation of their show this evening.

The blackboard beside the front door of Film Gris announced that Takamura-Jones were the musical event for the evening. There was no cover charge – a small but welcome blessing. A slim girl all in black, with very short black hair, showed me to a round little table, which had a red and white checked tablecloth and a squat wine bottle with a well-melted candle stuck in it. When I looked around, expecting to find abstract expressionist paintings on the walls, and saw what were at least amateur approximations of that, I got the feeling that this place was trying way too hard. But that was okay: I wasn't here to admire the décor, but to find out what sort of music Takamura-Jones had on offer tonight.

From what I managed to pick up in a few brief discussions online, Film Gris wasn't a strict hardcore jazz venue: they featured a variety of style and genres like folk and lounge and soft rock. But all definitely leaning to the non-metal side, so I could understand Bill's misgivings about the place. Even though I wasn't what you could call a mainstream jazz fan, my collection included a few items with some influence in them – Joni Mitchell and Ricki Lee Jones came to mind – so I was fairly confident that I could handle whatever was being presented here this evening.

It appeared that quite a few other people were here to check the music out along with me; I was glad to see the ladies pulling in a good-sized crowd. I was also glad to see that I was not the only guy here sitting on his own. Too often I end up in places where it seems like everyone else there is part of a couple, and I feel so conspicuous that I almost want to leave. Doesn't make all that much sense, maybe, but there it is.

I planned to order just a coffee and nurse it for a couple of hours, but when I saw they had sides of garlic bread at a less than outrageous price, I caved and got both. While I waited for my food, I watched the small stage area, expectant under small white lights. A mike stand had a tiny amp just in front of it, and off to the left stood a black Roland synthesizer with a larger amp of its own.

I recognized that Roland. Years ago, on that day when I first met these ladies, I had helped Bill wrap up that synth and carry it into the van along with Gwyn's

others, set it up on the stage for her, watched her play it during their show, and then do everything in reverse afterward to return it to her room at the end. It was obvious that Gwyn's instruments were her babies, she kept them immaculately, and I treated them with the same care I would give to my own. (If I had any.) I wondered if they had any idea how impressed I was by their show and their talent, and how dazzled I was by both of them, instantly and ever since.

I certainly never told them.

A taller black-haired girl in black clothing walked in front of the stage riser to address the crowd and give Takamura-Jones a brief introduction. Then she glided away and polite applause greeted the two musicians as they stepped up and took their positions behind their equipment. I felt like my clapping was obtrusively louder than anyone else's in the venue.

Mariko still sported her usual black shag haircut and bright natural smile, but tonight she was wearing a long dress of dark red satin, almost floor-length: it made her look more mature and confident. She let the fingers of one hand rest gently on the microphone while she took a second to look around at the audience and let the applause die down. Gwyn looked down, fussing with the settings on her keyboard. In her outfit of white blouse and navy-blue jacket, her long blonde hair hanging loose, she looked almost exactly as I remembered her at that first show, that first day.

Then Mariko spoke, and, I admit, I felt my pulse speed up just a fraction. "Good evening, everyone. Thank you so much for coming. And thank you to Film Gris for being willing to give us a shot, and for allowing us to use all of you as guinea pigs for our newest material." She broke into a mischievous grin and there was a good-natured ripple of muted laughter. "For those of you who haven't met us yet, I'm Mari Takamura, and my trusted musical director here is Gwynnie Jones." Another spattering of applause from me and everyone else. (The last few times I had seen these two perform, she always introduced herself as Mari. But on the day I first met them and served as their techie, she was still using the stage name Mariko. So Mariko she was when I discovered her, and in my mind Mariko she would always be.)

She glanced over at Gwyn, then back at us. "We're going to open with an original number we call 'Keep the Night'." A lush rippling keyboard intro followed, with the Roland set to a very convincing acoustic piano sound. Then Mariko's voice came in, and to me it seemed a little deeper and richer in tone than

before, even though not lower in range. A sound more developed, maybe more womanly. And I became aware that years had passed, and all of us were growing.

The sound of their new songs was definitely less pop than much of what I heard from them before, and far removed from the Joan Jett cover that got Bill and me to headbang with such enthusiasm. This was what I guessed you would call torch singing, the sort of music that you might hear in a forties movie. A good fit for this place, I would say. And the fact that they were able to write their own material in this vein, and do it this convincingly, made me even more impressed with their talent, even more starstruck.

I found their music easy to get lost in. While I listened, I imagined myself in a forties movie, ideally as a hardboiled detective. Brooding over my latest case in a dark speakeasy while a gorgeous dame sang songs that only hinted at her deep secrets. For a while it felt more appealing to be someone that assertive, that confident, that unflinching a guy, ready to take on whatever came at him. And I suddenly realized that I had always wanted to own a trenchcoat, and wondered why I had never even looked for one.

Their set continued in much the same sultry retro vein. Sometimes Mariko would announce a song as a cover of an old classic, but I didn't recognize any of those any more than I did their new, original pieces. There was one exception at the end of the set. Mariko said, "I don't know if anyone here ever heard us do our Bacharach and David tribute evening," and she was interrupted by what sounded like a golf clap from three people. That made her grin and say, "Great!" She giggled and for just a second seemed young and girlish. "Well, Gwynnie insists on including at least one Bacharach whenever we perform – I guess it's like her personal superstition." She looked over for a second at Gwyn, who blushed and glanced down and smiled. "So we're going to close our first set with one now."

Gwyn played a piano intro based on the chorus, and I perked up when I immediately recognized "Walk On By". They played it a little slower than I was used to and made it ooze a quiet pain that was also sweet somehow. The applause at the end of the set was a bit more energetic. Mariko spoke into the mike: "Thank you very much. We'll be back on in about an hour if you can stick around for that. And we're sitting at this table just over here with CDs and tapes for anyone who feels like they absolutely have to buy one. But just coming by to say hi is fine, too. Thanks again!" She gave a gentle little bow, the stage lights

went dim, and I saw them step down and sit at their table to stage right.

I sat for a few minutes, absently sipping my cool coffee, sometimes watching them. A couple of times, someone came to their table and bent down to speak with them. One of them walked away with a purchase. Was tonight going to be the night I finally bought one of their albums? I never managed to, the other times I saw them. I checked my wallet and made sure I had cash on me. That wasn't the problem: it was actually standing up and walking over to them that was my biggest hurdle. Had never managed that before. But I thought again about how they seemed more mature than when I met them a few years ago, and reminded myself that I was, too. Tonight, I could do this.

I stood up. I felt sure that everyone immediately turned to look at me, and I had to glance around to convince myself that in fact no one was paying me any attention. I walked over slowly, and to my surprise the floor was steady beneath me, and I didn't trip, and I was doing this just the same as anyone else would do it. When I got to their table, I felt little tremors and my blush and dry throat and tight lips, and watched them look up at me.

Mariko gave a little start of surprise and smiled. "Hey!" she said. "It's, uhh – "

And it was Gwyn who burst in and said, "Ward." She suddenly blushed along with me, but looked at me like I was the best thing that happened to her this week.

"Ward! Yes!" said Mariko. "Wow, it's been a while – how've you been?"

"Uhh, I..." I had to stop and clear my throat. "Okay." I think I smiled. And somehow I found myself actually saying more: "I, I'm kinda amazed you remember me."

Gwyn said, "You wrapped a padded tarp around my Roland *and* tucked in the ends – a girl doesn't forget something like that." And for a second she smiled so I could see her teeth.

I bit my lip. "Heh, I just..." I looked down, saw a CD sitting on their table, and gestured vaguely at it. "Umm, so, what's on this?"

Mariko gave the CD a quick glance. "Oh, you mean what kind of stuff? Sorta electro-pop, I guess? Right, Gwynnie?" She looked over at Gwyn, who nodded

back. Then Mariko looked up at me again and said, "It's older things. Remember the kind of stuff we did that day at the mall? You were there."

I wanted to say, *I will never forget that day. The two of you amazed me with your talent and your energy, and your beauty inside and out, and I have been in awe of you ever since.* What I actually said was, "M-hm." Oh, and I nodded.

"It's similar to that show but with more originals."

"Ah, cool." I nodded again, and got my wallet out and told myself not to drop it.

"It's ten dollars," Mariko said. "Is that okay?"

I nodded harder. "Oh! Yeah! That's fine, I, I like your stuff. You guys. What you both, um." I only had twenties on me, but Mariko seemed fine with that. She handed me the disc and my change. Then I looked at the plastic case, and turned it around in my fingers, and stayed where I was.

Gwyn saying "um" got my attention. I looked over to see she was watching my face. She said, "We, we can sign that for you if you want?" For a second I wondered how she knew. I handed the CD to her and croaked out a "Yes thanks please."

Gwyn handed the disc to Mariko, who uncapped a small marker. While Mariko signed, Gwyn leaned closer toward me, watching me very seriously, and spoke like she didn't want to be overheard. "Sometimes it's hard to know how to ask. I get that."

Mariko handed the disc to Gwyn for her signature, then looked up at me with a grin that had definite mischief in it. "So hey: how's Bill?"

I blinked. "Uh, he's, uh, good. Still really Bill."

"Glad to hear that!" Gwyn handed me my album and I murmured a thank you. Mariko went on: "Well, thank you very much for coming out tonight. It's really nice to see you again." To which Gwyn nodded. "Can you stay for the next set?"

I nodded, and said, "You, too, uh, thank you," and turned and left. My face felt so hot, I wondered if I was actually lighting the place up while I returned to my table. I didn't feel remotely confident, but I had finally done it and I had survived.

Go me.

When I sat at my table again, I looked at the CD, front and back. Part of me hoped to see that they had written a greeting or dedication, but that sort of luck wasn't with me. Plus, I hadn't asked for that. As expected, Mariko had signed her name simply "Mari".

And I found myself thinking about Dawn. I was already confident that I was going to enjoy this album. (With enough incentive, I can give a listen to pretty much anything. Unlike, say, Bill.) But I wondered if Dawn would like it. I wondered if she would like the music that Mariko and Gwyn were performing here tonight. And I realized that I really knew nothing about what sort of music Dawn liked... or much about her tastes in anything. Other than unicorns, I guess.

In that moment, this felt like a significant omission. But we never seemed to talk about music at work; it just never came up, somehow. At least not so far. Apparently I was waiting for her to raise the topic.

Chapter Nine

T minus 178 days

A couple of days later, just after lunch, there was a soft tapping on our office door, and then the door swung in without waiting for either Patrick or me to offer an invitation. Ms. Szabo stood there, looking at me with imperial kindness and ignoring Patrick.

"Ward, Dawn is out of the office for about the next hour. I'd like you to cover reception til she gets back, please."

I looked away from her just long enough to lock my workstation, then stood. "Is, am I allowed to work on my own, um, work while I'm there?" Patrick and I had put a decent dent into Y2K repairs that morning, and I hated to lose my momentum.

"If you're able to do that, then of course." She waited til I reached her side, then escorted me through the common area to Dawn's cubicle, as if I didn't know the way. As I sat, she briefed me. "If anyone calls, just take a message and tell them we'll call them back. If someone comes in, then Dr. Singh is out and you don't know when he'll be back so take a message for him. Any of the rest of us, ask them to wait and then let us know they're here." She gave me a gentle smile that reminded me she had dimples. "I understand that you're overqualified for this position, but we really do appreciate your help." She then turned and headed into her office, secure in her belief that I would have no questions.

Being surrounded by unicorns when I was trying to work was, I admit, rather off-putting, but I wasn't especially worried about being able to handle this task. It was rare for anyone to call this office, and even rarer for someone to come in person, aside from staff from other divisions who were free to just walk directly to the door of whichever officer they needed to see. But I did wonder why Ms. Szabo didn't ask, say, one of the Outreach girls to cover this. I hated to think that maybe she felt their work was more important and less interruptible than mine.

My shift at Dawn's desk dragged but wasn't too demanding. I spent the time flowcharting mostly, and once or twice I helped myself to a few M&Ms, and sometimes I found myself looking at the framed pictures on her desk. That bathing suit picture. She looked like she loved being at the beach. I imagined it would be a lot of fun to be there with her. Her friends seemed to be enjoying themselves, too. I wondered who they were, and what they all did together when

they went out other places. Then I glanced over and one of her chihuahua photos looked like he was giving me attitude, like *Quit gawkin' and get back to work, mister*. So I did.

Ms. Hemphill and Steve came in not long after I got settled, talking together quietly. When Ms. Hemphill saw me, she gave me a big grin and said, "Dawn! You cut your hair!" Steve chuckled, but I just smiled crooked and glanced down at my hands. Then I heard them open their respective office doors.

There was one phone call which made me glad I didn't hold this position full-time: a lady who sounded righteously indignant that I wasn't prepared to be more helpful by giving her information I didn't have. Our conversation sounded very much like, "Sorry, I don't know, ma'am" – *Charlie Brown trombone* – "No, I can only take a message for her, ma'am" – *more trombone* – etc. In the end, she didn't even want to be bothered leaving a message. Whenever I saw Dawn on the phone, she always seemed to handle calls with what you could call breezy aplomb. Sort of like the way she handled life. Or so it looked to me.

Nearly an hour after I first sat myself in Dawn's command centre, I heard the office doors open again. This time, Dawn came in with Dr. Singh. They looked like they had been conversing and enjoying it; in fact, Dr. Singh appeared almost chipper, or as close to that as I had ever seen him. He gave Dawn a friendly nod before taking his briefcase into his office and softly closing the door.

Dawn kept coming forward, straight toward me. She made a sound something like a game show buzzer, then said, "So they stuck you with covering my desk, eh? Aww, poor sucker!" And she laughed.

I gathered up my papers and stood as she came in beside me. "Wasn't so bad," I murmured. I moved aside to let her sit and put her purse in her desk drawer.

Then she swivelled and looked up at me. "Wanna know why I was away?"

I nodded, once I finally let myself realize that she was right: I *did* want to know. But it was as if she knew I wouldn't ask her.

She leaned in, her eyes glittering, and in a stage whisper she said, "Me and Dr. Singh are having an affair."

I could feel my eyes grow unusually big and she burst out in a laugh that echoed

through the foyer.

No longer able to keep a straight face, she went on in a confidential murmur. "Yeah, we sneak out and get a hotel room downtown!" She roared again. I blushed and shook my head, and she reached out and flicked my arm with her fingertips. She brushed a strand of hair back and, more composed, said, "No, seriously, though, do you wanna hear? It's okay, I checked and it's not a secret."

I nodded. That last statement had me curious.

"Dr. Singh is doing research on my past life," she said. As matter-of-factly as if she said he was proofreading her resumé.

For a moment I blinked. Maybe a few moments. Then I said, "Sorry, what?"

"Oh! I have some, uh, like memories from the 1800s. So I sorta think I had a previous life back then? But I'm not sure. Dr. Singh is really interested in it, though, so he's had me back in the lab a few times to try some experiments, find out more about it."

I wasn't yet sure what to make of any of that, so I just said, "Oh."

Dawn put her fingertips in front of her mouth. "Oh god wait: when I said he *'had me'* in the lab, I didn't mean it like *that*, all right?" And she stifled a giggle while I blushed. "Geez, I have a one-track mind today!"

"Um, so, uh... ." I was powerfully curious about this new info about her, but wasn't sure where to begin.

"Anywayyyyy," she said, "thank you for holding down the fort for me, milord. Did you fall asleep?"

I blinked and gave a little smile. "Um, no, I don't think so." Dawn giggled, then turned to unlock her PC and get back to work, so I took that as my cue to slink back to my office.

Patrick looked up when I came in, and almost scowled. "Finally! Ready to help me with this Y2Bastard again?"

I set my flowcharts down by my keyboard. "I, uh, I was working on it while I was

out there."

He turned back to his monitor. "Good. I, we gotta get a handle on this bitch like yesterday, Iggy. I dunno what Inez was thinking, taking you away when we got this kind of slog to get through."

And, I admit, I at least partly agreed with him there.

About a week later, Ms. Szabo came to our office again, and once again asked me to come out and cover Dawn's station "for an hour or so". Patrick's face got darker, and his mouth tightened, but he said nothing.

This time, Dawn was still by her cubicle, but standing and preparing to leave. Standing with her and talking with her quietly was a very tall, athletic-looking man, with short dark hair and a sharp dark suit, like the cover of a magazine on a different shelf from the magazine Dawn was on. I was going to say he looked like Christopher Reeve's Evil Twin, but I guess I mean more like his Dangerous Twin. As the two of them headed for the front door, Dawn saw me approaching with Ms. Szabo and she flashed me a little smile and wave.

This time I had to man Dawn's station for over an hour. I still had flowcharting to do, and this time Trombone Lady didn't call. Or anyone else like her. One of the professors from Research came in at one point but didn't even look at me – he just walked straight to Dr. Singh's door, knocked, and let himself in. It was so quiet, I still wasn't sure why I needed to be here.

Finally I heard the doors open and Dawn came back in, again with the impressive Mr. Reeve-ish. They chatted as they approached the cubicle, Dawn bright and bubbly, the suited man smooth and polite.

When they were close enough for me to make out words, Dawn was saying, "Well, it was interesting, so thank you for that, Dr. Tower. Again, I'm sorry how things worked out. Would you maybe want to try again sometime?"

He inclined his head to her for a second. "Please, I wish you'd call me Richard." His voice was deep and rich and felt very trained. "But, given the results we got today, I'm not sure that another run-through would turn out much differently. I'll have to think about it. But I'd be more than happy to discuss the case more

informally with you. Over dinner, perhaps? Next time I'm in town?"

Dawn grinned, and blushed a little. "Check with me then and we'll see." They shook hands, briefly, gently, and gave each other little head bows. Then he turned and left the office at a brisk walk, as if he had spotted a Bat-signal the rest of us couldn't see. And I got a sense that his suave calm was carefully controlled, as if none of us here could ever find out who he really was, and he was working to make sure that's how things stayed. He was charming, but I wasn't sure that I liked him.

My curiosity gave me a burst of unusual daring, and I spoke up first. "Another lover?"

Dawn burst out in a loud laugh at that. "Yeah!" she said. "When we go to The Ambassador, we have to make sure to book a different room."

I looked at her and blinked, suddenly aware of how much went on in her that I had no clue about. "So, really, were you away doing, like, more research?"

"Uh-huh. Dr. Tower is a specialist in past-life regression."

"Oh! Is that the thing with hypnosis?"

"Yeah! He hypnotizes you and gets you to remember your past life better. Or lives, I guess. Anyway, he comes here from out of town now and then, to work or lecture and things, so people here know him. Dr. Singh gave him a buzz to see if he'd be interested in checking me out." And she gave me a wink clearly intended to be naughty.

"Wow, that sounds fascinating," I said. "All of this does. So, so what happened today? Are you allowed to say?"

"Nothing!" She laughed again. "He couldn't put me under! I finally got him to admit that I was the worst hypnotizing subject he ever had."

I could feel myself grin. "No, really?"

Dawn brushed her ponytail back. "Oh, man, he tried and tried, that poor guy. And I did, too, really. I mean, I wanted to help him, eh? And I'd start relaxing a little, and then he'd say something like 'You are feeling very... relaxed' and it'd

remind me of some old crap movie and I'd get the giggles. So yeah, basically, I couldn't stop laughing through the whole thing."

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me."

"And finally he just gave up. Yeah, I have a feeling he won't be back. At least not to see me."

I shrugged. "His loss."

Chapter Ten

T minus 168 days

By the middle of July, Patrick had mostly updated the Financial overnight program, but it had yet to test-run without a snag. It was so long and so complex that there were date references hidden all through it, and any one of them left uncorrected could crash the test run under the right circumstances. And the original program was so old that, whoever was running systems for IFPS in those days, they couldn't be bothered with things like commenting their work to make it easier for their successors to understand. So no wonder Patrick was generally more frazzled than usual, these days.

Steve peeked in on us once or twice in that time and seemed not displeased by how we were coming along. I gathered we were doing about as well as he could reasonably expect. I had managed to update a couple of the smaller Financial programs and got them running, ready to swap in and replace the ones currently in use. But it felt like a giant haystack of work still left to go, with days trickling away....

It was a Friday afternoon when I came in from lunch and spotted Patrick at Dawn's station, propping himself up with an elbow on her counter and leaning in to talk with her. "So I was thinking of going tonight," he was saying. "You should come with me."

Dawn looked at him from the corner of her eye. "I dunno, Patrick. That sounds a lot like a date to me."

"If we're lucky, it will be." He made a low, dark chuckle.

She shook her head, looking mildly amused. "Patrick, how many times have I told you that co-workers dating is against company policy?" For some reason, I felt something inside me fall when I heard her say that.

Patrick raised a finger. "And Dawn, how many times have *I* told *you* that, until you show me where it says that in writing, I'm gonna keep asking?"

She gave a sputtery little laugh. "Go look it up! Geez, you think I have time to go digging through the Policy and Procedures manual? I've got enough on my plate already, guy."

Patrick cleared his throat. "Hey, watch out who you're talkin' to about being busy – I got yez all beat." Then he noticed me at his side and said, "Oh, hey, Ig."

Dawn looked up at Patrick and said, "Then shouldn't you get going and do all your stuff you gotta do?" Then she turned to me and said, "Hi, Lord Ward."

I nodded. "Don Kirshner."

Patrick started to say "I will – " but the sound of the main doors opening made us all look over. Steve and Ms. Hemphill came in together, as always speaking together quietly, as always looking like they enjoyed each other's company. All of us nodded greetings as the two of them split off into their own offices.

Patrick tisked while he looked away, toward their office doors. "Man, there is sumthin goin' on with those two, I tell ya." He looked at Dawn and me. "They're like always joined at the hip – don't you guys notice that?"

"They're just friends, Patrick," Dawn said. "Known each other like forever."

He shook his head slowly. "Naa, I don't think a guy and girl can be friends like that. Joined at the hip, I tell ya. Literally, sometimes, heh heh – " His chuckle was cut short in surprise when Dawn threw a paperclip at his forehead. Then he laughed again, louder.

With that, Patrick turned and headed away to our office. Without looking back, he called, "Anyway, think about it, Dawn."

She called back after him. "Policy!" Then she turned back to me, shaking her head. "I dunno about that guy sometimes."

I cleared my throat. "He, ah, he's been under a lot of stress for a while now."

"I guess," said Dawn. "He says he is, anyway.... Hey, so what's your nickname for Patrick?"

I shrugged, and then frowned. I hadn't really thought about it before, but a nickname for him just never seemed to come up.

"Yeah," she said, "it's funny, I've never been able to come up with one for him, either. I dunno."

"Well, his name is Milner – he could be, like, 'even more Milne'."

Dawn's mouth twisted, like she didn't want to laugh. Like she realized that it didn't really deserve a laugh. (Well, to be fair, we both realized it.)

"Or 'Milliner' – " [I pronounced it very distinctly] " – and then you could make puns about hats."

She looked at me like I was a small but mildly pleasant surprise. "I bet you are like the only person in the world who even knows that word."

I just shrugged again, and blushed.

Not long after I settled in at my desk and got my nose back into my work, Patrick's phone rang. I saw him glance at the call display, then pick it up and answer with a simple "Hey". He listened a few seconds, nodded and said, "Yeah sure." He hung up, stood up, stretched long and lazy, then said, "Steve wants to see me" as he walked to the door.

"Careful," I said, "he's gonna chew you out for gossiping about him."

"Bull shit," he said without looking back.

I just typed away, or scribbled things out on my flowcharts, for about fifteen minutes, til Patrick came back in and sighed into his chair. For a few seconds we just looked at each other. His mouth was small and tense.

Finally he said, "You aren't gonna believe this."

I gestured toward him vaguely, trying to urge him to say more.

He let out another sigh, heavier. "Inez wants a website."

My eyes got wide. "Seriously?"

A slow nod from Patrick. "All this time she says she doesn't see the point, and now all of a sudden she's on Steve that we 'really need' one. I dunno, she was

at some conference the other day and one of her friends teased her about our site." I couldn't blame her friend. From what I understood, IFPS bought its domain about five years ago, mostly for the email addresses. The Institute's host put up an Under Construction graphic, which looked like it came out of a GameBoy, on the domain's main web page. And that clunky bitmap still sat there, untouched, to this day. The type of work we did here didn't really require what you could call a robust web presence.

Patrick sat back. "So when she gets on Steve, Steve gets on us. I told him that this would need to mostly be your baby, Iggy. You know how swamped I am with Y2Bastard, and that's gotta be our number one priority, I mean, let's get real here."

I swallowed, and felt a little queasy, but just sat quiet with it.

He went on. "You took web design in school, right?"

I barely shook my head. "I, I, I took a bit about the internet, like, what it is. I mean, the web was barely getting off the ground then. I don't think I'd call that 'design'."

"But you can work it out."

"I guess?"

"You're a good man, Charlie Brown. Just forget it for now, let's dig in." And he turned to his keyboard and leaned in peering at his monitor. For him, that's all there was to it.

I just sat looking at my screen for a while, not really seeing anything. I had a million questions, but I knew that Patrick was not the one to ask any of them. And he was right, we couldn't lose sight of Y2K through all this. All I could think right then was that I would need to burn a lot more midnight oil for the foreseeable future.

A little before five that night, Patrick logged out, shut down, and looked over at me. "Quittin' time, Iggy. Chop chop – you're a free man."

"No, I have some extra stuff here I want to finish up."

"Are you kidding?" His eyebrows went up, then he stood and stretched. "C'mon, Friday night, man! Born to be wild!"

I rubbed my forehead. "I don't think that sounds much like me, somehow."

"Well, it's your funeral," said Patrick. He paused in the doorway long enough to say, "Don't burn out, eh? Okay – Monday." And he was gone.

Patrick left our door open. I could hear office doors opening and closing, voices murmuring far off in the Admin main office. Sounded like everyone else was wrapping things up for the weekend. Which was good: sometimes I found it easier to get work done without a lot of other people around. I opened my lower drawer, pulled out King's X's *Faith Hope Love* album, and set it in my tower's CD tray. Volume turned down to a social level for now, until I was sure the others were gone.

While I was typing in some code, I could still hear footsteps in the foyer, in the common area, light switches being flicked. Then the footsteps were definitely coming closer to my door. I looked up.

Dawn peeked in and her eyebrows went up. "Oh hi!" she said. "What's wrong? Got detention?"

I half-smiled. "Just got some extra stuff to work on for a while."

"What stuff? Must be pretty important to stay late on a Friday."

"I think it is, yeah. You, you really want to hear about it?"

"If it won't take you an hour to tell me, then sure."

So I told her in more like two minutes, giving her an extremely rough and abbreviated understanding of the Y2K problem. Then I got down to the heart of my plan.

"Our biggest problem, Patrick and me," I said, "is that we have to go reading through all these old programs, a line at a time, trying to find anyplace that they have a two-digit date, and then rewrite that part for a four-digit date. And if we

miss any of them, it can still mess everything up, okay?"

Dawn nodded. She looked interested, or at least made a good show of it.

"So. I am writing a program that will search through the code of these other programs, looking for those parts with dates. And when it finds one, it spells out where the program is on our system, and even what line that date is on. Basically, it automates all that hunting and finding, and gives us a list of where all the problems are. It should save us like a megaton of time."

She gave me a slow nod of appreciation. "Wow, milord, that sounds really impressive. Assuming I understood it all, which I wouldn't bet on." She laughed, of course.

"I mean, the rewriting will still take a lot of time, like *a lot*, but this algorithm should save us so much that we might even make the deadline. So I really have my fingers crossed for this."

"Then I will, too." And she held her hands up in front of me, and crossed her fingers where I could see. Then she turned her head slightly toward my PC speakers. "Hey, who is this? I like this."

"Oh." I fumbled for the CD case and handed it to her.

She looked it over like she recognized nothing at all about the album or the band. Then she set it back down on my desk with a quiet click. "Cool." This was good to know, but not an immense surprise. The song "It's Love" was playing at that moment, and it was filled with Beatles harmonies and a sweet melody and things that I thought would appeal to a lot of people. Even Dawn.

I was wondering if I could ask her what other sorts of music she liked, but then she spoke up with, "And I guess this is a good way to rack up some overtime, right?"

I bit my lip and blushed. "Actually, I, uhh, we, we haven't been approved for overtime on this."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I... I was just going to not claim it. It... I would really like it if you could not

tell anyone over the other side about this?"

She watched me for a few seconds, looking serious but soft. "I guess this is really important to you."

I swallowed. "I think it is, yeah."

Then she let herself smile, just a small one. "It must be, if you wanna stay late on a Friday – no one else is crazy enough to. Well, I won't breathe a word, Your Lordship. I got no reason to." She backed into the office doorway. "But I'm off now, though. Remember to turn the lights off and alarm on when you go?"

I nodded. "I know the drill."

Dawn chuckled. "Then that puts you ahead of most of the big executives next door. I've seen them forget, more than once." She glanced over at the speakers for a second, then back at me. "Well, have a good weekend, okay? See you Monday." And gave me her easy, comfortable smile.

"You, too." I kept watching long after she rounded the corner, listening for her footsteps and the clack of the main doors closing and locking. Then I cranked King's X up higher and settled in for a session of programming.

And I did turn off the lights and set the alarm when I left.

Chapter Eleven

T minus 164 days

On Tuesday morning I received a phone call. I glanced at the call display to see if I should let it go to voicemail. It was Ms. Szabo – which meant that under no circumstances should I allow it to go to voicemail. I snatched up the phone like it was homework I was saving from the jaws of the dog.

I answered it with a "Yes, ma'am," listened for a few seconds, then signed off with a "Yes, ma'am" and hung up.

Patrick looked over at me, clearly curious. "Wussup?"

I locked my station and stood up. "Ms. Szabo wants to see me."

He blinked, then flashed a devious grin. "Shit, what did you *do*?"

I shrugged and went out, beginning to feel like a deer in headlights. Dawn was busy on the phone when I walked past her station to Ms. Szabo's door, cleared my throat, and knocked. When I heard her call "Yes?", I opened the door a crack and peeked around.

Ms. Szabo was seated behind her desk, a desk that looked the size of my office. She kept it so clean that it seemed like she never used the space for working on; it felt pointless. When she saw me, I got her cool professional smile. "Hi, Ward. Come in, sit." She made an expansive gesture toward the round table with chairs near her door. While I closed the door behind me, she wheeled herself in her chair, out from behind the desk, and stopped beside it, in order to sit with nothing between us.

I eased myself down onto one of the non-wheeled chairs as if I were afraid I might trigger a bomb. Then I held my knees and looked expectantly at her.

She sat tall, managing to look poised without any tension in it. Her blouse was pale blue, light but not sheer, sleeves large and loose. She rested her hands in the lap of her shiny black skirt. "Steve tells me that Patrick is up to his elbows in this Y2K business. And so I understand you will be doing the lion's share of the work on our new website."

I nodded and waited.

"First off," she said, "I wanted to thank you for taking this on, and let you know that I'm sure you'll do an impressive job."

"Thank you, ma'am." I saw her mouth twitch up. She had told me, more than once, that she wasn't comfortable with us calling her "Ms. Szabo", and I knew that I was phenomenally uncomfortable calling her "Inez", so I ended up either addressing her as "ma'am" or simply not addressing her at all. We managed to make that work somehow.

"Today I mostly wanted to let you know what I want the website to be, what features I'm looking for. Provide you with some guidance. I was thinking about it over the weekend."

"That would be very welcome, thank you." I hadn't yet had a chance to ask Steve about these very things.

"I'd like to see a nice panoramic photo of the Institute on the front page," she said. "I've always thought we have lovely buildings here, laid out beautifully, and I'd like everyone else to see that."

I nodded. To me, every building on the grounds looked like a rectangular box, some flatter than others. But I didn't pretend to know anything about architecture. She said nothing about how we would get such a photo. I figured I could ask later, when I needed to.

Ms. Szabo sat back into her soft leather chair, and unselfconsciously slid one leg up over the other to cross them. This lifted her hem over her knee, and made the slit in the side of her skirt more obvious. I think she was saying something about admitting that she always used to say that a website for IFPS was just silly, we had no need for one, etc. But I found myself being reminded that she truly did have gorgeous legs. And that I had been told that she earned money from modelling when she was in school, and I wondered what kind. There were also rumours that she used to be a contestant in beauty pageants, and that made me wonder how she ended up in this place, in this position.

I snapped my eyes back up to hers when I heard her pause.

"But I've had cause to reconsider my position on that," she went on. She managed to smile with her eyes without it quite reaching her mouth. And I wasn't

sure if that smile was because of what she was thinking, or because of me. "I understand now that a website is a good promotional tool, and we do have some need of promotion. Especially when it comes to fundraising. So I see the main purpose of this site as a sort of offshoot of the work they're doing over in Outreach. We want to make it easier for donors to find us, learn about us, and contact us."

"I can see that, yes," I said. In fact, I was a little surprised at how much sense it made. Maybe I didn't always appreciate how good a brain Ms. Szabo had for this work. I felt like I needed to give her more credit. "So, will I be able to contact Outreach and ask them for materials to go up on the site?"

"Absolutely." The foot of her crossed leg turned in a lazy circle. "I'll send a message over to Ulrich, tell him to make sure all his folks co-operate with you, give you whatever you need for this."

"Thank you, that would be great," I said. Then I cleared my throat and added, "Um, no one has said anything about a deadline for this project yet."

"Oh." One hand slid along her leg til she held her knee; it was almost like she had no awareness of that happening. "Well, how long do you think you would need?"

I wanted to say something like March or April, after Y2K, but figured it would be prudent to make a better offer than that. "Possibly by Christmas? A bit before?"

Her brow furrowed, and she lifted her free hand and pressed the tip of her thumb against her lip. "Hm."

"Well, I, I'm assuming here that you didn't want me to drop all our other projects and focus just on this. I mean, I'm doing a lot of the Y2K work along with Patrick, plus all our normal daily things and so on."

"Ah yes." She watched her foot turn for a few seconds. Then her face relaxed and she looked directly into my eyes. "I'm sure you will have this done as soon as humanly possible."

"Of course, ma'am."

She took a deep breath and put on her official smile again. "Then I guess we

can leave it there for the time being. Please feel free to come in here if you need me for anything. And thank you again: I really do appreciate all the work you do."

I took that as my cue to stand. "Thank *you*," I said.

She gave me a small, simple nod, confident that it would be enough to dismiss me. And it was. I heard her wheeling back behind her desk as I let myself out.

I swung by closer to Dawn's desk on my way back to my office, to donate another quarter to Westgate Furry Friends. And get another smile from her.

A bit later that morning, Patrick and I were typing away at our desks, hammering at the prickly Y2K problem. I had yet to tell him anything about my new search algorithm: I wanted it completed and tested before I said a word to him, rather than get his hopes up and have it fail. Then there came a tap at our doorframe and young female voices called out, "Patrick!"

We both looked up to see the Outreach girls crowding into our doorway. They were looking directly at Patrick, and I will swear that their eyes were glittering and they were just on the edge of hyperventilating. Meanwhile, I might as well not have even been there.

Patrick eased his chair away from his desk and sat back, looking and sounding completely relaxed. "Hey, Rach. Val. What can I do you for?"

Barbie said, "Both of our computers are stuck – can you believe it?"

The brunette [to me she was Serena, as in the dark-haired evil twin] chimed in. "And Ulrich is going kinda ballistic that we can't get anything done."

Patrick stood up slow, sighed, and shook his head. "Man, it looks like I can't take my eyes off you two for a second, now doesn't it? Nuthin but trouble." They giggled and he let them have his crooked smirk.

I ahemmed and said, "Sure you don't want me to go do that, Patrick? Then you can keep bashing at your stuff."

He raised an easy, dismissive hand in my direction. "Naa, 'sokay, Iggy, I got this. I was just about to go grab a coffee anyway." When the girls heard him call me "Iggy", they giggled again. And, while the three of them strolled back over to Outreach, I had a sobering thought. If those two were some of the people I needed to depend on to provide me with materials for the website, then that didn't inspire confidence in me about the success of the project. But maybe I was misjudging them – in fact, I had to hope that I was.

I don't want you to get the impression that I was staying late at the office every night. Patrick was right: I didn't want to burn out. So that night, at least, I left at quitting time and picked up a sub for dinner on my way home. (Hey, it's meat and veggies – for me, that's doing exceptionally well.) So the only dish I had to wash up afterward was my coffee mug. And it was while I stood at the sink doing that, that I heard unusual sounds coming in the back window.

I dried off my hands and tried to look through the screen. The back shed got in my way a bit, but I was able to make out the head and shoulders of Mrs. Goodenough in her back yard. She was standing near her big maple, holding some kind of stick or pole. And, after a few seconds, I realized that she was digging. With a shovel. Not something I had ever seen her do before.

I stood and thought. This was none of my business. I knew that. But even though the sun was down low by now, and she was working in the shade, it was still a pretty warm day, and digging was hot work for anyone. But I knew she was strong enough to rip me apart if she wanted to. But that didn't mean her back was good, or her hip, or who knew what else. I just felt like a little old lady shouldn't be doing work like this, alone in the heat. I didn't want to be nosy: I just wanted to make sure she was all right and she knew what she was doing. I was just going over to check on her.

I walked around the front of the house, listening to see if the crickets had started up yet. Then I went up her gravel driveway to the shade of her back yard. And yes, she was digging a hole near the base of the maple tree. The hole wasn't very big or very deep yet, though. Spacey was wandering around, looking in the hole, then brushing Mrs. Goodenough's ankles.

I called out to her. "Ma'am?" She didn't seem to hear. I went closer, through the

grass. "Excuse me, ma'am?"

She turned then, looking only a little surprised to see me, but also tired, I thought. "Oh! Hello, dear," she said.

I came up to her side, feeling like I towered over her. Even doing physical labour, she still wore a knitted shawl. "Sorry," I said, "I don't mean to pry, but I saw you from my kitchen just now. Is everything okay? Do you need any help?"

She looked down at the hole and blinked, almost as if she were a little surprised to see it, too. "Oh, it's fine, I'm just..." Then she looked back at me and the dimming light made her eyes shine. "We lost Dorothy today, you see."

I stood and blinked. It took a few seconds for me to process. Oh. Lump. Lump was....

"Oh, I'm, I'm really sorry to hear that." You know that I had no particular attachment to either of those cats, but Mrs. Goodenough was a nice lady, and I felt bad to know that she felt bad now.

She reached a hand up to rest it on my shoulder. "She had a good run. She was nineteen, you know, that's not so bad."

I nodded. She squeezed my shoulder and I drew in a sharp breath. "Please, ma'am, you really should let me help you with that."

Mrs. Goodenough looked down at Spacey, who was sniffing at the hole. "I need..." She looked up at me again, and tried to smile, and her voice was unsteady. "I'd be very grateful for that, dear, thank you."

I reached out and carefully took the shovel from her. "You just let me know how big."

And while the daylight faded around us, I dug up Mrs. Goodenough's yard right beside her tree. It was hot work, and I wasn't particularly good at it, and before long my shirt was wet and sweat stung my eyes. Better me than her, though. It ended up being a bigger hole than I had planned on, but Lump was a big cat. And she was insistent about the hole being deep enough; it seemed to me that she knew more about that than I did, so I just did as I was told.

When she saw I was nearing the end of what needed doing, she went back into her house. Spacey stayed and watched me dig. Sometimes she said "reer". Once or twice I answered back, "Yeah, I know." When Mrs. Goodenough came back, she was carrying a box, one that looked like it once held a pair of boots in a shoe store.

Once she reached the tree, I tentatively held my hands out and said, "Do you want me to? Or are you all right with that?"

She licked her lips. "Now that you mention it, that bend might be a bit too much for me. Thank you, Warren." She handed me the box, and my eyes widened at how heavy it was. I squatted and lowered it into the hole. It brushed the sides but went to the bottom easily enough.

I stayed crouched down, and turned to look up at her for more guidance. She was standing with her arms down, hands clasped, head bowed. Her eyes were closed and her lips moved. I looked away and waited. I could hear crickets now.

After a while I felt a fingertip prodding my shoulder. "You can finish it now, please," Mrs. Goodenough said. Filling the hole back in was easier, of course, and I patted it down with the shovel blade when I was finished. Somewhere I got the idea that that was the done thing.

I wiped my forehead and handed the shovel back to her. "I'm really sorry," I said again. "I know this must be a rough time for you."

"Oh, I've buried many cats in my day, dear. After a while, you learn how it goes. I can tell you, burying a husband is much harder, *hn-hn-hn*." I heard her little chuckle, but, even though the light was too dim now for me to tell, I had a feeling that her eyes weren't laughing. She reached for my forearm with her shocking grip again. "Thank you again, Warren, so much. I do need to tell you that you are a wonderful neighbour and a wonderful boy. And I hope that your girlfriend or boyfriend realizes what they've got. God bless you, dear."

My blush made me feel hotter than I already was. I managed to murmur a "thank you". When she felt me moving to leave, she let go of my arm, and I made my way more hesitantly through the darkening yard. I heard a "reer" behind me.

As soon as I got back inside, I headed straight for the shower to hose down the sweat off of me. While I soaped up and rinsed off, I stretched and rolled my

shoulders and neck. This had turned out to be a much more strenuous and demanding evening than I expected. I had unfamiliar aches all over me now, and I was sure that there would be more of those in the morning. But I didn't regret any of them.

Chapter Twelve

T minus 163 days

First thing I did after logging in the next morning, was fire off an email to Ulrich in Outreach, letting him know that the Institute wanted to put up some fundraising and donor liaison info on the website, so could he please let me know what he thought needed to be there. Last night I figured this was a good place to start, to help me figure out how many pages the site might need.

There was something unusual in the inbox that morning, sent via the staff listserv:

IFPS Staff:

I am looking for volunteers to assist with my upcoming research. I plan to replicate Sheldrake's recent studies of pets. If you own a dog or cat who always knows when you are coming home, or if you know someone else with such a pet, please contact me at cnathan@ifps.ca. Please note: the participant does not need to be a member of Institute staff, but it is essential that they have a home internet connection to be eligible for this project.

*Dr. Chandra Nathan
Research Division, IFPS*

I admit, that got me thinking. It sounded a little more interesting than most of the staff announcements that came in. I tried to think of how many pet owners I knew. I had no idea whether or not Spacey could tell when Mrs. Goodenough was coming home, but I did know that she didn't have internet. In fact, she was very suspicious about the fact that the internet even existed. So no point in bothering her about it.

Dawn had a dog. The rest of it, I wasn't sure about. I figured I should ask her about this. Yeah, I really should.

While I was pondering the matter, a flag popped up on my screen when a reply came in from Ulrich. Short and sweet:

I'll find out from Valerie and Rachel what a website is, then think it over and get back to you. Thanks, Ward!

I wasn't going to hold my breath, then. Just as well: I had enough work on my Y2K algorithm to keep me busy while I waited for him to catch up to the nineties.

I just barely got the source code for my program opened up when another email flag popped up. The notification said it came from user *cnathan*. That made me interested enough to want to open it right away.

Yes, it was another email from Dr. Nathan, but this one was sent to my personal address:

Mr. Noble:

I'm told you are the person in our organization I should contact if I need audiovisual assistance. I hope you have had a chance to read my staff announcement about my forthcoming research project. My study will require someone to set up, operate and monitor a video camera, with possibly some other incidental duties. Please reply at your earliest opportunity and let me know if you are available and willing to help me with this.

*Thank you,
Dr. Chandra Nathan
Research Division, IFPS*

This request was not entirely welcome at this moment, but also not surprising. My experience working with video and audio, back at the cable station with Bill, made me the Institute's go-to guy for things like this. In fact, I think that experience is part of what helped me get this job in the first place: because they felt I might come in useful this way. So I wasn't really in much position to turn this task down – it was sort of in my job description. Even though I had no idea where I was going to cram it into my already-stuffed eight-hour days.

But, for one, if I could get my algorithm working, it would speed up the Y2K cleanup enough to take some serious time pressure off of Patrick and me. So the workload would be a lot more manageable. And, for another, I had a feeling

that Dr. Nathan's project could be so much more interesting than anything else I had on my plate these days.

And so, after only a few minutes, I replied:

Dear Dr. Nathan,

I did read about your research and I think it sounds very interesting. I would be happy to help with your technical needs. Please let me know where and when.

*Ward Noble
Information Technology Staff
Administrative Division, IFPS*

Dr. Nathan got back to me in less than two minutes:

Thank you for your quick and positive response. I will be in my office today at three if that works for you. Room 505 in the complex.

I told her I would see her there then. Which left me a bit over five hours to brood and fret about what I just got myself into.

I didn't normally have much reason to visit the Research Building during the course of my work day, so it felt very strange and I felt very conspicuous wandering the ground floor, searching for the elevator, and taking it up to fifth. As if everyone I passed in the halls was watching me and thinking that I didn't belong here, that I must be involved in some sort of scientific espionage. I tried to make the best of it by playing the *Mission: Impossible* theme in my head til I reached Dr. Nathan's office.

I knocked softly and barely heard a gentle voice say, "Come in." When I eased the door open, I could see the doctor standing at a table beside her desk. She was reading what looked like a manual, one of several scattered on the table, along with electronic equipment and cables and a lot of loose papers. The

loose-paper look characterized her desk, and shelves, and the office in general.

She raised her eyes from the table to me, almost smiled as I stepped in, and said, "Ward?" I nodded. I could see that, by contrast, she herself was very collected. A trim, dark, serious woman, in a narrow charcoal blazer and slacks – it felt like she had studied demeanour with Dr. Singh. She was a bit smaller than me, which put me somewhat more at ease. Her half-glasses, with gold wire rims, kept sliding down her nose, and she kept pushing them back up again and again out of pure unconscious habit.

Dr. Nathan looked down at the table again and absently gestured me toward it. Speaking down, she said, "I've managed to get use of a motion-sensor digital IP camera. Have you ever operated one?"

I blinked and tried not to let my mouth fall open. This equipment was state of the art – I felt a bit *Star Trek* at that moment. "I, no, I... I've read about them, but never actually saw one before. I mean, these things are worth more than my life."

She looked up at me then and genuinely smiled, and her eyes relaxed. "More than *both* of us," she said. "I'm very lucky to have this, I know. But will this be a problem for you?"

I reached down and barely touched the camera. "If you can give me the manuals, I can get it to work." Not bragging: just speaking from experience. "What is it exactly you need to do with this?"

"Would you care to sit?" said Dr. Nathan. There was a plastic chair beside the table. While I fumbled myself onto it, she began to pace around the small empty floor space in the middle of her office. Giving me the sense that she was more comfortable in a lecture hall.

"I take it you've heard, at some point in your life, about someone who has a dog or cat that's always waiting at the door for them when they come home. As if it has some sixth sense about Master coming back. Yes?" I nodded. "It's very common, but people don't give it much thought.

"Over the last decade, Sheldrake has been studying this phenomenon, and publishing his work. I plan to replicate his research. There's not much glory in repeating someone else's experiments, but showing that they *are* repeatable is

like the backbone of science. Some might see it as dogwork, no pun intended, but I believe it's worth doing."

"I think I can see that," I said.

"I need to find such animals to study," she said. "Once I do, we will set up the camera to film the floor behind the front door. It will detect the movement of the dog coming to the door and record it. The signal will be time-stamped so we know exactly when it comes and goes. And it can be set to stop recording after ten seconds without motion, so we don't film all day long and end up needing to scan through hours of nothing. It will just show us little bursts when something happens, and we will know when it happens."

"Save you a lot of tape."

"Well, the signal is digital, but yes. It gets sent through the internet back to the lab here, where it can be monitored on the computer. But I *will* back up the video onto VCR every day, in order to save storage space on the server.

"I estimate that a week or so will tell me if the dog is intentionally at the door at the right time, or if this can be explained by random chance. If I find it's deliberate, then it's time to manipulate some of the parameters and record the new results."

I was right: this was a lot more interesting than reminding a staff member how to locate archived files in the shared directory. I said, "Does it matter that this video will be – " [I wanted to say "garbage" but opted for] " – not the best quality?" As I recalled, the screen resolution on these cameras was something like seventy-five by a hundred pixels or so, and they only shot four frames a second. A video of a dog walking by would look like a tiny, jerky blur of something that could be a dog, or cat, or mongoose, or magically mobile Kleenex box. And forget audio of any kind.

She smiled wider. "I do understand that I'm not shooting a feature film, yes. But for my purposes, this will be fine. All I need is to see that something is moving by the door, and see that it is a dog and not someone's legs. But you've made a good point: I do need to limit myself to a household that only has one pet, because video this bad will not be able to tell different animals apart. I *have* given this some thought." And she gave a little bow of her head.

I blushed. "Oh, no, I didn't mean to imply that you hadn't."

She actually showed me her teeth. They were bright. "It's fine. So, I take it that you can do this for me? You're on board?"

"Definitely. This sounds fascinating."

"Then I won't keep you longer. For now, I'm stuck waiting until I find a suitable subject. Once that happens, I'll contact you again. Sound good?"

I nodded and stood up. "It sounds good." She thanked me, and I took my leave and headed back over to Admin, feeling mildly relieved that this new job wouldn't actually require anything from me for the next while. After all, the source code for my Y2K algorithm was still waiting for me back at my desk, bugs hiding between the lines, hoping I wouldn't find them.

But I was determined to.

That night, after dinner, Mrs. Goodenough showed up at my door with another foil package of date squares. Sharp lady: she played to her strengths.

Chapter Thirteen

T minus 147 days

Over the next couple of weeks, as we got past the August long weekend, I finished writing my algorithm, started testing it, and found all kinds of trapdoors in it that I needed to shore up. Primarily, I needed to fine-tune it so that it could find all the various forms of date references in other programs, without turning up a lot of false positives. Enough of those would make the whole enterprise pointless. Plus a lot of my time was spent doing the same sort of hunting and pecking that Patrick was doing, eyeballing our way through the code and repairing whatever glitches we could find. I couldn't let the algorithm bring the actual editing to a stop, because what if I never got the algorithm off the ground? It's not like I could put Y2K on hold while I taught my baby to walk.

About halfway through a Friday morning, after I sent off a gentle reminder to Ulrich about website content, my phone rang. I saw it was Dawn, so I picked it up right away and said, "Hello?"

"Hey," she said, "I need a mage!" Then giggled.

"Um, okay, be there in a minute." So I hung up and of course pulled out my wizard paraphernalia. And of course Patrick looked over at me while I put the cape and hat on, his customary look, like he despaired of me and was prepared to always do so.

When I entered the foyer, Dawn was looking my way as if waiting for me to show up. Her smile got bigger, and she called out, "Hey!"

I casually waved my tacky wand while I walked over to her counter. "Hey yourself. What's the problem?"

She leaned toward me. "I just got an email from the professor about that pet research she's doing, and me and Alan got in!"

"That's cool. That's *very* cool," I said.

Dawn nodded. "Yeah, when that first announcement came, I answered it, and since then the professor's been sending me questions back and forth about whether Alan does all the things she wants to study and some other stuff. So finally she decided that we're the ones she wants to pick. I think this sounds like

a lot of fun!"

"I think so, too. So Alan is always waiting for you when you come home from work?"

"Yep. Every day, right at the door, never fails. And he's always so happy, too – god, he's the cutest thing."

I thought, I don't blame him for being happy to see you. But I only thought it. What I said was, "Did you ever wonder how he knows to be there for you?"

She made a soft shrug. "Not too much, really. Now and then I wonder, but I hear that it's just one of those things dogs do, eh? I just roll with it, I guess."

"Fair enough." Dawn certainly did seem to have some interesting things going on in her life. That thought gave me an idea. "Hey, now that I think about it: did you ever tell Dr. Nathan that you're doing other research now? With Dr. Singh?"

She blinked. "No, I don't think that ever came up."

"Well, I'm not sure, but there might be some kind of rule about being a subject of more than one thing at the same time? You guys should check with Dr. Singh or maybe one of the directors over at Research or somebody, I dunno. Make sure that's not gonna mess anyone up?"

"I never woulda thought of that," Dawn said. "Okay yeah, I'll ask, thanks."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "I mean, it's probably fine."

"We'll find out," she said. "Anywayyyyyy, the professor happened to mention that *you* were gonna be setting up some equipment in my apartment for this thing. And I thought that was great, that it's somebody I know."

I blushed. "Um, yeah, that *is* cool."

"So we need to work out some time you can come over and do that." And suddenly it became very real that I was going to be inside Dawn's home. I had a weird feeling of it being too soon, and I felt a little nervous.

"I, I'm sure I can manage any time that works for you. I mean, I'm pretty flexible."

"I've been told that I am, too." She winked at me, then laughed when I blushed harder. I really enjoyed how forward and open she was with everyone here, but she still caught me off guard with it sometimes. "So, the professor said she'd like the experiment to start on a Monday, but I'm busy with the girls tonight and other junk this weekend. How about you come by next Friday night and set up? Lotsa time to get ready for it and also check with Dr. Singh like you said. Is that okay for you?"

I nodded. "For sure. I can do next Friday easy. Like I said, I'm – "

"Flexible, right," she finished. "I remember." The gold in her eyes looked especially bright, just then. "So I'll tell the professor that that's when we're gonna go for it. Thanks, Lord Ward!"

I gave her a little smile, then bit my lip. "Oh! So, uh, what problem are you having?"

"How do you mean?" She blinked hard.

"With your computer – I mean, you called for Schmendrake – "

"Oh sorry!" Her mouth got tight, trying to hold in a grin. "There, ahh.... nothing. I just sometimes like seeing you in your wizard get-up." And then she burst into a loud laugh.

I gave her an incredulous, *you have got to be kidding* look, and rubbed my forehead.

Once her laugh settled a bit, she looked me in the eye and whispered, "Oh hey, c'mere."

Puzzled, I mumbled back, "What? I *am* here."

She beckoned me. "Closer."

I leaned in toward her. She reached up quickly, pulled my hat up on its elastic, let it pop back down, and laughed even louder.

I was holding in a giggle now. I opened a jar on her counter. "You owe me some

M&Ms for that, Don Quixote."

Still laughing, she said, "Yeah, you're right, I do." I pinched up a few and turned back to my office, my little shawl cape making a gentle flap behind me.

That night, I put in some more unsanctioned overtime testing my algorithm, weeding out a few more false positives. Once again, Dawn came by while she was locking up, reminded me to set the alarm, and chided me for working late on a Friday. "At least *next* Friday you'll have some kind of social life: you're coming over to my place, remember!"

I had not forgotten.

When I logged in at home after dinner, there was an ICQ from Nat waiting for me: *Please tell me you didn't die, Schmen*. It looked like her current status was active, so I got in immediately:

Schmen73: Whoever might be out there, wishing for my demise, remains sorely disappointed.

WAYCar54: *Yep, that couldn't be anyone else. Welcome back, my friend.*

Schmen73: I didn't realize it had been that long.

WAYCar54: *A few days. Felt long to me. ;)*

Schmen73: Awww. Work has gotten crazy busy, sorry.

WAYCar54: *Understood. I have my moments like that, too.*

Schmen73: I commented on your last entries, didn't I?

WAYCar54: *Yes, but not with your usual depth and insight. I figured something must be distracting you.*

Schmen73: Sidelining, more like. They've added two major new duties to my job description in the past month.

WAYCar54: *But no major new pay, I bet.*

Schmen73: No fool you, ma'am.

WAYCar54: *Oh god, don't call me ma'am. I don't want to feel old. LOL*

Schmen73: A spirit like yours can never be old.

WAYCar54: *You flatter me. And you'd better keep doing it. I forget, did you tell me where you work?*

Schmen73: IFPS

WAYCar54: ?

Schmen73: Institute for Paranormal Studies

WAYCar54: *I've heard of that. In Westgate, right?*

Schmen73: Got it in one.

WAYCar54: *I bet it's interesting working there.*

Schmen73: It has the odd moment.

WAYCar54: *It's gotta beat working retail. Even retail admin.*

Schmen73: Yeah, I liked your post about feeling like a world explorer trapped in a department store.

WAYCar54: *Uh-huh. My plans went off the tracks somewhere along the line. Happens to the best of us, I guess.*

Schmen73: At least you had plans. I'm still just falling through life, trying to figure out what I want.

WAYCar54: *Would you believe I'm doing just the same? We are kindred spirits,*

Schmen.

Schmen73: Yeah, I have been feeling that for a while. It's like, in here, we live so much bigger than everyone on the outside sees us as.

There was a longer than usual pause, and then Nat started typing again:

WAYCar54: *So you work in Westgate. You live there?*

Schmen73: Yes.

WAYCar54: *I live in Royal Falls.*

Schmen73: Not that far.

WAYCar54: *Not that far. Close enough that we could meet in person if we wanted.*

My heart suddenly sped up and started pounding hard. It took a few seconds for me to answer:

Schmen73: Would you want to?

WAYCar54: *I think so. Been thinking about it a while now, if it turned out to be doable.*

Schmen73: Wow.

WAYCar54: *Like I said: kindred spirits. I like how you put things. I like how you think. I like THAT you think. We do seem to connect.*

Schmen73: I would say we do, yes.

WAYCar54: *I'm curious to see how much we do. Or could.*

This time it was my turn to take a long pause. Then:

Schmen73: I've never done anything like this before.

WAYCar54: *Me either, baby. You think I'm not shaking here? LOL*

Schmen73: They say you should tell yourself it's excitement.

WAYCar54: Yes.

Schmen73: And not call it terror.

WAYCar54: Yes. *LOL*

Schmen73: I have a car. Takes like 15 min to get there.

WAYCar54: *I don't. I'd need to bus up there. So yeah, if you drove here I would appreciate that very much, thanks.*

Schmen73: You sure you want to?

WAYCar54: *The more time I spend with you, the more sure I get.*

Schmen73: Wow again. When?

WAYCar54: *Now I'm thinking tomorrow night.*

Schmen73: That's fast.

WAYCar54: *Waiting just gives us more time to lose our nerve, Schmen. I say we go for it. If you're sure.*

When I typed back *Yes I am*, it was mostly true. Or at least partly.

Chapter Fourteen

T minus 146 days

We arranged to meet at seven the following night at Davey's in Royal Falls. I'd never been there, I didn't know where it was – to be fair, I rarely had much reason to be in Royal Falls and didn't know the city at all well. But, the way Nat described it, Davey's was a quiet family restaurant downtown, as opposed to a noisy singles bar. You could have a conversation there. And it was well lit, so when you were inside, you were visible, and public. She thought that felt like a safe place to meet, and figured I would feel that way, too. She also mentioned that it was licensed, and said that she was sure she would "need at least one drink to get through this LOL". And I realized that idea actually sounded advisable to me as well.

I told her I would be the guy with shaggy, light brown hair, wearing a gray T-shirt with a Karl Marx cartoon on it. She said she would be the lady with short, curly, brown hair, wearing a print sundress, blue with white gardenias. (A reasonable choice for the August we'd been having so far.) She gave me directions to the restaurant, and they turned out to be fairly good ones: I only got lost once. Not too much of a shock, if you could see Royal Falls's street layout – I can't bring myself to call it a "grid".

I parked in a dim enclosure behind the building, then walked around to the front entrance. A tall man, younger than me, in a white shirt and tie, asked me, "Table for how many?"

"Um, two, I'm, uh, I'm supposed to be meeting someone here." And once again I felt something like a voice in my head, saying, *You don't do things like this! Who are you?* But somehow I made myself follow the maître d' to a small table near the front, with a view of the door. I thought that was a lucky break: I could watch for Nat to come in if she wasn't already here. Before I sat, I scanned the other tables, looking for some sign of a blue sundress, but didn't spot one.

I pulled out my cell phone and flipped it open to see the time. A bit before seven (I hated to keep people waiting). As I tucked it back in my pocket, a waiter brought two glasses of water and two menus. I asked if they had Sleeman's: luck was with me, and he went to bring me one.

I didn't really look at the menu. I'd eaten a little before I left town and wasn't planning to here. So when the waiter brought my bottle, I just focused on it, and

let the menu lie there. I drank the first half of my beer a bit faster than I intended. But then I reminded myself that, if a beer could loosen me up enough to sing King Diamond, it could loosen me up enough to get words out and actually have a conversation with a strange woman. At least, such was my plan.

I checked my phone again. Seven fifteen. The drink had me feeling just a touch warmer, even with the air conditioning in the restaurant. Several couples had come in since I sat down, but still no sign of Nat. The other patrons made a comfortable, subdued murmur all around me. Was it too early to start worrying?

Then I heard a voice, husky contralto, to my right, just behind my peripheral vision: "Schmen?"

My heart jumped, and I turned. There stood a woman with short, curly, brown hair, wearing a blue sundress with white gardenias. She had a small black purse slung over one shoulder, and she held a partial bottle of Sleeman's in one hand. (Which was a good sign.) But, for whatever reason, I wasn't expecting her to look like my mom. No, not *like* my mom, not like I could ever confuse the two of them: she looked like someone who went to school with my mom. Part of it, I realized, was that I somehow expected everyone using the internet socially to be around my age. I mean, my parents and their friends didn't even know what the internet was.

Fumbling, I stood, and nodded, and quietly said, "Nat?" And for a moment we just looked, and continued to take each other in. Her hair was brown, as she said, but with a number of gray streaks in it. Her nose was soft and round – all of her was – and her lips were narrow and tight, her eyes tired. I was surprised to see freckles over her face and soft arms: again, not sure why, because I was never clear on exactly what I had expected to see.

She passed her bottle into her left hand and reached her right toward me. I reached mine and our hands met. Not a shake, more like a tentative touch, squeeze, and release. I managed to say, "Um, sit?" And she nodded and settled in the chair across from mine.

She blinked at me, took a swallow of her beer, set it down, looked right into my eyes, and said, "I gotta tell you, you are not what I expected, exactly."

I nodded. "Yeah, I, I can understand that."

"I was waiting at the bar, back in the corner, and when I saw you come in, I wasn't sure at first if that could be you." She made a shy smile. "I mean, you're just like you said, but.... anyway, I'm sorry I made you wait. I've been sitting back there all this time, wondering if it was really you, but mainly wondering if I was actually gonna be able to go through with this."

I cocked my head. "Well, I, uhh, I'm glad you did." And I was, very quickly, starting to be glad she did. I could already feel the Nat I knew, inside this lady.

Her smile got wider and more relaxed. It was pretty – not in a magazine way, but in an honest way. "So. We did it."

"Yep." I raised my bottle to toast her. "Go us."

She saw my bottle and nodded. "Hey, you got taste. That'll help me relax." And she actually let herself laugh. Short and quiet, but, again, honest. And I felt a flash of liking her, the way I liked her when she was words on a screen.

"Good," I said. "I'm still trying to."

The waiter came back then to take our order, but it turned out Nat wasn't planning to eat anything, either. So he said he'd be back later to bring us another drink if we wanted, and took the menus away.

We both sat quiet for a moment then, a silence not quite as awkward as it could have been. Then she said, "So what's your real name?"

I couldn't see any reason not to tell her. "Ward."

"Ward?" There was something in her voice that suggested a mildly unpleasant surprise, like she'd found an unfamiliar sock in her drawer. She raised her eyebrows, studied my face for a second, then looked down at her bottle.

"And what's yours?" I said. There was enough drink in me to make the question feel a bit easier.

She looked back up at me. "Carla." And suddenly I felt something like she must have felt: that this name didn't fit what I saw in the face. Or, fit my expectations. I just nodded, and she went on. "That's what inspired the 'Car' in my username."

I had a sudden suspicion. "And the '54'?"

She licked her lip. "I always heard it isn't polite to ask a lady stuff like this, but lucky for you I don't give too much of a damn about polite. It's my birth year."

I swallowed. Yes, she was almost the same age as my mom. I just said, "Aha."

Then her mouth fell and her eyes widened, just a touch. "Waitasec. Schmen *seventy-three*? You – "

"Uh-huh."

She let fingertips brush the base of her throat. "Oh my god, you're almost as young as my son." Which I didn't know she even had until that moment. "This is all kinda wild, isn't it?"

"What, you didn't think I would be this young?"

"Well, no, honestly. Your journal always has such insight in it, you always come across as... I dunno, grounded, I guess. It feels like experience."

I felt my mouth make a crooked smile. "Should I be flattered?"

"I'm not saying it as flattery, just the truth. But I mean it as a good thing, yes." She smiled and finished off the last swallow of her beer. "But how do you get Schmendrake from Ward?"

"I don't. I get it from Schmendrick the Wizard in *The Last Unicorn*, and Mandrake the Magician in the comic strips."

"I'll take your word for that." She laughed. "But I'm sorry, I just can't see you as a Ward. To me, you've always been Schmen. And even when I see you now, you look like a Schmen."

"I get that. To me, you look and feel like a Nat."

She laughed again. "No, I'm *Mrs.* Nat!"

I shook my head. "I can't call you 'Mrs.' – it makes things feel unsavoury." That made her laugh even louder.

"Okay then, I'll be Nat for you." And she gave me a smile, a warmer one, while the waiter took our bottles and an order for two more. While we waited, we spent a moment just looking at each other. And, for me at least, I could feel this face before me growing more comfortable. It was beginning to fit the person I already knew. And I was beginning to like it more.

The waiter brought two more bottles of Sleeman's, and we clinked them together in a toast. We were both smiling easily now, and even when I was looking directly at the touches of gray in her hair, and the fine lines in her face, I wasn't thinking at all of our age gap. All it meant to me now was that this was who she was.

Nat said, "Y'know, this part of it is almost exactly like I hoped it would be."

"What do you mean?"

"Like, I like your company. I love this, just being here with you. We can just be us, just like we are at home. I mean, I look at you, and I know the things going on inside you, beautiful things that everyone else out there can't see." She looked around us at the other tables, the other customers, and said, "Just like there are things inside me that, that no one...." Then she started blinking hard and took a swig from her bottle.

I felt like she needed me to say something. "I can see them."

She swallowed, reached out, and took hold of my hand. "I know you can, baby." Her fingers were dry and warm. "*You* can. That's why you're Schmen. The Mage." She let me go and drank some more. The light was dimming outside, which made it feel like the world was getting unexpectedly deep around me.

We talked all through that second beer. She told me about her son and ex-husband. I told her about my parents up in Owen Sound, and how hard it was to go away to school. We talked about what Mike Harris was doing to Ontario, about the rise of the religious right in America, about gender roles, about how the internet was freeing people to act, and interact, free of their external appearance or location, free of presuppositions and prejudice, and how many of those we faced, often so familiar we no longer noticed them. It was the kind of conversation we would often have on ICQ, or in the comment sections of OpenBook... but tonight it was with spoken voices, and rapt facial expressions,

and the occasional gentle brushing of her fingers.

Dusk had settled deeply by the time we were done, and neither of us thought that a third drink was advisable, so when the waiter returned I asked for the bill. We argued over it, good-naturedly, as people do, but in the end my wallet prevailed. I was debating if I had overstayed my welcome when Nat stood up, steadily enough, and said, "Where are you parked?"

I blinked up at her. "Around back."

"Show me your car."

"It's just an old Toyota – "

"I wanna see it. C'mon."

I shrugged, and stood, and we walked out into the stuffy August night. There was a glow of humidity around the streetlights. As we walked into the shade behind the restaurant, sometimes Nat swayed and brushed against me for a second. Sometimes she swayed and leaned on me a little longer. And I let her.

I brought her to my car, and she walked around to the passenger door, saying, "Go on in." I unlocked it and got behind the wheel, not sure what she had in mind. Did she want to go somewhere else? Did she want a lift home? I started saying, "Do you wan– "

"Schmen." Her voice was low but got my attention at once. I turned to face her. She was sitting sideways in the passenger seat, toward me, her left hand on my headrest. She was mostly a dark shape in the darkness but I could feel her eyes, her mouth. It was even stuffier inside the car, but I couldn't really register it at that moment. I licked my lips. My heart was loud.

When she spoke, it was barely more than a whisper. "I'm sorry, but I have been waiting so long for this." And then she reached her other hand up to my cheek, and her fingers were dry and warm again, and she leaned in and tried to guide my face toward hers.

I whispered back, "Don't be sorry," and remembered to lean toward her myself, to meet her. And now my pulse was deafening, and I could feel myself growing, feel the indescribable rush of preparing to kiss someone I had only just met a

couple of hours before, and my voice inside said, *You don't do things like this!*
And another voice said, *But I always wanted to.*

And our lips met. Soft and unsure for the first split-second, and then we kissed, longer, pressing in deeper.

And nothing.

We broke apart and looked at each other in the dark. There was nothing bad about it. It's not like it was repugnant, or even unpleasant. It was just there. It was like kissing your own arm. I felt mildly stunned.

My pulse quickly settled down to normal, while Nat sat back, ran a hand through her hair, and let out a soft laugh that sounded like *tish*. She looked out the windshield, then back at me. "Wow," she said. "*That* doesn't happen every day."

"Good thing, right?"

She tished again. We just sat and looked at each other, with smiles that were a little sad and a bit resigned, and eyes that said, *Yeah, I felt that, too. Too bad, because that could've been really nice, but there it is.*

I buckled my seatbelt. "Want me to give you a lift home?"

Nat settled into her seat and did up her own belt. "I would love that, thank you. Turn left out of the lot." And she navigated me through the unfamiliar night streets to a quiet residential one, so thick with trees that the streetlights had a hard time shining through. The neighbourhood didn't look upscale, but it did look safe and cozy. A nice area: I was happy for her.

She indicated her house, and I pulled up and idled in front of it. Nat undid her belt, then turned to look at me. "Schmen," she said, "I hope this isn't gonna wreck things for us. Is it?"

I shook my head, and gave her a smile that I hoped was reassuring. "I don't think it will. I mean, think about it: all the things we liked about... about us, we still have. Right? All the important things."

She let out a breath. "Thank you, my friend. The internet wouldn't be the same without you."

"That's exactly how I feel, too," I said.

Then she suddenly leaned in, and for a second I thought she was going to kiss me again, but it was just a one-armed hug around my far shoulder, and she pressed her cheek to mine. Then she quickly backed out of the car and leaned down to speak in to me. "You can find your way back from here?"

"No problem." I nodded vigorously.

There was enough streetlight for me to see her grin. "Go safe and good night. Thanks for picking up the tab, and I guess I'll see you online."

I gave her a casual salute. "See you." Then she thunked the door shut, and I watched her go up her steps and let herself into her house. Only then did I shift the gear and pull away into the night.

As it happens, I was wrong about the "no problem", but I did find my way back to Westgate, eventually.

Chapter Fifteen

T minus 142 days

A few days later, just before lunch, Patrick and I received a service request email from Ms. Hemphill – she thought her mouse was dying. Patrick ignored it and kept muttering at the source code on his screen. I quietly gathered my wizard gear, and a new mouse in case it was needed, and headed off through the common area.

Dawn saw me come into the main foyer, and she waved and giggled. I waved my wand back and made my way to Ms. Hemphill's door, to the rear of Dawn's station. When I thought back, I couldn't remember ever making a service call for Ms. Hemphill before. She didn't seem to report that many problems, and the few I could recall, Patrick handled. Then again, she did seem to be friends with Steve: chances were that he did a lot of troubleshooting for her that we never heard about. Made sense to me, anyway.

I knocked, and noticed that the blinds in Ms. Hemphill's front windows were lowered and closed, which was unusual. I wondered if she was actually even in, at the moment. I was just about to go ask Dawn if she knew whether Ms. Hemphill had gone out, and possibly ask to borrow Dawn's pass key to let myself in. But suddenly there was a click, the door opened, and Ms. Hemphill was there, smiling when she saw my cape and hat. I always felt something about Ms. Hemphill that I can only describe as welcoming. Sometimes it was as if she could see things about me that other people didn't.

"So!" she said. "It's finally my turn for the wizard to visit. About time, I'd say – come in." She stepped back and aside to let me in, then closed her office door and locked it.

I took a quick look around, to orient myself. It looked very much like Ms. Szabo's office, only less. Smaller windows to the outdoors, smaller desk, smaller table – and I immediately noticed Steve sitting at that table, eating a sub. He acknowledged me with a slow nod and a lazy drawl: "Schmendrake the Mage."

Ms. Hemphill giggled and I said, "Uh, hey, Steve." She sat down at the table near him, and I noticed a second sub and a couple of large paper coffee cups. She turned her head to me and said, "Steve and I have busy afternoons so we just grabbed some takeout for lunch. I didn't want everyone watching us eat."

I suddenly felt very third-wheel. "Did, did you want me to go and do this later?"

There was a warm light in the bright blue eyes behind her round glasses. "No no, it's fine, Ward, please go ahead. Or I'm sorry, is it Schmen... what?"

In stereo, Steve and I both said, "Schmendrake."

Ms. Hemphill giggled and grinned, a pretty one. "Ummmmm, okay!" Then she turned to her food and I went over to her desk. No one was watching me work, so I didn't bother putting on any sort of magic show this time. I tried her mouse and it did seem to be completely fried now: moving it and clicking it did nothing at all on-screen. I tried unplugging and replugging it, taking it apart and cleaning the ball and rollers [they really needed it], but that still didn't help. While I did all this, she and Steve chatted in the corner over mouthfuls of food, sounding very casual. I tried to make a point of not eavesdropping, but I overheard bits of things like their kids, and a performance review coming up, and Steve wanting to go south for a week in the winter. They sounded so comfortable with each other, and I couldn't help envying that.

I wrote off her old mouse, and stood at her desk, trying to tear open the sealed plastic bag around the new mouse. While I pulled, my eyes wandered to a photo sitting in a frame beside her monitor. It was a group of people, all wearing big Hawaiian shirts and shorts and smiles, standing in front of a picnic table, in what looked like someone's back yard in the summer. On the left were two Asian men and a little Asian boy. To the right of them was Ms. Hemphill. And to the right of her was a younger woman, an Asian woman.

I recognized her. And I dropped the mouse, which hit the desk with a loud clatter.

For a second my hands waved and fluttered in front of me and I heard Ms. Hemphill go "What?"

"I'm sorry I'm sorry! Oh gosh!" I said, and I blinked and tried to pick the mouse up and just knocked it off the edge of the desk so that it tumbled under and I had to get down on my hands and knees to get it back and then I knocked my magic hat off and hit my head when I tried to stand up again.

"Hey, man, you cool?" said Steve.

I held the mouse in both hands, trying to breathe deep, squatted down to retrieve my hat, stood, and finally turned to look at the two of them. "Sorry, I, it slipped, it's okay. I just, I.... Ms. Hemphill, is that Mariko?"

"Pardon?"

"In your picture there. You know her?"

Ms. Hemphill's mouth got round for a second, then she smiled. "Well, I haven't heard anyone call her 'Mariko' for a long time now. Yes, Mari's my daughter."

My turn for my mouth to get round. "Oh gosh. Oh. I had no idea."

She pushed her glasses up her nose. "I suppose I don't brag about her nearly as much as I'd like to. But I try not to, for her sake – she embarrasses fairly easily."

"Really?" I felt unreal and ridiculous. Here I was, finding out that Mariko had a real human family and real human feelings – as if I didn't know those things all along. But now, that knowledge was being made real for me, and it felt strange.

Ms. Hemphill stood up, stepped over to her desk, and picked up the photo, showing it to me. "That's my husband Ken, there, and his brother Ray, and Ray's boy A.J. And I'm sure you can tell which one is me."

I nodded. "Does, does your husband work here, too?" There was a good chance: IFPS was one of the town's largest employers.

"No. I actually met him around the same time I started working here. No, sorry, a while before, just before. Before you were born, I bet." She looked over at Steve. "That was the same time I met *you*, wasn't it?"

Steve said, "You met me a couple of weeks *before* Ken, as it happens. *And* I was the first person here at the Institute that you ever met." He looked lofty and self-satisfied as he added, "I retain bragging rights."

They smiled at each other then, and I felt such ease between them, and also, somehow, such ease being with them. In this moment, I felt welcomed by them, like I was invited to share a glimpse into an intimacy I may never have seen before. There was a peace in this room, and I liked it.

Ms. Hemphill turned back to her desk, set the picture down, and looked at it for a moment. Then she looked at me and said, "So it sounds like you know Mari?"

I swallowed. "A little, I guess. Do, do you remember that concert she did for the cable channel a few years back?"

Her eyes widened for a second. "Do I ever. That's still one of the biggest events of her career."

"I worked at that show. I did her soundboard and helped set up – I mean, my friend – "

"Wait, what?" She looked at me closer, almost as if she hadn't noticed me before. "Ward? You're *that* Ward? Oh wow, why did I never make that connection before?" And she chuckled.

The floor under my shoes felt a bit fainter, insubstantial. "That... sounds like she mentioned me."

"Well *yes!* She *did!* Her *and* Gwynnie both, from what I hear! They talked about you for like a week or more afterward, you and, uh, Bill, and what amazing work you both did. They thought you boys were wonderful. Even now, once in a while they'll talk about that show, and they always mention how good you fellows did."

I was stunned. They noticed me. They remembered me. I mattered. I felt like I was welling up inside. And yes, Gwyn had said something to me the other night, I knew. But, some of the lessons life teaches us, it has to teach us again and again, waiting for it to sink in deep.

Steve called over to me. "Keep on rockin', man."

Ms. Hemphill shook her head. "Now I feel like I've been working with a legend the past two years and never realized." She grinned at me. "The cosmos is full of surprises, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am." Then I noticed I had a mouse in my hand. "Oh! I just need to plug this in and then you should be good." I did that, tested it to check, and said, "Ta-da!"

She gave a small bow. "Thank you, mighty wizard." Steve gave me a languid salute.

Then I remembered something I'd been wanting to say to her for a while now, and struggled to work up the nerve to do it. I thought it was that important. I cleared my throat and said, "Ma'am, you oversee everyone's finances here, right?"

She blinked like I made a sudden turn. "When it comes right down to it, yes, basically."

"And I know you said that we can't afford to hire temps to help us with Y2K."

Ms. Hemphill pushed her glasses up again. "Well, Inez and I discussed it and that's where we ended up."

"Um...." I took a breath. "I've been thinking about the lab animals. Over in Research?"

They both blinked and waited for me to go on. I had to push, but I did.

"There are people saying that the power could go out on New Year's because of Y2K, and they don't know for how long. If that happened, some of the lab animals could die."

Ms. Hemphill said, "Oh."

"So, I was wondering if the Institute can afford to rent a backup generator over New Year's. Just a little one, enough for heat for that part of the lab, and the aquariums and that."

She put a thumbnail against her teeth. "I'm not sure, I'd have to look...."

Steve said, "Could we maybe send the animals home with people over New Year's?"

"What if the power goes out all over town, though?" I said. "They say it could. Then the animals still have the same problem."

"Ah, yeah." His mouth went crooked.

To Ms. Hemphill, I added, "We'd probably need to move fast if we want to book one – I'm sure lots of other people are grabbing them for those days."

She nodded, deep in thought. "Right, right."

"Oh, and Steve?" I looked over to him. "You went to Bel U, same as me, right?"

"You know it, man!" And he held up a solidarity fist.

I was on a roll now, and barely recognized myself. "I remember hearing something in my last year there about a work-study program or it's called something like that. The university helps find jobs for students, connected to their major, and it also pays part of their wages, so it costs less than normal for whoever hires them. I was thinking maybe you could contact the computer department about sending a couple of students out here for the Y2K job." I looked at Ms. Hemphill again. "Could we afford to bring temps in if Bel U was covering part of it?"

She blinked at me like she just woke up from a trance. "Uhhh, maybe? I'm going to need to look into both of those. But Ward, thank you for bringing all this to my attention. These are really good things to know."

I blushed. "I, I just want this all to work out okay." I saw Steve give me a raised thumb.

Ms. Hemphill rubbed her forehead, but smiled. "I think I have a better idea why the girls were so impressed with you."

And with that, I blushed harder, and mumbled, "Uh, okay then," and let myself out quickly. Feeling that I had taken up too much of their time.

When I got back to my office, Patrick said, "Hey, do you have any idea where Steve bugged off to? I was looking for him."

"Oh, he's having lunch in Ms. Hemphill's office."

Patrick raised one eyebrow, in a way I have never been able to learn how to do.

"Ohh yeah? So *that's* why she's got her office all under wraps. 'Lunch,' huh? Riiiiight, I wouldn't mind havin' a lunch like that."

I sat, facing away from him, and unlocked my workstation. "They're just friends, Patrick."

"Does anyone really believe that?"

I looked back at him and actually looked him in the eye. "They're just friends. Leave 'em alone."

Patrick looked at me like I had suddenly grown tentacles. He muttered, "Jesus, Iggy." But at least then he turned back to his work and stopped talking about it.

I decided to work late that night. The algorithm was testing out better, but still not perfect. I realized I would have to stop striving for perfection or Patrick would never see it, but I kept telling myself I just needed to hit "pretty darn good".

Dawn peeked in on me again as she was turning out lights around the offices. She looked at my speakers for a second, where Soundgarden's *Superunknown* was playing; she said nothing, but at least didn't appear disgusted. Then she slipped away without reminding me about the alarm. Maybe she trusted me to remember by now.

I was a little surprised to hear the main doors open again about fifteen minutes later, and then footsteps approaching my office. And then Dawn peeked in again, but this time with a Tim's coffee in her hand, which she set down on my desk. I didn't know if she had it prepared the way I like, but when it was from her, I was ready to drink it however it came.

"A little treat, Your Lordship," she said, "to help you keep pushing."

"Well, thanks very much," I said. "Wow, I guess Patrick doesn't know what he's missing, eh? Overtime perks like this."

She winked. "Some guys miss out – some guys luck out."

"True enough," I said.

Chapter Sixteen

T minus 140 days

A couple of days later, I was putting in some more Friday overtime. I seemed to get more work done after hours than any other time, and I was excited to see it paying off. My algorithm was pretty much done, and I was on what looked to be the final testing. Another day or two and I could run this past Patrick. Fingers crossed that it worked for him and helped him out.

Of course, Dawn looked in on me while she was locking up. But that night she said, "Hey, milord: don't stay too late. Remember you gotta come over and fix me up later."

"I remember," I said. I reached over and petted a pile of electronics and cables sitting on the desk beside me. "Got all the stuff for it here, ready to go. Remind me again where."

"There's a little shoe repair place on Hamilton, just south of Newman. The apartments are above that, and the entrance is an old wood door to the left of the store. My buzzer is number 203."

I grabbed a sticky-note pad and wrote 203 on it. "And you said seven o'clock?"

She nodded and her ponytail swayed. "Around that. I should be done eating by then. All good?"

I gave her one big nod. "See you then." She patted the doorframe, then turned and was gone.

A couple of minutes before seven, I found a parking spot in front of the New Age store, a few doors down from Dawn's apartment. I was changed into one of my newer polo shirts and my good jeans, and I hoped I smelled freshly showered. The equipment for the study was on the passenger seat, bundled in a doubled-up plastic grocery bag, which I grabbed and took with me up the street. Another hot night: I hoped that Dawn had air conditioning. But my place didn't, so I was used to going without, and could manage if I needed to. I found the right buzzer at the side of the door, heard a click as the door was remotely unlocked, then went up a narrow stuffy staircase and found apartment 203.

As soon as I knocked once, I heard a sharp *yap-yap-yap* behind the door, and the frantic scrabbling of tiny claws. Alan was apparently as excitable as the chihuahua's reputation would have you believe. Then Dawn's muffled voice came: "Alan! Alan, c'mon. C'mere, buddy, let's go see."

The door opened, and Dawn stood there, in a pink tank top and denim cutoffs and a half-awkward smile, a strand of hair over her face, one hand on the doorknob and the other arm cuddling up her dog. Alan was shivering and squirming, his snout crunched up, his bulging eyes never leaving mine, while he yapped at great length, pausing only to growl.

"Sorry, Alan's gonna be loud for pretty much the whole time you're here, but I promise you he won't touch you. Will you be able to manage with that?" And she backed away from the door to invite me in.

I stepped in and looked around slow. "Oh, yeah. I was expecting him to be a bit hyper. If he doesn't get in the way while I'm setting things up, then that's fine." I lowered the bag to the floor just inside the door, then straightened up. Her apartment was old and small, with hardwood floors. There were big windows in the kitchen along the back wall, with a fan set up in one of them. Dining table to my left, living room area to the right, and beyond that a doorway to where I guessed a bedroom and bathroom would be. Unpretentious, but too comfy to call spartan.

"Okay," said Dawn, "I'm gonna put him down now. Now you be cool, buddy, this is Ward. He's not a supervillain, okay?" While she lowered him, I noticed that she had some tan on her arms and legs. As soon as she let go, Alan bolted over to my feet in a hail of nail noises, barking without letup. But he stopped a foot away from me, then circled around my feet, this way and that, bouncing and yapping, and I braced myself against the noise, preparing to tune it out the best I could.

I looked down at him. "Yeah, man, hey there."

Dawn shook her head and spoke over the backdrop of barks. "I dunno why he always thinks he has to act like The Mighty Guard Dog. Once he's asleep, he never wakes up for anything." She laughed, and I smiled at her. "But guys especially. I dunno what it is, but he never seems to relax around guys."

"Too bad for me I *am* one, I guess." The yaps slowed down a bit but didn't stop. I turned around slowly, looking at the apartment with more focus. "Where's your modem?"

She took a step toward me and pointed. "Oh, it's in behind the TV there."

I crouched beside the TV and peered behind. Looked like dialup, so I'd need a phone line for this. Fortunately, I came with both phone lines and cables, to be prepared for anything. Go me.

While I was curled up there, it registered that the scampering claws and barking had stopped. And then I felt the feather-light brushing of a dog's nose on my leg. I turned my head and looked down. Alan gave me a final sniff, made one soft *ruff*, and then sat quiet beside me and looked up at me, with an expression like, *Oh, hey, how ya doon*.

I reached my closest hand out, with the back of it facing Alan, and held it there. He sat up straighter for a second, then leaned in and touched his nose to it. Then he sat back again and gave me those calm, amiable eyes.

"Wow," Dawn whispered. A little louder, she said, "I have never seen him get that comfy with anyone that fast before."

"I dunno," I murmured. I lifted my hand around and softly rested it on Alan's little baseball head. His eyes became happy slits, and the corners of his mouth eased back into a little chihuahua grin.

Dawn giggled. "Oh my god, you *are* a wizard!"

I looked up at her and smiled, then back down at the dog. My fingers barely moved on him. Low and soft, I said, "Yeah, he's a good guy. Aren'tcha, buddy?" Then I stood up, and Alan quietly and calmly started wandering around my feet. "So. I'm gonna need to string a phone cord from here to the front door. I brought painter's tape to stick it along the baseboard and not get in your way. Is that all right?"

"Oh, sure, go for it."

I took about ten minutes hooking up a splitter to Dawn's modem, running the new line from it, and taping it down along the floor. Then I sat crosslegged near

the door, setting the camera where the door couldn't bump it when it swung open, connecting it, consulting the manual over and over, checking the view in the little monitor on the control box, fussing with the camera's position to get a clear shot of the entryway, and then taping the whole device into place. Through all of this, Alan would come clicking over to me every now and then, to sniff and sit and get petted, then he'd wander back to Dawn for a while.

I turned my backside on the floor til I faced Dawn, who was at the sink filling a kettle. "Hey, Alan isn't going to muck around with this camera, do you think? It has to stay put exactly where I've got it." When he heard his name, Alan came over and stared at my face, so I petted him.

She turned the water off and set the kettle on the stove. "No, he's not that nosy, he's usually pretty good. If it had wheels, then you might have a problem with him."

I fretted over the camera a few minutes more, checking the picture quality and response time, getting a ping back from the Institute's server to ensure that the signal was reaching there the way it was supposed to, and finally everything looked as okay as I knew how to get it. I stood up, and Alan looked up at me, wagging – maybe he thought I was about to take him for a walk. I brushed off my knees and backside and said, "All right, it looks like we have liftoff."

"Great," Dawn said. "Hey, I'm just putting some tea on – you want some?"

I think my mouth moved. I'd told her I was finished. I was expecting a goodbye.

"I know most people think it's not a hot-weather drink, but I live dangerously." And she gave me a brilliant grin, filled with mischief and joy and life.

I swallowed, quietly, I hoped. "I would love some, thank you."

Dawn served tea at the dinette set, in mugs that didn't match, along with shortbread cookies she told me were imported from Scotland. For a while, we talked about Scotland: she told me how she had visited once and wanted to go again and how beautiful it was, and I told her how I wanted to go because *Local Hero* was one of my favourite movies.

Then there came a brief lull where I found myself looking around the apartment, and I suddenly said, "You know, I only just noticed now: you hardly have any unicorn decorations around here. I was expecting a lot more, somehow." I gave her a smile that felt awkward.

She said, "Yeah, well, wait til you see my bedroom." And she sputtered into her tea.

I felt myself getting warm, and took a breath. "Oh, is, is that something I should be waiting for?" She laughed louder, and swung an arm in my direction, as if she would've swatted my upper arm if she were close enough to reach.

Alan jumped up onto her lap then, and she petted him gently but absently. He made a huge display of licking his snout, and then looked over at me, like *Yeah, this is nice, we should do this more often.*

Retreating to my comfort zone during this break, I said, "Anyway, I don't know if Dr. Nathan told you this already, but just in case: you don't need to worry about your privacy with this camera here. It doesn't have audio, so it isn't recording anything you say. It can't film anything other than the front entryway. And it's aimed down so low that it doesn't shoot any higher than like your knees – I can show you if you want. I mean, you could walk in front of it naked if you want and no one could tell." And suddenly I felt my insides falling, like I had no idea where that last crack came from. It was as if spending this much time with Dawn made me feel like I was drinking.

Dawn leaned back and roared at that, and I blushed hot. She managed to say, "Don't worry, Ward, I don't answer the door naked for just *anybody.*" In between bouts of laughter, she went on. "But what if I get down on all fours there? Maybe put on a little show for you back at the office?" I had to look away from her then. "I could wiggle at you and say, 'Good evening, milord'. What happens to my privacy then?"

"I, uhh..." My voice was rough; I reached for my tea and drank. When I managed to look back at her, she was giggling and wiping her eye. Alan looked up at her, then back at me, like *Yeah, she does that.* I finally got out, "Well, now that I've explained the situation, you would be doing that at your own risk."

She laughed louder, then settled, smiled, looked in my eyes, and bit her lip. Her eyes were bright, shining from her laughter, and I had no idea what she might

have been seeing when she looked at me. A sweaty, deep-blushing mess, most likely.

I looked down in my cup, and saw my tea was essentially gone. The chair feet made a loud squeak as I pushed back, then I stood. "Thank you, uh, for the tea and everything, but I should probably go."

Dawn got her arms around Alan and stood up, too. "I'm sorry, did I drive you away?" But her expression looked friendly and happy, not concerned.

"No! No no, I just...." I gave one hand a feeble wave. "I, I still have work to do."

"Ah. Well, don't overdo, okay? I know you've been working really hard lately."

"It's okay," I said. I felt myself settling, and tried to give her a reassuring smile. Then I leaned down to get my bag and Dawn came closer to the door.

"So, should I call you if anything goes wrong, like if the camera catches fire?" And she snickered.

"It won't," I said, but suddenly had a flash of wondering if that was true. I pushed that thought down and said, "But yes, call me or Dr. Nathan. No, actually, if that happens, call 911."

"Smart man." She opened the door for me and gave me a smile. "Have a good weekend, eh?"

"You, too." I nodded, reached over to give Alan one last pat, then headed down the hall to the stairs.

I had some trouble settling down to sleep that night. I had recurring thoughts of someone on all fours. And not Alan.

Chapter Seventeen

T minus 135 days

On Wednesday morning, Patrick came in about ten minutes after me, carrying a coffee from the cafeteria and frowning at the floor, not really greeting me. Over the past few weeks, this had become standard for him. I knew he had a lot weighing him down. I was hoping that would all change today.

He stopped when he got to his chair, staring at it. "Whatsis?" he said.

What it was, was a printout, rather thick, of tractor-feed paper, wide pages, green and white stripes, from our antique dot-matrix printer. I knew this because I put it there.

"I wanted to make sure you saw it right away," I said. "I stayed a bit late last night and printed it out."

He looked aside at me, a bit suspiciously, then set his coffee down on his desk, picked up the printout, and sat down while he unfolded the first page. Frowning in concentration, he scanned down. Finally he said, "So tell me what I'm looking at here."

I felt my heart speed up a fraction. "This is a report showing all the references to dates and date variables in the source code of all the Admin programs. It gives the file name and folder location for every hit, and also the line number and comments for every line."

I had never seen Patrick's eyes open so wide. It was like he saw the implications of this instantly. Which is just what I expected from him. The pages rattled as he leafed through the accordion folds of the printout, scanning faster now. "Where did you get this?"

I made a little cough. "I wrote a search algorithm that would go through all the directories and then return this. I thought about all the common names that the old programmers gave to their variables, and set it to look for any reference to *date* or *dat* or even *dee-tee*. But I also got it to ignore *data* or *dot-dat*, so that it wouldn't give us a truckload of false positives. Of course there still could be a few of those, but we can handle that, I figured."

To himself, Patrick said, "Holy shit, it looks like it works!" Then he looked up at

me as if I had suddenly started to glow. "Why didn't you tell me about this?"

"I, I wasn't sure it was gonna work. I worked on it for two months and still wasn't completely sure. I waited til it was testing out solid, so I knew I actually had something for you. That happened last night. It wasn't really ready any sooner than now."

He looked at the printout again, saying almost absently, "Okay, yeah, I get that, sure...." He flipped a few more pages. "Iggy, this is frickin' genius." He turned to me again. "You know what this means, right?"

I was finally able to smile. "I think so. Half the work on Y2K is hunting down those date glitches. So now the hunting part is over: we just dig straight in and start fixing."

Patrick took a deep breath, the first one I could remember him doing in I don't know how long. Then he looked over at me. "Wait: what happens if one of the old guys used some oddball variable name that this isn't looking for?"

I shrugged. "Then we miss it. But that's one of those things like getting hit by a meteor: there are only so many contingencies you can prepare for, right? But, uhh... maybe what we could do is check and see if there are any programs that this doesn't pick up at all. We still have time to eyeball those the old way."

"Yeah, that's true." He flipped through a few more folds, then closed it up and set it beside him. "I gotta tell ya, this is just in time. I mean, I can't believe it. I got performance review the end of next week, and I really need to throw Steve a bone for it."

"Well, when he sees that we've got Y2K under control, he ought to be pretty happy, I would guess."

"Hell yeah, he's gonna love this. I mean, you know / do, right?" He gave me a nod, and for the first time in weeks, I saw hope in his eyes. "Good man, Ig."

And, for that moment, I let myself feel like one.

I spent a good chunk of my morning boning up on my HTML, planning for the

company website. I also buzzed Ulrich, not so much to nag him as to ask if Outreach had any promo or PR photos of the Institute on file. Maybe that was how Ms. Szabo would get her front page after all. Then an email from Dr. Singh popped up, asking me why he couldn't find Research's report from the third quarter last year in the Admin directory. I wrote back to remind him that all last year's reports had been archived, and included a link to an intranet page Patrick had set up, providing instructions on how to locate and retrieve archived files. Looking for a less obvious way of saying *I bet you don't remember how that works*. After that, I tore off a piece of the algorithm report from Patrick's desk – he was out at that moment, but there was no reason he should mind. The way I approached it, the first thing to do was scan through and colour-code different lines according to urgency.

That was when I discovered that most of my highlighters were dried up. So I strolled over to Dawn's desk, because another of her seemingly endless titles was Chancellor of Office Supplies. Patrick was stepping away from her counter, as if he had just been leaning on it chatting with her. As I got close enough to hear, he was saying, "Think about it – you don't wanna miss out," and starting to walk back to our office. He nodded as he passed me, and Dawn called after him, "Still sounds like a *date*, Patrick! What did I say about those?"

When I reached her counter, she was shaking her head. I said, "Hope springs eternal, right?"

She looked up at me with a crooked smile. "Just my luck. This time it's some outdoor rock festival next week."

"Sounds okay to me," I said. "You don't like rock?"

"That's not it, though." She wrinkled her nose for a second. "The thing is, whenever he tries it on with me, he never asks me if I *want* to go with him. He tells me that I *should* go. And I bet he's never noticed."

"Ouch."

She grinned. "Forget that. What's up?"

"Oh, I need some highlighters."

"You bet. What colour and how many?"

"In my dreams, two of every colour you've got."

"Then I am about to make your dreams come true, Your Lordship. Just watch me." She got up, stepped to a filing cabinet that ran behind her chair, and pulled open the top drawer.

While she rattled in it, I said, "How's Alan?"

She giggled, her back to me. "Same old. Bouncing around like a dodgeball one minute, snuggling up like a stuffed toy the next. I still can't get over how he took to you, y'know."

"Well, I really liked meeting him."

"Oh! Speaking of!" She closed the door and turned to me, holding a bundle of markers as thick as she could hold. (To me, that looked hot.) "I've been getting emails from Dr. Nathan every day, and Alan is doing real good. She's already excited about him."

"Oh yeah?" I held my hands out to receive Dawn's bounty.

"Uh-huh. She's been asking my schedule and stuff, and get this. Okay, so, Alan has been at the door waiting when I get home from work, every day. That part isn't new."

I nodded. "Yeah, I remember you said."

"But here's the new part. You know I leave here a bit after five, right?" I nodded. "Then I go get the bus home, and I usually get in around five-thirty. But the camera says that, like two minutes after I leave the office, Alan goes over to the door and waits there til I show up."

My eyes got round. "Wow, that's wild, eh?"

"Well yeah! I mean, I never had any way of knowing that part. I think that's kind of amazing!"

My fingers toyed with the bundle of highlighters. "I, I think so, too."

"She says that if he does it a few more times, so we know that it isn't just a weird coincidence these past two days, then she's gonna do the full study. I think this is exciting – I mean, I had this little magic guy in my place all this time and never knew it!"

I started to turn away with my hands full of loot. "Well, I'll keep my fingers crossed for both of you, all right?"

Dawn nodded goodbye and said thanks. But, I admit, I was keeping my fingers crossed for me, too. It had not escaped my attention that, the longer this experiment ran, the longer it would give me good excuses to talk with her. I just hoped I wasn't too transparent about that.

After I unloaded my haul of highlighters into my bottom drawer with a satisfying clatter, I sat back up and an incoming email caught my attention. It was from Carlos in Research, and addressed to our shared business email, *it-admin@ifps.ca* and CC'd to Steve. It read:

Patrick,

This is great news. Should I instruct staff and researchers to continue to use this address for general inquiries vis a vis Y2K assistance though?

Carlos

I frowned, puzzled – I had no context for this. Then I saw, below that, a quoted email from our office, sent around the time I was busy harassing Ulrich, without me knowing:

IT staff:

I know all of you have been struggling to repair your department's programs before year's end. Dare I say the dreaded name Y2K? I am writing to inform you that we have produced a search algorithm that speeds up the task of locating date fields etc enormously. Let me know if you are interested and I will copy the

source code file into your respective folders. If any of you are working with machines running older languages eg. FORTRAN, COBOL, I can decompile the executable into a form you can use. If you need this done, contact me directly at pmilner@ifps.ca

*Patrick Milner
Information Technology Manager
Administrative Division, IFPS*

I sat with that for a few moments, while Patrick clacked away at his keyboard behind me. Did he not think I could write a decompiler for this as well as he could? Is that why he didn't want anyone asking me to do it? I admit, this was something he was skilled at, I knew that. But somehow, after my writing the algorithm in the first place, I felt like he should have a little more faith in my skills, too.

I wanted to ask him about it, but felt way too uncomfortable to even try. Instead I thought some more, and finally told myself that this was his way of wanting to contribute. I already did the heavy lifting by writing and debugging this project; maybe he didn't want this follow-up dumped on me as well. That could be it. I hoped that was it.

Chapter Eighteen

T minus 133 days

Friday happened to be my birthday. My twenty-sixth. August 20th. When I woke up, I took an extra-long look in the mirror, to see if I noticed any difference. And of course I didn't. Didn't feel any difference, either, if I was being honest with myself.

I tended not to make much fuss about my birthday – never had. I didn't book the day off, or make any special plans, beyond the fact that Bill had already told me he was coming over after work to take me out for a beer. ("You are under orders, Warden LOL!" he even said.) But I never mentioned it to Nat when we were chatting, or in my journal, or to anyone. It felt tacky, like I'd be fishing for gifts or whatever. I traditionally just spent the day feeling happy to be here.

When I came into the office that morning, Dawn almost looked like she was trying to hold her smile back. "Good morning, Ward the Lord," she called out.

"Good morning, Don Rickles," I replied while I sailed past her station. But when I opened my office door – [Patrick wasn't in yet] – I was stopped short for a second by a modest surprise.

Sitting on my desk, right beside my mouse pad, was a cupcake. Chocolate frosting, multi-coloured sprinkles, and an unlit candle stuck in the middle. Behind it stood a card, which I picked up. It read, *Have a magical birthday*, and below that was a cute cartoon drawing of a wizard, pointy hat and long robes, waving a wand. I made a small smile, then read the inside of the card: *Just be careful where your wand ends up!* I felt my lips press tight together. Below the punchline, there was handwriting in ballpoint: *somewhere nice, I hope! ~ D.*

I let out a little sigh, smiled bigger, then opened my drawer and hid the card and cake in there until later. I wasn't expecting any kind of fuss or acknowledgment at work, like Dr. Singh got, not so long ago. Because I wasn't an executive: we were already told that the department wasn't planning to shell out for that. So that meant Dawn went out of pocket on her own to do this for me.

No great shock that she knew it was my birthday today, of course. As the Admin Assistant, she had access to our personnel files. Same way as she knew to get Dr. Singh's celebration prepared. But I forcibly reminded myself not to read too much into this gesture, sweet and encouraging as it was. I'm sure she must've

done the same for Patrick's birthday, too. I couldn't remember offhand, though. Maybe Patrick hadn't had his birthday yet. But yeah, she'd do it for him, too. She'd do it for anyone. She was just that nice.

Even so, I made a point of going right back out to thank her.

I didn't put in any overtime that night. For one, now that a lot of the Y2K pressure was off, there didn't seem any pressing need for it. And for two, it was my birthday. And even I was willing to acknowledge it at least that much.

I had Mariko's CD playing in the living room, and was in the kitchen just draining some ramen to go with my fish when the wall phone rang. I answered and my mom sang Happy Birthday.

"Thanks, mom. But why are you calling so early? You should wait til the rates go down."

"I thought you might be going out, dear. And I didn't want to miss you."

"Ah yeah okay. Actually, I *am* going out later: Bill's coming over and we're gonna hang out."

"That's nice, dear. I'm glad you boys still see each other now and then. Just stay out of trouble, all right?" The way she said it felt like she wanted to sound like kidding but didn't entirely mean it as such. I know Bill could be a bit too rowdy for her tastes.

"Promise," I said.

Mom made a gentle tsk, then said, "Twenty-six years ago today, it was just you and me. My baby boy."

"Uh-huh." She said something like this every year, and I never knew what to say back. But I could tell that she liked to hear herself tell the story.

"I wish I could be with you today, Ward. I wish you could've found work closer to home."

"Well, I, I do really like this job, mom. It can be really interesting sometimes."

"And I guess that's the main thing, dear. Oh, before I forget: we wanted to invite you up for Labour Day – your father's going to be doing a barbecue."

I grinned. "Mom, there is no such thing as a summer weekend where dad *doesn't* barbecue."

Mom made a tiny giggle, the most she ever allowed herself. "Oh dear, I guess that is true, isn't it? You have such a sense of humour, Ward."

"Um, I'm lucky some people think so, I guess. But yes, I'll come up for the long weekend, definitely. Speaking of dad, can I say hi to him?"

"Sorry, dear, he's not here: he's on evenings this week. But he said to wish you happy birthday from him."

"Okay, tell him I said thanks. And thank *you*, too. It's nice to hear from you."

"Now, I've never missed your birthday, have I?"

"Not that I can recall."

"And I never will, don't you worry. But I suppose I should let you go. You have a lovely evening, Ward, and happy birthday again. I love you."

"Love you, too." And we hung up. My ramen was cooled down a lot by now, but I just ate it as-is anyway.

As I was leaving my dishes in the sink, a loud thumping rattled my front door, and a voice outside bellowed, "Open up, Warden! We got the joint surrounded!" Obviously Bill, studiously ignoring my doorbell. Part of me was surprised that I hadn't heard his old Dodge approaching from a block away, even over my stereo. But that car was part of Bill's vibe: ramshackle but lovable.

I opened the door and said, "Easy on the property there, Billionaire, or I'll sue you for punitive damages."

Bill shook his thick hair back and punched my shoulder. "The big two-six! Go powder your nose, missy: time to hit the King Eddie." And he headbanged to music I couldn't hear, while I ducked back inside to turn things off. Then I slipped my runners on and we tumbled into his dusty blue derelict.

As soon as he turned the key, the cassette deck in the dash blasted to life. Zeppelin. We looked at each other and called out, "Fuck yeah." And Bill hit the gas and hit the road – far less recklessly than you would assume.

Despite it being a Friday night, the King Eddie was not crowded. It was still fairly early, and there was no live music scheduled for that evening. So Bill and I didn't worry about securing a table before we went to the bar to place our order. One of the bartenders strode over to us, a tall lady I didn't recognize, tall black bouffant, tight sleeveless yellow T-shirt, wide shoulders and hard arms. Someone I wouldn't want to mess with. And a low voice: "What can I get you?"

Bill spoke up. "Two Sleeman Cream Ales would hit the spot tonight, please." He clapped me on the shoulder. "My good buddy here is celebrating his birthday today, plus he rocks, so surely you would agree this is cause for a freebie."

She half-smiled and gave her head a little shake. "Sorry, man, we don't."

Bill quietly placed a ten on the bar in front of her and took the bottles from her, then, with a beckon of his head, led me to a table in the corner, far from the ceiling speakers and bigscreen TVs.

"This is an outrage, Warden!" he cried. "These people run an unwelcoming establishment! The fourth estate will be hearing about this!"

I gave him a crooked smile. "We have grown into a cold and uncaring society, buddy."

He brushed hair back out of his eyes and lifted his bottle. "Anyway, happy birthday and cheers." I lifted mine, we clinked them together, then tipped them back. Bill let out a substantial belch when he put his drink back down. Then he said, "So! What's all this fooforah you were telling me about *Mariko's mom* working in your office?"

"Well, yeah, took me long enough to find out, eh?"

"So do they look the same? Cuz that would obviously be rather hot."

I blinked. "Not all that much, really. They both have kind of round faces, I guess. But her mom is a redhead, with freckles. Glasses." *Also a bit bigger – sort of like Dawn*, I thought, but decided not to say out loud.

Bill's eyebrows went up under his bangs. "I did not see that one coming, Warden."

"Nor I, nor I. Caught me completely off guard."

Bill took a thoughtful sip of his beer. "I bet she's a MILF, ya lucky toad sucker."

I blushed, and picked up my bottle. "Never thought about it, really." But then I started cracking a smile.

"Yeah right, pull the other one," said Bill with a short laugh. "Oh hey wait, before I forget yet again." He sat forward and reached into his back pocket. "I got you a birthday present even if you don't deserve it." He pulled out a small slip of paper and slapped it down onto the table in front of me. "Read 'em an' weep!"

I picked it up and realized it was card stock. At once I saw it was a concert ticket, reading "Tri-Cities Royal Riot". My eyebrows raised while I looked up at Bill and cocked my head.

He slapped a hand down on the table. "Next Saturday. Royal Lake Bandshell. A festival of loud. Five seriously rockin' bands. Headliners: *Ikiru!* You and me are *there!*" Then he sat back as if he were expecting a hail of hosannas from a crowded arena.

I felt my jaw drop and my grin grow wide. For a few seconds, no sound came out, and finally I murmured, barely audible over the tavern's ambience: "Fuck yeah."

"I must agree, good buddy," said Bill, extending his hand to me.

I took it and we shook. (His grip, as ever, much firmer than mine.) "Thanks, Billionaire. You so rock."

Again he slapped the table. "Yes! Yes, I do! And always at highest intensity! Tell

the world!" He gave me a firm, satisfied nod, then, and lifted his beer to his mouth again.

I was taken aback by the fact that this concert was a surprise to me. I don't just mean that Bill surprised me with a ticket as a present: I mean I wasn't even aware that this concert was coming up. Work occupied so much of my time and thoughts these past few months, that I wasn't spending as much time keeping up on news from the world of music. Whereas, back in school, I lived and breathed music. When I thought about it, that period accounted for the majority of my music collection. Suddenly I felt like I was getting old, the way that Old People who knew nothing about the music of the day were old. A sobering thought, which called for another beer to counteract it.

After that second drink, and relentless conversation which mostly revolved around music, it was time to call it a night. Bill still needed to be able to drive back to Belvedere. On the way back to my house, accompanied by more Zeppelin, Bill called over, "I'm gonna stop in to pay a social call and visit your little boys' room."

Once I had the front door unlocked, he power-walked past me and up the stairs to my bathroom. As he thumped up the steps, he bellowed out, "And when I come back down, you're doin' 'Gypsy!'"

I shook my head and went over to my stereo. My legs felt maybe just a little woolly under me. While I turned the system on, I thought that the music at the King Eddie had been enough loud for me for a while. I was still willing to put on a show for Bill and make him laugh [now that my brain chemistry was sufficiently tweaked] but I felt like doing something different.

I heard him clump down the stairs and throw himself into my old couch. " 'Dja wash your hands?" I said.

"How dare you doubt my hygiene, Warden!" he said. "Just hit me."

I clicked the Play button on my stereo, and a synthesizer intro started up, one which Bill recognized at once, and one which was clearly not "Gypsy". Just for an instant he wore a puzzled frown and said, "What the heck!" Then he settled back and said, "Oh, all right, go for it."

And I launched into my impression of Tony Hadley singing Spandau Ballet's "To

Cut a Long Story Short".

Early-eighties synth-pop was not Bill's cup of tea, and he certainly didn't own any, but when he was visiting over here it was always an option. A few of those synth bands had pompous, operatic vocalists – Spandau Ballet and Dead Or Alive are great examples – and we both found those guys to be deliciously funny. So when I did one of these, Bill was willing to put up with one non-metal song because he laughed just as hard.

So I posed and declaimed and vibratoed my way through the song, and he hooted again and again, and when I came to that over-the-top long note at the end, then, yes, there was laughter until there were tears. Bill was my favourite audience. As well as my only audience.

It was only when he stood up, wiping his eyes, that it finally occurred to me that Mrs. Goodenough might be sleeping. Or trying to. I gritted my teeth and hoped the sound didn't carry that far. Up to this point it never had, or at least she had never said anything about it. But I wasn't willing to trust my luck that far, and managed to worry anyway.

Bill came over to me and clapped a hand on my shoulder. Hard. "Time for me to hit the long and winding road, Warden. You have a good rest of the evening being older." Then he nodded, hair fell in his eyes, and he turned toward the door.

As we walked, I patted him on the back. Not as hard. "Thanks again for everything, Billionaire. You're the best."

"I am, but that's a well-kept secret." He opened the door, then turned back to me. "See you next Saturday, buzz ya before then, and catch ya on the flipside. And don't let anyone escape!"

I gave him a nod and another pat, watched him go down my front steps and out to his car. When he started it, I could hear the Zeppelin even from where I was. But it faded as he pulled away and headed out of town.

Chapter Nineteen

T minus 130 days

When I got into the office on Monday morning, there was an email in my personal inbox from Dr. Nathan:

Ward:

I expect to be in my office most of today, and was hoping you could come by at some point during the day. There are new developments in my research I would very much like to discuss with you. Please call and let me know.

*Thank you,
Dr. Chandra Nathan
Research Division, IFPS*

I called and said I could come over right away – there was nothing on my plate at that moment that couldn't keep for half an hour. I locked my workstation, stood, and let Patrick know where I was going.

He raised one eyebrow. "Huh, you're gettin' mighty popular with the ladies lately, Iggy. I'm gonna hafta keep an eye on you." He gave me his crooked smirk, then added, "Oh hey, grab me a coffee on your way back." I waited a few seconds, til he suddenly made a mild startle and reached into his pocket. Muttering "oh yeah right", he got his wallet out and handed me a five.

Dr. Nathan's office door was open, and she was sitting at her desk, typing briskly with her back mostly toward me. I knocked on the doorframe; she turned to me and pushed her glasses up. "Come in, Ward. Thank you."

I took a few steps in closer and just stood, waiting for her to speak. "I've examined the results from Miss Wilton's apartment and I have to say that I'm very excited," she said, managing to look not at all excited. "Her dog – Alan? – performed consistently throughout the week. I'm comfortable ruling out random chance to explain his behaviour."

I nodded. "So, you're saying that Alan *always* knows when Dawn is coming home from work?"

"More specifically," she said, "he *always* knows when she is *acting* with the *intention* of coming home. That's the time that he goes to the door and waits. Every day. Without fail."

Very quietly I said, "Wow." And for a moment the world felt a bit more spooky.

"Therefore I've decided to proceed with a full ninety-day study. I've been in contact with Miss Wilton, and she assures me that having the camera in her home hasn't presented her with any difficulties. She's willing to continue participating that long. The last workday of that period will be November 19th. So I wanted to let you know I am keeping you 'on retainer' that long, for troubleshooting and so on. Will that be a problem?"

"No, ma'am." To me, what this meant was three months with the possibility of even more enforced contact with Dawn. Not what I would call a problem.

"Also," the doctor went on, "there will likely be a few related tasks I could use some help with during this time. Possibly even outside of office hours. Is that something I can call on you for?"

I touched my chin. It's not that I was so eager to take on more unpaid overtime, but I did find this work fascinating. "Um, it's hard for me to be sure this far in advance. I'm *willing* to, as much as I'm able. All I can say now is contact me at the time, and I'll let you know if I'm available?"

She nodded. "I don't think I can ask for better than that. Speaking of contact, do you have a cell phone?" I nodded. "That's good. Miss Wilton tells me that she does not, so I am lending her one for the duration of the experiment. There will likely be times when it's important for us to be in contact at odd hours. I was going to ask if you could please take it to her for me?"

"Of course." I had been wondering why she needed to see me in person to discuss all this, but now that I knew there was legwork involved, it made sense.

She picked up a cell phone and charger from beside her keyboard. There was a blue sticky note on the phone, with two phone numbers written in pencil. "Here. And I want you to add the number to your contacts, so the two of *you* can stay in

touch as well."

"That sounds fine," I said. "But there are two numbers here?"

"The top one is for the lender phone. The other number is mine. You might need to reach me during the study."

"Ah, I see." I punched the numbers into my contact list, labelling them *Dawn* and *Dr. N.*

While I was thumbing my phone's tiny buttons, Dr. Nathan said, "You should be flattered. It's normally much harder for a man to get my number." I glanced over at her and saw she was watching me and smiling brightly.

I blushed and looked at my phone again. "Um, yes, ma'am, thank you." Once I was finished, I said, "Th-then maybe you need mine, too, I guess."

"I was just about to ask," she said. I pulled up my own number to display on my tiny screen, then handed it to her. She got her own phone out of her purse, flipped it open, and copied my number into it. Then she returned my phone and said, "Thank you again very much. I'll be in touch." She took a breath, and let herself smile again, a gentler one this time. "There are exciting days ahead, Ward."

I just nodded. It seemed to me that I had never seen exciting days ahead, ever before in my life. I had no idea what to expect.

After lunch on Friday, Steve showed up at our office door and asked to borrow Patrick for about an hour. Patrick shot me a nervous glance as he got up and left. Then I remembered him saying something about a performance review, and figured this had to be it. I felt fairly sure that he'd do all right: I was confident enough in my algorithm to believe that it would reflect well on our office, which ought to earn him a few brownie points as manager.

I barely noticed the time going by. I got wrapped up in some documents that Ulrich sent over [finally], giving me the text pieces to include on the website. I needed to be sure I understood what they were trying to say and how they related to each other, in order to know where and how to place and connect

them on the site. It wasn't as simple as just treating the text like Tetris and plunking things in anywhere they fit. At least, not if the site was going to do a decent job. Within minutes, I fired off an email to Ulrich asking for clarification on something – I was sure it was only the first of many.

I looked up when Patrick came shuffling back in, and the first thing I noticed was his eyes: they looked more relaxed than I could remember seeing in many weeks. I guess he noticed my look and interpreted it as a question.

"All good," he said, the phrase sounding like a sigh of relief.

"I take it that was your performance review?"

"Uhh, yeah." He sat down, unlocked his workstation, and talked at his monitor. "Just glad to get it over with." His keyboard clacked.

"Did, did it not go so good?"

"No no, it was okay, it was fine, I just, I don't – " He tapped his Enter key loud. "I'm just glad to get it out of the way. I mean, we still got this leaky-canoe Y2Bastard to patch up. So let's stay on it, right?"

"No problem." I turned away from him to face my monitor, save my website work, and pull my highlighted printout pages closer to me.

The concert at Royal Lake the following afternoon was, for me, all about brutal sun, a weak but steady breeze coming in off the water, a crowd in front of the Bandshell which was enthusiastic but not densely packed (and which smelled of sunscreen and weed), and of course rock-and-roll at ear-challenging volume. Bill and I both wore baseball caps to shade our faces, and I let him borrow my sunscreen as needed throughout the event, because he naturally didn't remember to bring any of his own.

Five bands were scheduled to play full sets, and it was a humbling experience for me to see that headliners Ikiru were the only name I recognized. Again, in my heyday I thought it was my duty to keep my finger on the pulse of rock, to know who was who, and who sounded like what. Since I started working full-time, it seemed I put less and less effort into keeping up with new bands, and settled

into a rut of listening to my old favourites. If I wasn't careful, I was going to become my dad before I knew it. I mean, my dad is a great guy, but emulating his lifestyle was never my goal.

Bill, at least, seemed to be more on top of what was happening there on that day. He could tell me where every band on the bill came from, who had a record contract with which label, and which musician used to be in what earlier band that I had heard of. He definitely had metal in his blood, and for that I admired him in some ways. But I still liked the fact that my music collection was more eclectic. You gotta be you.

About partway through the second band, Bill leaned over and yelled, "The guys running this soundboard are pikers! Me and you would make this band sound like the second coming of Priest!"

I yelled back, "They'd still need better material than this! Their guitarist shreds, though!"

"He's their saving grace!" Bill bellowed. And suddenly I had a nickname for Ms. Hemphill, if I ever dared. (I wasn't expecting to ever dare. I still didn't dare call her "Grace", which she asked me to do my first day on the job.)

I felt a sudden sharp shove in the middle of my back, and then Bill and I stumbled forward into a couple of wide guys in black leather jackets just in front of us – they didn't even look around. We both turned around fast to see Leroy and Shawn standing proud, giving us inarticulate but energetic war whoops and index-and-pinkie metal salutes. Bill burst into hearty laughter and called back, "Stay in your lane, you hooligans!" Then he charged at them, and the three of them engaged in chaotic chest bumping that they appeared to enjoy.

I wasn't surprised to see Leroy and Shawn at a show like this, but at the same time I realized that their sudden appearance kicked up the level of madness a notch or two. Bill always encouraged me to join in their shenanigans but, even after years, I just never seemed to connect with them the same way I did with Bill so easily. I guess it wasn't as simple as "liking the same music".

So I suspect Bill wasn't too surprised when, a few songs later, I told him that I was going to the concession stand for something to eat. I offered a few of the water bottles in my bag to him and the other two before I went, then pushed my way to the edge of the shapeless crowd and settled in for a long wait.

I got myself a small overpriced box of fries, in part because the hot afternoon had me craving salt, but also to be my excuse for distancing myself from Leroy and Shawn for a while. When I turned away from the booth and tried to push my way back out to the concert grounds, I happened to glance over and thought I saw Steve. I was half-expecting to run into Patrick here, once I figured out that this was probably the show he was trying to get Dawn to attend with him, but so far no sign of him. But Steve? I didn't think this would be his thing. But people can surprise you.

I didn't call to him or wave, but I did try and edge my way closer. And soon I saw that this wasn't Steve, but someone who looked a lot like a younger Steve with a blond soul patch and earrings. He looked to be engaged in close conversation with a short, dark-haired girl holding a box of fries like mine. I was near enough to hear her laugh, over the sound of the bandshell in the distance, and she happened to turn her face a little more toward me –

Mariko.

My heart gave a little jump, just like every time I ever saw her. Even though I knew she was just a regular girl, and not even semi-divine, my insides were not yet thoroughly convinced. I was taking my first step back toward Bill, to tell him about this chance sighting (and possibly restore some of Mariko's metal credentials in his eyes). But she turned some more, and spotted me, and suddenly her face lit up and she started pushing her way between knots of people, only a few steps to get to me. Young Steve, looking nonchalant, eased his way along with her, not far behind.

Over the music and the crowd, I heard her call my name.

Mariko stood close enough for us to hear each other, and I could see her Ikiru tank top and denim cutoffs. Her hair was dishevelled from the heat, but she still looked like a star. "Hey!" she called to me. "Time to rock-and-roll!"

I nodded and tried to smile.

"So what do you think of this sound? You and Bill could do a lot better than this, am I right?"

"That's exactly what Bill said!" I called back.

She grinned her pretty grin, then said, "Yeah, figures he's here, too! And hey! What's this I hear about you working with my mom?"

"Um, yeah, that was quite a surprise."

"Wow. Small world, huh?"

"Well, small *town*, definitely."

When I said that, she laughed, a bright laugh, and I had a feeling that I would never get over her, not completely. Then she gave me a nod, that felt like it said *Okay, I'm done but I want to make my exit kindly*. She started to turn away and called back, "Say hi to Bill for me, okay?"

"I will." I watched Young Steve turn to go with her, and they resumed their heads-almost-touching discussion while they walked.

I finished my fries before I made it back to Bill and the others, and it was then that I suddenly remembered where I knew Young Steve from. In the early nineties, that guy was the singer for a Westgate band that Bill and I went to see a few times. A couple of the guys from Ikiru were in that band as well, and I remembered them all being really good. It took me a while to remember that his name was Frank. But back when I saw him, his hair and beard were a lot longer, and he seemed more outgoing then. I guess we all go through changes.

The sun was barely showing over the horizon, red between the tree trunks near the lakeshore, when Ikiru took the stage. I had never seen a bad Ikiru show, but on that evening they outdid themselves. I felt my love for them rekindled, and it added a glow of sweet elation to the night. In my hot, tired daze, the band's every move and every note seemed magical. The humidity and crowding no longer mattered; time no longer mattered. At one point I leaned over to Bill's ear and called out, "Best birthday present ever!"

He yelled back, "I knew it would be!" And punched my shoulder. Which, somehow, Leroy and Shawn took as an invitation to punch my other shoulder. But I managed to let go of it all. The music's roar helped me find my bliss.

Chapter Twenty

T minus 121 days

On Wednesday, I was ready for Dawn to call out "good morning" when I came in. But instead she beckoned me over to her cubicle eagerly: "Milord! C'mere c'mere!"

I veered toward her counter. "I'm here I'm here. What's up?"

She patted a jar on her counter, a new one sitting beside the collection jar for Westgate Furry Friends. This one had a round sticker on the side with the United Way logo.

"September," she announced. "That means like the United Way pre-show. All the big fundraisers will be next month for the actual campaign."

"Nice to see you're on the ball," I said, still not sure where she was going with this.

"The first one is on the first of October: we're gonna have a karaoke in the Lecture Hall. I'm still waiting for posters for it, but I already got the tickets."

"Um, good?"

"Anywayyyyyy, I wanted to ask if you would please take some posters when we get 'em and put them up around town somewhere? This thing is open to the public, not just us, so we wanna get like hundreds of people there."

"Ah. Sure, okay, I can do that for you."

"Not downtown, though – I'm gonna cover that cuz it's my home turf. But if you can think of someplace else up your way, wherever that is?"

I nodded. "Yeah, just let me know when you have them."

"And can I give you a few tickets now? Maybe you'll run into someone who wants to go?"

I swallowed. "How few?"

"Just like five. Every bit helps, eh?"

My chest trembled for a second. "Okay. Yes."

"Great." She pinched a little bundle out of a thick stack of tickets held with elastic bands, and counted out five onto the shelf in front of me. "They're five dollars, so I expect you to bring me back twenty-five bucks, got it?"

I rubbed the back of my neck. "Fingers crossed."

She handed me another ticket and said, "And of course *you're* going to buy one, right?"

I reached for my wallet. "Of course." I had absolutely no intention of going to a karaoke, especially in front of hundreds of people. But I didn't mind buying a ticket for it from her. It was basically the same as making a five-dollar donation to United Way, only I had a piece of cardstock to show for it.

I opened my wallet. "Oh, um, I only have twenties on me now."

She held her hand out, open and expectant. "I can make change out of petty cash."

"How could I forget," I said. I collected my change and tickets and finally headed to my office. She called after me, "Go get your foot in the door, Ward the Lord!"

Just as I got my email opened up, Patrick strode in with his coffee. I knew that, on those days when he went to the cafeteria first to buy one, he came into our building the back way. Which means he didn't see Dawn on his way in, and she didn't already have a chance to buttonhole him about the United Way stuff. I waited for him to get his workstation running, then turned to him while he sat through the startup.

"Hey, I've got these tickets to a United Way thing next month. Karaoke. I'm supposed to sell them. You want one?"

Patrick looked at me from the corner of his eye, said "Pshhh," then reached for his coffee and turned his gaze to his screen again. That door didn't even open enough to get a foot in it. Well, maybe Bill would buy one.

Dawn showed up in the doorway and knocked on the frame. "Hi, guys," she said. She stepped closer to my desk. "Hey, Ward, I got you this little cash envelope – I thought you might want it to keep the ticket money in?"

"Aha, thank you." I took it from her and tucked it in the fold of my wallet for the time being. Who knew, I might want to use it.

"And Patrick," she said, turning to him, "just wanna make sure you know that the official United Way jar is up on my desk for anytime you feel like making donations."

Very slowly he swivelled his chair back and forth. "So noted."

"And we're already selling tickets for a karaoke fundraiser next month. Five dollars." And she waited. Even I could feel the expectancy in her gaze, and it wasn't even directed at me.

Patrick blinked. "Ah! Yeah!" He reached into his pocket. "I was just this minute buying one from Iggy here when you showed up." He pulled out a five and handed to me, with a look in his eyes that said *Work with me here*.

I gave him a ticket and Dawn said to me, "See? That envelope is coming in handy already! Thanks, guys." And she turned and was gone.

I looked at Patrick and just opened my mouth a little when he suddenly raised a finger and said, "Don't." He turned to his work, slid the ticket under his keyboard, and logged in.

Late that afternoon, a couple of unusual emails came in, both of them directly connected to my work. The first was from Steve, addressed to Patrick and me:

Glad tidings, gents!

I've been in touch with the computer department and the student aid office at Bel U asking about their work-study program. And Inez put her head together with Grace and figured out that we can wring enough juice out of the budget to hire two temps to wrestle Y2K with us, starting in Oct until Xmas. They'll mostly just

be running tests and double-checks on all the work you cats did this summer, but there's enough of that to keep us all busy. So I thought this was the coolest news and had to share it.

*peace
Steve*

*Dr. Steven Wagner
Chief Information Officer
IFPS*

I turned to Patrick as soon as I finished reading. "Hey, did you see – "

"The thing from Steve, yeah, just now. Fuckin' A." And I actually saw him smile [crooked, of course] and take a deep breath. I joined him in that.

I sat for a minute, trying to think of a way to tell him that this was my idea. I kept telling myself that I would be acting childish and needy, looking for him to pat my head. (Alan wouldn't second-guess himself that way – he'd go straight for the head pats. Sometimes there was a simple wisdom in dogs.) I tried to be content with knowing that I helped everyone out, and the rest of the year looked to be much smoother sailing.

At the edge of my vision, another email flag popped up on my screen, and I turned to it. It was from Ms. Szabo, to the entire staff listserv. An update on the Y2K situation, intended to assure everyone that IFPS was handling it with speedy expertise and that there was no cause for alarm. She mentioned that the Institute was allocating additional resources to address the problem, that progress on the solution was very encouraging, and that media panic on the subject should be ignored, at least as far as it applied to our organization. All intended to sound calming – I'm guessing that Ms. Szabo recently saw something alarmist about it in a magazine or on TV, and thought it would be a good idea to stop her herd getting spooked.

One paragraph, about three-quarters down, jumped out at me:

The Board would like to extend special commendations to Admin's I.T. Manager, Patrick Milner, for creating a diagnostic program that has made our "battle" against Y2K much more efficient and more effective. We can also foresee

selling this program to other institutions over the next few weeks, which would represent a not insubstantial contribution to the Institute's finances. Therefore, we are doubly grateful for Mr. Milner's efforts.

I didn't read the rest very clearly. I just sat there, staring, for what felt like ages. My stomach was queasy.

Eventually, I heard Patrick mutter behind me: "Jesus, I didn't know the whole Institute was gonna hear about it."

I swivelled my chair around and looked at him. Looked at his eyes. My throat was tight, and my eyes burned.

For what seemed a long time, he looked back, with a soft frown. Then he said, "Look, you gotta understand."

A pause, where I just blinked and felt cold.

"It's different for you," he said. "You're union. If they wanna give you the boot, they have to jump through a million hoops. In management, they can put your ass on the street for any reason at all. For *no* reason at all. I told you I needed to throw Steve a bone. I, I didn't have anything else this year."

The muscles in my jaw were starting to hurt. I swallowed. I heard it – I bet even Patrick heard it.

He blinked a couple of times, then said, slower, "You gotta understand."

I took a breath. I turned around. Even then, I remembered to lock my workstation. Then I stood up and walked out, not looking at him. The floor felt a little unsolid. I walked through the back, past the girls in Outreach. They usually didn't say anything to me when I went by, but if they said anything then, I wouldn't have known. There was a men's room just past their office and I went in and locked the door.

I sat in the stall and looked at my knees. I couldn't grasp this. Was Patrick telling me that his own record, his own work, was not good enough for him to be able to keep his job? That couldn't be. He was one of the best programmers I knew. I'd seen his work. When I had trouble figuring something out, he was the first person I went to. Was I not good enough to be able to recognize whether

someone else was good enough?

Or maybe it was something else. Some unrelated thing he'd done that put a black mark on his record, and he needed a way to balance it out. I didn't know. Would I ever? I didn't think I'd ever be able to ask him about anything like that. In that moment, I didn't think I'd ever be able to talk to him again. I was having enough trouble just trying to breathe and keep my stomach down where it belonged.

I don't know how long I sat in there. I made a point of not checking my phone for the time. But finally my insides were quivering a little less, and my chest didn't hurt, and I went back into the hallway. Only the emergency lights were on, scattered along the building. Everyone was gone home, looked like.

I went back, a little unsteady, past the empty desks in Outreach, and saw that my office door was open and the light was still on. Was Patrick working late? When I got in, he wasn't there and his workstation was shut down. But there was a yellow sticky note on my keyboard (not on my monitor):

Your computer's still on so I know you're still here somewhere. So I won't set the alarm when I leave. Please remember to do that when you go, okay? ~ D.

And I don't know what it was, but there was something about that note that made me feel seen, and noticed. Like I mattered. And I told myself, *That's just how she is. She's just that nice. She'd do this for anyone.* Suddenly I noticed that I was blinking back tears. They stayed in, at least.

Chapter Twenty-One

T minus 120 days

When I got to work the next morning, I stopped under the awning outside the main doors, to take off my waterproof hoodie and shake the rain off of it. I shook it hard; it made dull popping sounds. During a summer rain like this, it was so hot and humid that wearing any sort of extra layer felt almost as uncomfortable as just letting the downpour have its way with you. But I was blessed with a job in an air-conditioned building, so I knew I'd feel better fairly soon.

I walked past Dawn's station, and she greeted me with a simple "Good morning," quieter than usual. Her eyebrows were slightly lifted, and she was watching me like she was expecting a stage magician to turn me into a dove, any second now.

"Good morning," I said back. "Did you get caught in it coming in?" Not that she looked it: she looked fine. Just making idle conversation, the way people do. With her, I could manage that, sometimes.

"Ahh, maybe a little," she said. And that was all. I headed onward to my office, and reminded myself to put some change in the United Way jar at some point later in the day.

Patrick wasn't in yet. That wasn't a surprise, but today it was a relief. I started into my workday and tried not to think about him. When he did come in, I didn't turn – just looked out the side of my eye. He gave me a wary look and a nod but said nothing. Again, this wasn't a surprise, except for the wary part. I quickly looked back at my work, and felt myself tighten up, and tried not to hear him settling in.

We both worked in silence for a while. I always felt like he and I rarely spoke while we worked. But today I noticed the absence of random, scattered bits of conversation that normally happened with us. Loose phrases, half-finished thoughts... usually about what we were working on, or comments on events around us. The occasional question. Except for Bill, Patrick was the easiest person for me to be with, simply because of the nearly-two years we spent in close quarters. After us working together this long, he felt to me like someone who I *could* talk to, even if I often *didn't*. But *this*.... I noticed now that what we had before wasn't actual silence, after all. But this was.

This felt like I was suddenly working with a stranger. Some random new guy that I was obligated to work with, but didn't need to – or even shouldn't – get acquainted with. I wasn't sure if I was ever going to be able to relax at my desk anymore. I focused harder on my work to try and tune the feeling out.

When a knock came at our doorframe, I was relieved more than startled. We both turned to see Dawn standing there, looking directly at me, as businesslike as she ever got. "Lord Ward, I'm going on a big Tim's run. You're gonna help me carry. C'mon."

"Um..." I blinked, then locked my station. Normally I would at least exchange looks with Patrick to make sure it was all right for me to take this long of a break away from my desk. That morning, I didn't care. I stood and asked, "Will I need my jacket?"

She shook her head. "Nuh-uh. The rain let up for a bit – that's what I was waiting for." Then she beckoned me with her head and turned away into the hall. I realized that she had avoided making eye contact with Patrick the whole time she was there.

As often happens here, the rain did nothing to clear away the humidity, and in fact the air was already steamier than before. We were surely in for more rain before the day was over. The Tim Horton's was across the street from the Institute's grounds and about a block down. We walked carefully around the puddles and sudden mud, going very slowly to avoid working up more of a sweat than we had to.

Finally, Dawn spoke, sounding more serious than I could ever remember from her. "Okay, so what's going on? Are you all right?"

I blinked. "Well, I... well, yeah?"

"So what's up with that memo from Inez yesterday? That part about Patrick and that program?"

I shrugged and made a tight little grimace.

"Isn't she talking about *your* program? Isn't that the one you told me about, to help with Y2Whatever? The one I saw you working late on for like weeks?"

I cleared my throat. Without looking at her, I finally said, "Yes."

"Ward!" Dawn almost yelled. She swatted my upper arm. "Patrick *stole your program?!*"

"Nnnnot exac– ... maybe sorta." When I looked at her, her eyes and mouth were round. And pretty – even in that moment, I couldn't help thinking it.

"Geez," she breathed. "What are you gonna do?"

"I..." My voice cracked. "I don't know."

"God, you *gotta* do *something!*"

"I dunno, maybe I *don't* gotta."

"Ward." By then we reached Tim's and got into line. While there were ears around us, Dawn thankfully let the subject drop. She had a list with her, detailing how everyone in the office took their coffee. She was even getting some for the Outreach girls. She said that this was coming out of her own pocket, which made Ms. Szabo even more willing to let Dawn take a break from her desk.

"Well, this is very generous of you," I said. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet." She handed me a cardboard tray stuffed with five coffees and picked up one herself. We took them to a side counter, where she gathered up napkins and sugar packets and stir sticks. She stuffed those into her purse, then pulled out a string of United Way logo stickers on a waxed-paper strip. She tore off a piece and handed it to me. "Gimme a hand, Your Lordship."

I saw she was sticking a logo on the side of each cup, and followed her lead with my own tray. She said, "See, this isn't generous: it's underhanded promo." She giggled, and I smiled. A small one, and the first one that day.

We stepped out of Tim's air conditioning, back into the puddles and gray skies and warm thick air. Again we walked slow, balancing our trays.

Dawn said, "Look, Ward, I can maybe understand you not being comfortable talking to Inez about this but maybe I could do it for y– "

"No!" I looked deep in her eyes. "Dawn. *Please*. Just no."

She pressed her lips together for a second, then moved the tip of her tongue over them. Very quietly she said, "Can you tell me why not?"

I sighed. "I can try." We stopped at the corner and watched the cars drive past, waiting for a break in the traffic to cross the street. "Look, I have to work with him. With everybody there. I just need this all to blow over and things to settle down. If you said anything to Ms. Szabo, I, I'd be so mortified that I'd have to go work somewhere else."

She took a breath. "Well, nobody wants that."

We started to cross. "I, it's not that big a deal. Really. I mean, I was never doing it to get credit. I was just trying to help the office. Just doing what needed doing. I, I was doing it for the team. I mean, I always thought we were a team. I wasn't trying to be a hero or anything."

"Even so, if they're gonna go around calling someone a hero anyway, then it should be you. Right?"

We were coming to the entryway to the Institute. "It was never *about* that – "

Not sure what happened in that second. I know that, in the summer, long stretches of dry dust gather in the gutters at the edges of the roads, and a quick rain could turn some of that into shallow mud. Maybe I stepped in that. All I know is that suddenly my foot swung up off the pavement and I fell back.

And Dawn caught me. Somehow she shifted the weight of her tray into her right hand and her left one flashed around my back, just above my waist, and she pressed me back up til I was steady on both feet again. Thankfully all the lids were on snug, and there were only a few drops spilled.

She said, "Whoa! Hey! You okay there, milord?"

I let out a half-hearted giggle. "Um. Yeah. Wow. Thank you."

She started walking again, pulling me to come along. And kept her arm around me. "Just making sure, eh?"

I swallowed and looked over at her again. "Look, I, I appreciate you being concerned about this. But... but I need to pick my own battles. And, uh, this isn't the hill I wanna die on." I hoped I never found out which hill I *did* want to.

She slid her hand up my back til it was cupped over my shoulder nearest to her. And she gave it a gentle squeeze and shake. "Okay then. Yeah, you deserve that much, at least. You wanna just let it lie, then okay, I'll respect that. But if you ever wanna talk about it, you know where I am, right?"

I felt calmer now than I had all day. Or last night. I shifted my tray into one hand and held the door open for her. "I do. And thank you again."

She walked into the foyer and called back, "C'mon, Your Lordship, you're helping me deliver these."

After dinner that night, I logged on and left an ICQ for Nat:

Would you say it means anything when a girl touches a guy? Necessarily?

Then I opened StarCraft and got a little farther in that same level before getting wiped out. I was missing something there but still couldn't figure out what. A chime from Nat popped up just then: as good a reason as any to give the game a rest.

I tabbed over to ICQ and saw:

WAYCar54: *Whoa Nellie. You got a loaded question there when you leave it that wide open. Depends on the girl, depends on the touch. Is there hanky panky in Westgate today?*

Schmen73: You want me to be more specific.

WAYCar54: *If you would be so kind. :)*

Schmen73: At work today, I slipped and a co-worker grabbed hold of my back to

stop me falling.

WAYCar54: *And so this would be a lady co-worker. Ms. Z, by any chance?*

Schmen73: As it happens, yes.

WAYCar54: *Wait now. Did she grab your back or your backside? LOL*

Schmen73: Just back. But sometimes I wish you were writing the script of my life.

WAYCar54: *Just want to be clear here, Schmen. Sounds all innocuous and altruistic to me.*

Schmen73: I see that. But she kept her hand there a lot longer than she needed to. That's what got me wondering.

WAYCar54: *Aha. I take it you liked it.*

Schmen73: I admit, I did. Did you ever touch a guy longer than you had to?

WAYCar54: *Well, let me put it this way. I don't remember ever touching a guy longer than I wanted to.*

Schmen73: I see. I think.

WAYCar54: *Then again, she's not me. She could just be one of those naturally touchy-feely people.*

Schmen73: That sounds like her, actually. She's really open and friendly. That's probably all there is to it.

WAYCar54: *You're pretty open and friendly yourself, Schmen. When you let yourself be. And I'm glad you let yourself be with me.*

Schmen73: It's easy with you. For whatever reason.

WAYCar54: *I'm not trying to get your hopes up here, my friend, but don't assume that's just how she is. She might like you. You're too quick to think nothing of yourself.*

Schmen73: I see it more like trying to be objective about myself.

WAYCar54: *True objectivity is harder than we think. You're a math science kind of guy. Don't assume anything. Just keep your eyes open and look at the evidence.*

Schmen73: That sounds smart.

WAYCar54: *It ought to. It came from me. ;) Gotta go. Let me know when you want to do coffee or something again. It'd be nice to see your face and hear your voice.*

Schmen73: Yeah, it would. Work has eased up a bit so maybe before too long.

WAYCar54: *No pressure. Good night, Schmen.*

And then her icon showed she was offline. I thought about the fact that I hadn't discussed this business about Patrick with her yet. But I had a feeling I would be ready to, before too long.

Chapter Twenty-Two

T minus 107 days

A couple of weeks went by with very little change in my office. Patrick spoke to me very infrequently, when he absolutely had to, like to get me to take care of an email request. And I answered him in flat monosyllables when I absolutely had to. I knew many people who hated their jobs: I had never been one of them, not here, not at the cable station. But now I was beginning to get some idea of how they felt, and how they managed to endure. The work was getting done. That was what counted.

Around mid-month, Dawn showed up at our door with a slim batch of posters for the October 1st karaoke, and gave them to me to post around town. By now, she was at least willing to look Patrick's way and give him a nod of acknowledgment, but little else.

"Remember," she said to me, "I already have downtown covered – did it last night. Oh, know what? There's a music store near my place, and a restaurant around the corner, and they said they'd take tickets and sell them at their till for us! And the hippie store down the street from me, too."

I gave a slow nod. "That's cool."

"Yeah, it is! Plus they put posters up in their windows, and some other places did, and I hit probably every single light pole downtown!" And she laughed. I felt like I would never be able to match her energy, but I would give this job my best shot for her. "Anyway, wherever you think is good. Don't worry about it too much. And thanks again."

After work, I drove downtown to pick up some things at my pharmacy, and my path took me past The Square, a modest but picturesque park that took up one full block in the centre of downtown. There was a scattering of people wandering through it, or chatting on benches or by the fountain... and a jogger running around the edge of it. Her wide, swinging ponytail was a flag I would recognize anywhere, and the scampering speck of dog by her heels settled the matter for me beyond doubt. I had a flash of thinking I could honk hello to her as I drove past, but I didn't do that sort of thing. My dad would, though.

When I got out of my car in front of the pharmacy, I noticed that Dawn had called it right: just about every lamppost I could see had one of her karaoke posters taped to it. Everything she did, she did wholeheartedly.

And I thought about how it felt that other day, her arm around me, her hand on me. And how what I got from her in that moment was her confidence in her own self, not fearless so much as unafraid. I wondered how it must feel to be that willing to go out and do, to not need to hold back.

On my way home, I swung by a plaza and asked a couple of the stores if they'd put posters up in their windows. I was trembling and sweating every time, but kept reminding myself that I was doing this for Dawn. All the stores said yes, and were very nice about it, and reminded me that situations like this didn't necessarily have to be as difficult as I made them in my head.

Then I drove around my neighbourhood looking for bus stops, where I taped up the rest of my posters. I left the roll of tape in the front seat so I'd remember to take it back to the office. And I told myself that this wasn't taking office supplies for personal use: that was against company rules, so of course I would never do it. I listened to metal, yes, but I sure didn't live it.

The following week, a day came when I received a text from Dr. Nathan about an hour before closing:

Are you able to drive Miss Wilton home after work?

I replied:

I can if she's ok with that

A couple minutes later, her answer came in chunks:

Already texted her about it. Make many detours even if not needed. Take your

time. Make one stop al

and then a few seconds later:

ong the way but don't tell her ahead. Text me when you decide to stop and when you get going again.

I replied *ok* and went out to Dawn's cubicle. "Did you see Dr. Nathan's text?"

Her eyebrows went puzzled, then up. "Oh! Gosh no!" She got her purse and reached around inside it, chuckling. "I'm still not used to having one of these things; I never think to check it."

"You could maybe turn your ringer up louder," I said.

"Yeah, I should get you to do that for me." She flipped the phone open, peered closely at the screen, and fumbled her way through the menu for a while. Then it looked like she stopped to read for a few seconds, closed the phone, and looked up at me with a smile. "So I get a lift home from you tonight? Cool!"

"You're okay with that?"

"Sure! Saves me a bus ticket!" She laughed, then said, "She was saying we would do this someday. Something about the sound of an unfamiliar motor, and if that has any effect on what Alan does."

I nodded. "Aha."

"But yeah, tonight is fine for that. So don't forget and go home without me, eh?"

"I'm sure you won't let me forget." As if I could anyway.

Toward the end of the workday, I found myself wrapped up in some online resources about website design, and didn't notice when Patrick shut down and left. So it startled me a little when Dawn knocked at my doorframe and said,

"Ward the Lord! You're keeping me waiting here!" And she laughed while I stumbled my way through shutting down, sprinkled with sorrys. We went to the front door and, while she set the alarm, I opened my phone and made note of the time. Then I guided her out, through the parking lot and over to my car.

I unlocked her door first and held it for her. She slid into the passenger seat and said, "Ooo, what a gent!" Then I closed the door a little too hard – nerves – and trotted around to my side.

Once I started the car, I flicked off the stereo before it could come on – I wanted to be able to hear her. First thing she said was, "Aren't you gonna say 'sorry about the mess'?"

I turned far around and watched while I backed out of my spot. "Sorry, what?"

"Every time I get into anyone's car for the first time, they always say 'sorry about the mess'."

I steered past the other parked cars and shrugged. "I dunno. I guess I didn't think mine is so bad?"

"It's *not!*" Dawn said. "That's just *it!* Almost no one's ever *is!* But they always say it!" And of course she laughed.

I felt myself smile. "Well, you know me. I'm a rebel." That got a bigger laugh out of her.

While I watched the traffic moving across the parking lot exit, she said, "Oh hey, this is cool: I found out Dr. Singh has a journal that wants to publish his paper about me. So I'm gonna be a star."

My eyebrows went up. "That *is* cool. So this is, like, about your past life?"

"Uh-huh. It's some sort of parapsychology journal, I think."

"Wow. I, I've been wanting to ask you about that for a long time now." On impulse, I turned right at the light ahead instead of going straight through.

Dawn blinked, looking puzzled. "Where are we going?"

"Oh, I, uh.... the traffic looked kinda congested up ahead, I'm just trying to get around it."

"Ah okay. So you wanna hear about my spooky secret, huh?"

"Yeah, I really do."

She made a show of cracking her knuckles, then giggled. "Well, my mom tells me that, before I was in kindergarten, I used to sometimes talk about living right around here, like back in the 1830s I think. I would talk about people I knew then, and building barns and cabins, and how I was married to a blacksmith, all kinds of things. Mom thought this was weird but really fascinating, and she started writing down all the stuff I said in a notebook. She still has it, and Dr. Singh got photocopies of it for his research. And lucky she kept it, because later on I stopped talking about it, and now when I read the notes I don't remember anything about them."

I took a left turn onto a street just because it looked shady and cool. "So you used to remember a past life but now you don't?"

"Not exactly." She watched the shadows move over the hood of the car. "Sometimes I still get these funny flashes that I can't really explain. Like, for example, sometimes I will look at the Research Building at work, and all of a sudden I will have this really clear vision of that exact spot, with the little hill going up the back, only it's completely covered in trees, so thick you can hardly squeeze through. But I know it's the same spot – I *know* it. Like how it looked back then. And I dunno, that vision is so clear and so real, I feel like I can't just be imagining it."

"That sounds really strange."

"Maybe. But it doesn't *feel* strange, not to me. It's... I dunno, it feels kinda touching, I guess. Like, like that little flash of memory is giving me back a piece of myself." She looked at the houses passing by us and said, "Hey, you aren't *lost*, are you? No one gets lost in Westgate!"

I smiled and shook my head. "Nope, just avoiding traffic. Are you in a hurry?"

"No, I just never went home this way before – it's a pretty funny way to get there."

"Well, as long as you're good."

"Yeah, I'm good, Your Lordship." She shifted in her seat. "So, part of Dr. Singh's research was, he got slides of things like old kitchen utensils and farm tools from all over. The idea was, some of them would be things you would've seen around here in the 1830s, and some were like not even close. And he showed me the slides to see if I recognized any of them."

"Did he check to make sure you're not a history major, or that you didn't see them in a museum, or something?"

"Yes, he did! You know *he* would, right?"

"And so how did that go?"

"He said I did good, but there were some weird moments in there, I tell ya. Like there was one slide he showed me, and I go, 'Hey, that's a wool carder! My mother had one just like it, only hers had cord wrapped around the handle!' But as soon as I said that, I was thinking like *I didn't even know I knew the word 'wool carder'!*"

"That must've been wild, yeah," I said. After a few quiet seconds, I added, "So do you really think you had a life before this?"

"Y'know, I don't think I can be sure. But there are still times when I really feel like I did. That's all I can say. Dr. Singh says it could be something else, like, what did he say.... that I am using telepathy or something to pick up someone else's memories through time, but I don't have any experience to tell their memories apart from my own, so I feel like it's me remembering the things. I dunno."

"Huh," I said. "I'm actually not sure which one of those explanations is wilder."

"Me either!"

"Pretty cool either way, though." I saw a convenience store on a corner up ahead, and suddenly remembered my mission. "Oh, sorry, I need to stop in here for a second."

She looked at me and blinked. "What?"

"Just gotta pick up one thing, really."

I parked in front of the store door. While I got out, I heard Dawn say behind me, "Is this why you took this way home?" But I didn't answer. I stood just inside the store and texted Dr. Nathan: *stopped now*. Then I picked up a Mars bar, wandered the store aimlessly for a minute, paid for the bar, and left.

When I got back in the car, I unwrapped the bar and held it toward Dawn. "Want some?"

"Uh, no, I'm eating dinner in like half an hour!" And she gave me a mildly incredulous chuckle. "Are you okay?"

I took a bite, then said, "Sorry, I, um... hypoglycemic."

"Oh wow, I didn't know you were."

"I'm not." A couple more chews. "I mean, I, um, I'm trying not to be. Prevention, like."

Her mouth twisted. "Uh, okay."

I swallowed, wrapped the rest of the bar up, and tucked it in a cupholder. "That's enough, I should be good now. Ready to roll?"

"Yes please, milord!"

I started the car, then before shifting gears I took my phone out and texted the doctor again: *taking her home now*. I pulled into the street and started taking the most direct route from there to Dawn's apartment I could think of.

"Hope I didn't mess you up too much," I said.

"No, you're fine. Not in any hurry tonight. Fortunately." She giggled and looked over at me. "But I'll say this: I haven't told that many people anything about my past life stuff. And you're just about the only one I told who didn't make me feel like a freak about it."

"Well, you're not." I kept my eyes on the road.

"Thank you. I just wanted you to know that I appreciate that."

"My pleasure," I said. And it was.

When I got home that evening and settled in, I noticed that I had to push down the last bit of my dinner – my appetite was a bit off. I knew better than to eat junk food that soon before a meal.

The next morning, at work, curiosity got me to log into the Research network and have a look at the videos from Dawn's apartment the night before. And what I saw filled me with a sense of wonder:

Just after the time Dawn and I left the office, Alan trotted over to the door and rested on the mat. As he had been doing consistently throughout the experiment so far. At the time I stopped at the convenience store, and Dawn knew that she was, for the moment, no longer actively heading home, Alan soon got up and wandered off camera. When I was driving away from the store, and Dawn knew she was on her way home again, Alan came back to the door. And stayed there until she got in.

I wondered if Dr. Nathan found this as magical to see as I did. And, watching Alan and the way he timed his comings and goings, well... I know it might sound weird, but I was actually proud of the little guy.

Chapter Twenty-Three

T minus 91 days

October 1st arrived. The official kick-off of the office's United Way campaign, and the karaoke which was its inaugural event. Dawn had managed to cajole everyone in the office into buying a ticket for it, even Ulrich and the girls over in Outreach. So, since our area would be deserted for the duration [a couple of hours after lunch], Ms. Szabo felt that we could manage with locking the office and forwarding Dawn's phone to voicemail, this time. This made me wonder why we couldn't have done the same thing those other times, when she had me come out to babysit the front desk. I didn't always understand other people's sense of priorities.

I was planning to hide in my office and get some work done. Seemed like a perfect opportunity with no interruptions. But Dawn showed up at my door and announced, "Ward the Lord! Showtime, let's go!"

"Seriously?" I swallowed and looked up at her. "I thought it was enough that I bought a ticket. I mean, you got my money, right?"

She stepped in toward me. "You are goin'." She got a handful of my shirt sleeve and pulled up. "*And you're singin'! Everybody is! C'mon! It'll be great!*"

Feebly I said, "At least give me a second to save my work and lock up?"

"So do it, then! Tick tock, buddy!" And she gave my shoulder a nudge.

I locked my office door behind us, and then she stuck beside me, all the way through Outreach to the back foyer and across to the Lecture Hall, like she was the guard escorting me to the gas chamber. I saw people from Facilities and Research and even some unfamiliar townies filing in through the double doors. A good turnout: looked like her postering paid off.

The rows of chairs that normally filled the Lecture Hall had been moved around some tables brought in for this event, and Dawn steered me toward one that already had Admin people seated at it, close to the stage. I nodded hi to Steve and Ms. Hemphill and Ms. Szabo, then looked around and tried to tune out the babble of the crowd.

On the stage, a microphone stood beside the lectern, with a small TV set up

beside it. Off to one side, a beefy guy in headphones was adjusting a small console with cables running to the equipment at centre stage. PA speakers were set up at the far ends, facing the audience.

Off to one side of the hall, there were coffee machines and big trays of muffins for sale, with proceeds of course going to the United Way. There was already a crowd around them, but I knew that, at that moment, eating was the last thing I felt like doing.

Not far from our table, Patrick sat at another one with Ulrich and the Outreach girls. They all appeared to be enjoying his company.

I turned back to our table and Dawn slid a fat binder in front of me, along with a slip of paper and a pencil. "They already did theirs," she said. "Your turn. Pick something good!"

The binder was a catalogue of all the songs this DJ had available for people to sing. It was impressively thick, with a wide variety of styles and years. (Karaoke was a surprisingly big and serious business in Westgate, for some reason.) You wrote your name and song number on the paper, they all went to the DJ, and then he'd call you up for your turn.

My mind raced as I flipped through the laminated pages, and heard other people doing the same with the binders at their tables. I still couldn't see any way out of this. One bundle of papers got handed up to the DJ, which was his cue to start the event with announcements and encouragements to keep the choices coming in throughout. I remember that the first person up was the wavy-haired cashier from the cafeteria. She sang the Patsy Cline song, "Crazy". She was nowhere near professional, but she had a sweet sound and it was a good choice, and she looked like she was having fun.

Dawn nudged me to keep looking and pick something while other people took their turns and got friendly cheers and applause. I was pleasantly surprised to see a decent grunge selection in the binder, and thought about Alice in Chains. But no: there was no way I could do justice to Layne's voice – he was my hero. I was fairly confident they didn't have "Gypsy" in here, and no, they didn't. Besides, I wasn't sure how comfortable I felt doing something like that in front of my boss, or my boss's boss.

I thought and thought, and looked and looked, and finally found something I

thought I could get away with without dying. Embarrassment was inevitable here, but it didn't have to be fatal. I scribbled down my choice and passed it over to Steve, who reached it up to the stage along with a few others.

Dawn grabbed my shoulder and shook it. "So what did you pick?"

"It's a surprise," I said. "You'll see." Like I was trying to calm a little kid down. She stuck her tongue out at me.

She spent most of the time talking with the others at our table, once she saw that I was focused on sitting there, watching my hands and tightening my mouth, and resigning myself to the fact that this was going to happen and it couldn't be good. I kept telling myself that everyone who went up there got a nice response, no matter how good or not good they were, that that's how these things worked, that I'd be fine. I was going to be fine. I kept saying it.

The DJ got to the bundle that came from the tables in our area, and things started to get more interesting for me. Steve was called up and sang James Taylor's "Fire and Rain" – Ms. Hemphill leaned in and said, "He named one of his sons after James Taylor." Then Ms. Hemphill went up and sang "Touch of Gray" by The Grateful Dead: Steve leaned in and said, "Grace is a Deadhead from way back. But I bet she picked this cuz it's the only one they have – she's more into their older jams. I'm gonna ask her when she gets back." I felt like this was turning into a way to learn more about everyone else in the office.

Patrick went up and did Bruce Springsteen's "I'm On Fire". Part of me was thinking, *Good, I don't really like this one all that much anyway*. Because I didn't want to have to credit him with having good taste in songs. I was also hoping that he'd be really terrible, but I couldn't honestly say that. He wasn't great, but he didn't suck either. The Outreach girls clapped and cheered extra loud when he was finished.

The DJ called Dawn up. She said "yay" and giggled and trotted up the steps to the stage and over to the mike. I saw her watching the TV at the side, waiting for the lyrics to show up.

And then the song kicked in. One short, three-chord intro, and I knew it immediately. And my eyes got big. "Celebrity Skin" by Hole. One of the hardest-rocking songs in that binder.

And Dawn threw herself into it right from the first note. I couldn't look away. She sounded amazing. Maybe not like a *Why doesn't this girl have a recording contract?* miracle, but she hit the notes, and her voice had a raspy power, and she nailed the cool drawling attitude of the song, and, most of all, she did it wholeheartedly. She put her energy into it like no one else here had done, and her confidence carried the song and made everyone believe.

Halfway through I whispered slow, "Oh my god." Losing herself in the moment, while she stood at the mike she twisted and swung and gyrated and tossed her magnificent hair around her, and I found myself pushing my chair back so I had room to cross my legs. It was too loud for me to hear my pulse but I could feel it.

Dawn was a full-out Rocker Chick, and all this time I never knew.

When the song ended, she stood there a second, grinning and glowing and catching her breath, while everyone cheered and applauded. There were whistles. I'm sure I clapped louder than anyone. Then she hopped down the steps back to our table, giggling the whole way.

"Wow, that was amazing!" I said. "I never knew you were into that!"

"Well yeah! I like hard-rockin' stuff. Didn't you ever see me liking the stuff you play at your desk?"

I paused, embarrassed. "I guess I missed that part."

She nudged me. "You gotta pay closer attention, Lord Ward. Keep your eye on the ball." She looked away and said, "Oh, 'scuse me a sec." Then she got up, and I watched her walk over to a table where Dr. Singh sat with a few people in suits, one of whom I recognized from Research. Dawn bent close to him and they spoke for a minute, while the DJ called up Barbie from Outreach. She sang "Barbie Girl" by Aqua, and I worked hard to hold in my laughter, in case she thought I was laughing at her performance.

Just as Dawn sat back beside me, the DJ called out, "Next up is... Ward." Dawn applauded at once, nudging me with her shoulder. I took a deep breath and forced my feet up to the stage.

All the faces in the audience seemed to blur, and I encouraged that to happen. I had never done this in front of anyone but Bill before. I had never done this

completely sober before. But now, here I was, all because Dawn wanted me to be. It would all be over in a few minutes.

I reminded myself that I wasn't here to sing: I was here to do an imitation of someone who can sing. My song started, and a few people clapped, even whistled, when they recognized the intro. I was going to do "True" by Spandau Ballet.

The binder didn't have "To Cut a Long Story Short", but at least this was Tony Hadley and I knew I could do him. "True" wasn't a favourite of mine, but it was a big hit back when; I saw it often enough on the after-school video shows. It was soft and poppy and wouldn't offend anyone. It seemed like the least bad choice I could make.

I closed my eyes. I felt like I remembered the lyrics well enough, and could always peek at them quick if I needed. But, to start, it helped me not to see those hundreds of people out there.

My cue came. I did Tony. Then came the first crescendo where he hits a loud note. And when I hit it, I could hear a few people cry out, "Whoa!", and someone clapped.

I dared to open my eyes. Nothing bad happened yet. I kept going. I felt an urge to giggle and pushed it down. And then, not missing a note, I looked over at our table. Ms. Hemphill was grinning at me and blushing. Steve was giving me a relaxed half-smile. Ms. Szabo nodded her head slowly in time with the music, and briefly licked her lips.

And Dawn... Dawn was looking at me like she just opened up the most fantastic Christmas present she'd ever seen, the one that she was sure no one would ever give her. And part of me refused to believe that it could ever be me that would put a look like that on her face. It had to be something else.

The instrumental break came, and I just stood and looked at my shoes and swallowed, gearing up because a big note was coming right after it. And then I hit that big note, and the ones after it, and the song was over, and people cheered and clapped and whistled, and I wasn't dead.

I still didn't think I ever wanted to do this again.

I could feel myself a little shaky when I sat back down, and the others all leaned in and told me how wonderfully I did, how surprised they were. Dawn grabbed my shoulder, squeezed it hard and shook it, and almost yelled, "Oh my god! You sound *exactly* like him! How do you *do* that? Oh my god!"

All I could do was shrug and feel warm. Too warm. But what a relief to have that over and done.

There wasn't much after that, and I remember even less. Ms. Szabo went up for a turn, which somehow I hadn't expected. While she went up the steps, Dawn said, "I was trying to get Dr. Singh to go up but he just refuses. He's no fun sometimes." I turned around to look back at him, and couldn't help thinking that some people had the strength of will to say no to Dawn, so why couldn't I?

"Well, I guess we can't all be fun," I said.

Ms. Szabo chose "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'." For me, the most intriguing part of her performance, aside from her dusky singing voice, was her way of gently undulating at the mike stand. She seemed oblivious to it, but it made me wonder if I would ever be able to look at her in the office quite the same way, ever again.

Soon after that, the DJ thanked everyone on behalf of United Way and sent us back to our offices. In the scraping of chairs and rumble of feet, Patrick came a bit closer to us. He avoided looking at me, but to Dawn he said, "Hey, Dawn, you did great up there. You really rock. I had no idea."

She gave him the smallest and mildest of smiles and said, "Yeah, well, you wouldn't." Then she gave me a hard nudge and steered us away from him toward the doors.

Chapter Twenty-Four

T minus 78 days

A couple more weeks went by. My morning routine changed somewhat in that time. For one, Dawn's traditional morning greeting to me was now, "Sing 'True' for me!" And my answer was now, "No, thank you."

For another, I now passed two new faces on my way to my office every morning. Our student temps arrived at the office the day after my pop star debut, and we set them up in spare workstations that sat across the hall from the meeting room, between my office and the Outreach girls. A soft young guy named Neil, who reminded me of a quieter Bill, with shoulder-length hair, always coming to work in T-shirts and jeans. (Which Steve had no problem with.) And Guita, a serious-looking lady with black-rimmed glasses and Susan Powter hair. (Somehow I could remember their names, oddly enough. Maybe because I thought of them as "mine"?) We had them working on testing the new Y2K-compliant program edits Patrick and I completed, reporting the results to us, and doing the occasional sweep with the algorithm to see if anything had escaped our net. When they didn't have their noses glued to their screens, they always said good morning when I came in. On this particular day, their noses were glued, so they didn't see me and I didn't disturb them.

An hour or so later, I went past their desks on my way to the men's room. Neil was clacking away, but Guita wasn't there. When I went further on I saw her, gabbing with the girls in Outreach. Not the first time I'd seen her doing this. I figured she must have her reasons. As long as she got her work done. Which she did.

On my way back through, Neil gave me a hoarse, tentative call: "Hey, Ward?"

I swerved over. "Yes?"

He pointed at a folder icon on his screen. "Am, am I supposed to be running a search on the files in here?"

I leaned in closer. "Ah, no, you've gone into Research's directory here. See? You don't need to worry about that unless Steve asks you to."

"Oh, okay. Thanks."

I was just about to turn and head off when I happened to notice his shirt. Black. With a StarCraft logo on it.

Without thinking, I blurted out, "StarCraft!"

Neil lit up. "Yeah! Hey, so you play?" I nodded. "Coolness! What's your best time?"

"I.... "

"Mine's about twenty-six hours now but that's including the extras. I'm trying to get it down to twenty-five."

I cleared my throat. "I, uh, I still haven't actually finished it yet. At least not without god mode."

His eyebrows went up and he tried to hold back a smile. "Wow, really? Noob. Oh, sorry."

I felt my shoulders relax a little. "Yeah, I've been stuck at this one level for like months."

"Which one?" When I told him, he said, "Yeah, that's the one where you have that little base at the top and you gotta hit the enemy Nexus at the bottom, right?" I nodded, and he sat back, got comfortable, and casually pointed at me. "I bet I know what you're doing. You're all in a panic setting up defences because of all their Carriers, yeah?"

"Um, yeah, exactly. You have to."

"Listen. The trick with that level is that you're too hemmed in. You don't have enough ground space to set up as many Photon Cannons as you need against a fleet that size. That's where they've got you beat."

"I know! So I try to pile on as many Scouts as I can!"

Neil shook his head. "This is one time where you can't play it safe. What you gotta do is build up a strike force of Archons as fast as you can and then shuttle 'em down to the bottom and hit those mothers. Focus on that. While you're doing that, the Carriers will be creaming your base, and you just gotta let 'em.

This one time, you gotta stop being defensive, let go, and go for it."

I let out a small smile. "That doesn't sound anything like me."

He nodded once, firmly. "Try it and see."

I gave the top of his monitor a gentle pat. "Okay, I will. Thanks."

"You owe me!" he called after me. Then he chuckled, and I heard his keyboard clacking again.

The temps were staying after hours that night, as they often did. Dawn came around, wearing a raincoat, to wish them good night and remind them about the alarm. She noticed I hadn't quite left yet and came over to my office. "You working late, too?"

"Just a bit. One or two little things."

"Okay. Take it easy."

"You, too." As soon as she left, I logged into Research's system and accessed the feed from the camera in her apartment. A small black screen appeared as an inset on my monitor. I decided that it would be fun to watch Alan live and in action again. (As I had done once or twice before.) Dawn was heading for the door now; so, in a minute or two, Alan should be curling up on the mat in his entryway.

The screen stayed black. I checked the time. Dr. Nathan told us how unfailing Alan's behaviour was through the whole study. By now, he was officially late.

I checked the status monitor for the camera, looking for errors. It said everything was functioning correctly.

I waited a couple more minutes and the screen was still black. The camera should have switched on as soon as Alan moved toward the door. I felt cold.

I pulled up the stored video from earlier in the day. I started at the beginning, where there was a short blur of Dawn's legs leaving for work, and a minute or so

of Alan circling the mat and then going back into the apartment. Normal video, happened every morning.

And then, time-stamped shortly after two p.m., there were two sets of human legs coming into the apartment, leaving the door slightly ajar behind them. About three minutes later, a white blur close to the floor, one that could look very much like a chihuahua nosing at the door and then going out. A couple of minutes after that, the human feet came back, left the apartment, and this time the door closed firmly behind them.

Alan was loose. Maybe he was lost.

First thing I did was text Dawn:

Alan got out around 2. Going to look for him.

I threw on my hoodie, said an abrupt good night to the temps, then dashed out into pounding rain and over to my car. What with the drumming of rain on the car roof, I barely heard the ring of Dawn's reply:

omg thank you ill tell the girls

I found a parking spot not far from Dawn's apartment and thought about where to look. Maybe he was still in the building. Maybe he had enough sense not to go out in this kind of rain. And hopefully people would have enough sense not to let him out the main door onto the street. But I had no way into the building to check. And yes, people coming out would try not to let him escape, ideally. But someone coming in wouldn't see he was there, and as soon as they opened the door he might bolt before they could even react.

So, just in case he had gotten out, I had to try and find him. Just to make sure. If Dawn got home and found him in the hallway, then I hoped she'd remember to text me and tell me I could come in out of the rain now.

I pulled my hood up tight over my head and got out of the car. Even through my coat I could feel the rain beating at me. I went to the alleyway beside Dawn's

building and took a few steps in. I called, "Alan?" Nothing.

I came back out onto the sidewalk and looked around. The rain on my hood was loud. For a moment, I stood there, making sounds like I was blowing through a straw. I was trying to whistle for this missing dog, because people do that, and I was so flustered that for a second I forgot that I never learned how to whistle.

Slowly I walked up the sidewalk, scanning all around me, calling "Alan" every few seconds, bumping into other pedestrians. I felt conspicuous and awkward but I couldn't let that matter now. I actually stopped strangers and asked if they'd seen a chihuahua. After a few tries I could feel that getting a little easier, like I was already in the deep end and swimming instead of sinking. I could do this if I had to. (And Alan and Dawn needed me to.)

I turned the corner, checked the alleys, looked under staircases, behind dumpsters, moving slow, calling and calling. I could feel the rain starting to work through the material of my hoodie. My slacks were already sticking to my legs, and I was getting cold.

I gradually made my way over to The Square. Just because I knew Alan liked to go for runs there. Maybe that was a place he liked to be. It was as good an idea as any.

I reached The Square, and by now the rain stopped mattering; I couldn't get wetter. But the chill was slowly growing deeper, so I hoped desperately that I found him soon. I thought about how cold Alan must be, if he was out in this for hours. I tramped through the puddles in the walkways, squished my way over the grass and wet leaves to peek under bushes. Calling his name.

When I got to the fountain in the centre, I squatted on my haunches and leaned my back against the stone base, just to rest a bit. I looked around the park, tired and dripping, feeling bleak. Then I felt my phone buzz in my pocket. Text from Dawn:

im home hes not in building asked neighbours if they saw him or can help im out looking now

I was getting ready to reply when, just barely over the sound of the rain, I heard

clicking nearby, on the flagstones surrounding the fountain. I looked down just as Alan, dripping and shivering, his fur all spiky from the water, sat down beside me and calmly looked up at me like *Oh, hey, how ya doon.*

I blinked at him for a second. Very quietly I said, "Heya, buddy." I reached down to pet him and he gave me the grin and the happy squint eyes. His fur didn't feel so good all soaked, but that was all right this time. I unzipped my hoodie, pulled it open wider, looked him in the eye again, and patted my chest. Alan hopped up onto the lap my squatting legs made, then climbed inside my jacket and curled up.

I zipped him in a little better – for all the difference it made, with everything soaked through – then I cuddled an arm under him while I stood up. Trying to position my head to shelter my phone from the rain a bit, I replied to Dawn's text:

Got him. He's fine. Be there in 5.

Chapter Twenty-Five

T minus 78 days

When I got Alan back to Dawn's main entry and pressed her buzzer, I heard the click of the lock opening immediately. Then, as I was stepping inside, I heard a tumbling sound coming from above. I looked up: Dawn was hurrying down the steps to meet Alan and me partway. She looked soaked through as well, her hair slicked down onto her, not flying free for once. And her eyes were bright.

I stopped climbing the stairs in order to carefully ease Alan out of my hoodie and hand him to her. She made a soft gasp and held him carefully, while he licked her face and wagged his tail, so heavy with water now that, when it hit the wall of the stairwell, it made loud thumps.

Dawn looked over Alan's ears and directly at me. She was blinking fast. "Come on up" was all she said, quietly, then turned and trotted up the stairs with her pup. I slogged up the stairs behind them, hearing the squish of my shoes on every step.

When I got inside her door, I bent and pulled my mucky shoes off. She had already gone ahead, through the living room to her bathroom, caring nothing for her wet footprints. She came back out a few seconds later with Alan wrapped in a towel and carefully rubbed him. I've heard that wet dogs smell unpleasant, but right then it seemed to me that we all smelled the same.

Dawn gently set Alan down, still in the towel, on top of a blanket crumpled up on her couch. She bent further and kissed his head, and said, "Oh god, what a relief." Then she stood straight, turned to look across the room at me, and quietly said, "Thank you so much, Ward." There were soft squeaks in her voice when she said it, and it looked to me like her eyes were starting to well up.

I blushed, and rubbed the back of my neck. "Hey, no need to thank me, I.... if I'm being perfectly honest, *he* found *me*." I tried to smile at her, and she managed a much better smile back.

Her chest rose and fell as she drew a breath. "So how did you know? That he was gone?" And I told her about watching the video, and the pairs of feet coming in and going. She frowned at that. "Did it look like they broke in?"

I thought back, trying to remember the details of what I saw. "I don't think so.

The way the door moved, it looked to me more like it was unlocked. So someone with a key?"

Dawn looked off to the side, thinking. Then she looked back at me and walked over to me. "Okay, so here's what we're going to do. You – " [and here she gave my chest a gentle shove, with just the tips of her fingers] " – are going to take everything off, get in there, and grab a hot shower. I will take your things down to the laundry room and stick them in the dryer for a while. And when I get back, my turn for the shower. So don't use all the hot water, eh? I cannot *wait* to get this chill off me."

My mouth moved a few times before it finally started working properly. "I, I, I can't – "

She cocked her head. "Got someplace else you need to be?"

"Ah, no – "

She flicked my upper arm. "Then quit arguing and get in the bathroom! Hop to, mister!" Feeling a bit unreal, and stepping carefully on the hardwood in my wet socks, I let myself be herded down the short hallway into her tiny, echoing bathroom. I closed the door and locked it, then looked in the mirror over the sink. I was a disaster.

Dawn's voice came through the door. "Towels are on the top shelf! I'll leave a robe for you on the doorknob!"

"Thank you," I called back.

After a second, she said, "Now get your things out here so I can take 'em down!"

"What ab– "

"*Everything!* C'mon, Lord Ward!"

I took out my belt, keys, and wallet, and rested them on the floor under the sink. Then everything else came off, and I tried to bundle up my underwear inside my shirt so she wouldn't see it. Then I rolled everything else up in my slacks, unlocked the door, opened it as little as possible, then squeezed my wet bundle through til I felt her pull it from my fingers.

"Thanks," she called back. "See you in a bit."

I was naked in Dawn's apartment.

It didn't take me too long to figure out her tub-shower. It was older, like mine was, so the fixtures were similar. And I soon got over the weirdness of being in a strange shower with so little warning, once I felt how good it was to warm up and not feel slimy anymore. But while I washed my hair, I had another moment of weirdness: when I told myself that the other door I passed in the hallway was Dawn's bedroom, and couldn't stop thinking about that.

I dried myself off and got out of the tub. The mirror was so steamed up that I couldn't get a clear look, but as near as I could tell, my hair looked psychotic now instead of disastrous. But it felt a lot better.

I cracked the door open, reached around, felt the robe on the outer knob, and pulled it inside fast. I held it up. It didn't look floor-length. It did look pink. Bright. And shiny. Puffy fabric with a diamond pattern of stitches running through it. And the hem, and cuffs, and collar, were all covered with some sort of fluffy chiffon. I stared at it for a while.

There was a knock at the bathroom door. "Sounds like you're done," Dawn called. "Come on out."

I called back. "I think maybe I'll just wait in here til my things are dry."

She laughed. "My turn for the shower, Your Lordship."

And of course she was right. So I put the frilly pink bathrobe on, tied it shut tight around me, and slunk blushing into the hallway, where she waited in her wet clothes with another bundle in her arms. She beamed with delight. "You go on out and relax, Susie, I'll just be a tick." The bathroom door closed on her laughter, and I padded into the living room and sat on the couch beside Alan.

He looked over and up at me just for a second, like *Okay cool*, and then rested his chin on his paws again. A far cry from the tiny ball of hyper I first met. I could dimly hear the spray of the shower, and then Dawn's echoey voice singing something I couldn't quite make out. I tried pushing the flaps of the robe down around and tucked between my legs, suddenly feeling far too exposed for my

liking. Once or twice I reached over to pet Alan's head, and he didn't mind.

For a while I just sat, looking around, feeling as unreal as I did up on the stage at karaoke. I noticed when the shower sound stopped. A few minutes later came the very soft sound of Dawn coming into the living room in soft, fuzzy, pink unicorn slippers. She had a small pink towel covering her hair, bundled up like a turban, and somehow she made it look elegant. Seeing her clean face, and how familiar it looked, suddenly made me realize that either she wore very little, very subtle makeup to the office every day, or possibly none at all.

Then I noticed her robe. It looked bigger and longer than mine, cinched in tight at her waist, and it was steel blue-gray with pinstripes, and no frills of any description. I stared at it pointedly for a few seconds, glanced down at the sheen of my pink robe, then up to her eyes. And she was sputtering trying to hold back a laugh.

I watched her walk over to the stove, and said, "Okay, yes, I can see why you'd be enjoying this."

She stopped and turned around, still looking very pleased with herself, and said, "What? You not happy with your robe?" Then she took hold of the lapels of hers, as if she were getting ready to pull it open, and brightly said, "Wanna trade?"

I held a hand up, turned my face away, and said, "Nonono, it's fine. It's all fine." She cackled; then I heard her pick the kettle up off the stove and fill it at the sink. I swallowed quietly, thinking about the way that that gesture of her hands on her robe brought my attention to the triangle of skin just below the base of her throat. And now I was intensely aware of how nearly naked both of us were. For a moment that's all I could think about. I couldn't decide if she was simply very comfortable with her body, more than I would ever be, or if she was oblivious to how it affected me. Maybe both. I grabbed my left hand in my right and pushed them both down firmly into my lap.

I heard clattering from the kitchen. "I was gonna make a grilled cheese for dinner," Dawn said. "Want one?"

"Ahhhh... actually yes, I would love one. Thank you." Until that instant, I hadn't noticed how hungry I was.

A loaf of bread sat on the counter; she pulled it closer to her and spoke over her

shoulder. "You didn't have other plans, I take it?"

I shook my head. "Not unless you call ramen a plan."

She turned away to pay attention to her sandwich building. "Yeah, that sounds like the sort of thing you can postpone without too much trouble, eh?" I heard the clink of a knife, then Dawn called, "Alan," and whistled, a little *wheet-wheet* sound. Alan hopped off the couch and scrambled over to the kitchen counter, where Dawn handed him a piece of cheese. And I wondered if that whistle might not have come in handy when I was trying to find him. And suddenly I realized that that search in the rain felt very far away, like ages ago.

Alan kept circling around Dawn's ankles while she put the sandwiches together – I guess he was hoping for an encore. There was a sizzle when the first sandwich landed in a frying pan. Then she said, "I better feed him now or he won't leave us in peace." I watched her alternate between opening Alan's can, dishing it out, and flipping the grilled cheese over, and somehow everything felt very domestic.

Alan was making enthusiastic noises in his bowl when Dawn switched on the burner under the kettle, then brought the sandwiches over to where I sat. She handed me one – smelled marvelous – then she sat herself in a deep soft armchair facing me, curled her legs up under herself, and raised a triangle of sandwich in a toast. "Oh," she said, "did you want ketchup?"

I shook my head. "No, I'm good."

She shrugged. "I know a lot of people who like it." Then for a while we chewed quietly. The humans, at least.

I swallowed my food and said, "This is really good. Thank you again."

She gave me a gracious nod of her turbaned head, swallowed, then said, "So. While you were in the shower, I called my rassin frassin landlord and got the mystery solved." I perked up. "There was a ceiling leak in the shoe store downstairs, so him and his plumbing contractor, or whatever he said, were checking the apartments up here for leaks. Emergency, so he couldn't give notice. And he says the other guy musta not been careful enough with the door. Oh, and they didn't notice that Alan got out." Her mouth went crooked.

"Huh." I was suddenly glad that my landlady was more on the ball than this.

"Can you believe that?" Dawn put her sandwich down for a second. "All that *yap-yap-yap* going on without letting up, and then suddenly it goes quiet and you *don't notice?! Yeah right.*" She tisked and shook her head. " 'Plumbing contractor'. Fancy name for his brother-in-law, more like. Rassin frassin." She picked up her sandwich again and took an aggressive bite out of it.

"Well, hopefully those guys won't need to come in again."

She spoke around a mouthful. "Meh, who knows. Life is life."

Something about the moment made it feel safer to speak. Together, alone, quiet – I tried not to think about naked. "I, um, actually sometimes I wonder what you think about life. I mean, do you look at life differently when you know you have more than one? Know what I mean? I, I can't help being curious about what things are like for you."

For a second, Dawn looked down at her plate, licked her lip. Then back up at me, and I thought I saw something in her eyes that said she felt safer, too. "Well, remember I don't *knowww* that I do. I probably never will. And to be honest, it doesn't affect my life that much from day to day. It's only random little flashes once in a while – I mean, a lot of days I even forget about it. But, now that you get me to think about it, then yes. I think it does affect how I feel about things."

"Okay."

"The weird thing is, when I think about having another life, it makes me realize that this here and now is my only chance to live *this* life. So don't miss it. When you come back, everything will be different. You've only got this here right now – you won't have it later."

Just then the kettle boiled, and she got up to put tea on. I watched her walk, and was very aware of the back of her neck, which I usually couldn't see. "That's a kind of unexpected way of looking at it. At least *I* didn't expect it. That's cool."

Alan came over to Dawn's chair, sniffing at the plate she left on the seat. As she came back she simply said, "Hey hey." He turned away fast, trotted across to the couch, and jumped up beside me. He curled up, snuggled tight against my leg, and stared in rapt fascination at my grilled cheese.

"This is mine, buddy," I said. "You had yours. You don't want me to go hungry, do you?" He just watched my hand. I felt like my hunger would not concern him to any great degree.

Dawn shook her head and grinned. "I still can't get over how he took to you."

"I'm just lucky."

"And I can't get over how you look in that robe." Her grin got bigger.

"Ah yes, and thank you again, so much."

"If you could see yourself in that – hey, does my cell phone have a camera?"

"No!!" I could feel my eyes bulge. "No, Dawn, c'mon, please!" And her face squinched up while she snickered.

She let out a chuckling sigh. "Relax, milord, you're safe, I'm just.... Anywayyyyyy, yeah, I know my life must look kinda oddball to other people. All this stuff in it that I can't explain, that most folks don't get. And now I find out that Alan is doing all these things I never even realized.... But it's okay. It's not like I need to get anyone else to believe about my lives or whatever. I know what my life is, and I know how to live it. That's all I gotta worry about."

I nodded at that, and she got up to pour and prepare our tea. Alan watched her through every step of it. Then she brought our mugs over, and I caught a flash of leg when she curled up into the armchair again. I put my mug down on the coffee table and tried to unobtrusively push both my hands down into my lap again.

"Are you okay? C'mon, relax."

"This *is* my relaxed. You can tell because my teeth aren't clenched."

Dawn blew across the top of her mug. "Well, maybe I should say this: when I say I know how to live my life, I may be exaggerating slightly. I still have things to learn. I mean, I know I do stupid things sometimes and I know everyone thinks I'm crazy."

"I don't think you are." I reached for my mug, keeping my other hand pressed down. "I would call you more, uh, joyful." She gave me a warm smile at that. "And I've never seen you do anything stupid."

"Oh, it happens, mister, trust me. But not everyone knows, not everyone sees. Like, for example, I got married as soon as I finished high school. *That* was stupid."

My eyebrows went up. "Whoa. Really?"

She nodded, then sipped. "Only for about maybe a year. It was, uh.... Okay: my folks didn't think it was 'proper' for me to leave home until I got married. And it was rotten at home, we argued and fought all the time. And then in Grade Thirteen this guy comes along, who I will not do the honour of ever mentioning his name again thank you very much."

She took another sip. "But it wasn't just that he was my ticket out. I wanted him so bad and fell for him so hard, and that was *another* stupid thing I did. I couldn't imagine ever not being with him. And now I can't imagine ever wanting to see him again."

I sipped at my own tea. "People... fall hard sometimes. It's just what we do."

"Doesn't mean it's not stupid sometimes. Just, thank god we never had kids. I mean, maybe I might want to someday. But not his." She rolled her eyes. "Oh, and by the way, me and my folks get along a lot better now, since I moved out and grew up a little, I guess."

I shrugged. "Looks like you could've just moved out on your own anyway, maybe?"

"Well *yeah*, I know that *nowwww*!" And Dawn laughed. "What can I tell ya? I was very young when I was young." She drank some of her tea. "It's funny: sometimes I think about being already divorced at my age, and I look around at all my friends who aren't even married yet... and it's like somehow that makes me feel more experienced and, and mature, y'know?"

"Well... I guess our culture kinda encourages us to think that way, right? Like being married, even for a while, is one of those Big Life Things." I flashed her some air quotes for that last phrase.

"Maybe.... but then I look at my slippers, and all the unicorns in my bedroom, and I know that that's bull – I'm not mature at all!" She laughed.

"I dunno. I think you are. Or enough, anyway. I think you do a great job of keeping the office running. That's a lot of responsibility. I mean, I don't know what we, the office would do without you."

Her eyes sparkled. "I'm gonna quote you when Inez does my performance review." And another laugh. I was coming to realize that her laughter was something that comforted her.

I blushed just a little. "I can't see that my word carries any kind of weight with her, y'know?"

"Ward." She set her mug down, not too quietly. "God, that is so much like you. That is you, right there."

I blinked and felt a soft quiver in my stomach.

"I, I don't understand this about you. It's like you can't see anything good or, or worthwhile in yourself. You think you're nothing, and you figure everyone else thinks you're nothing." She bit her lip. "I mean, maybe it's your business if you can't see what I, what we see in you. However dumb that is. But you don't get to decide that for other people. You gotta let us see what we see and think what we think."

"I...." My throat felt tight and I drank some more.

"God, you can be so clueless sometimes I just wanna – " She shook her head hard, and I noticed she was blinking fast. "Tonight, when Alan was gone, I called my friends, and they said they'd come help 'later if they could'. *Some* of them. When I was asking the neighbours, they all said they 'hoped he turned up okay'. But who came? Who actually showed up?" Her eyes looked wet now, and I thought I saw her lip trembling. "Don't you understand how much that's worth? Do you have any idea how much that means to me?"

I felt stuck. My mouth fell open a little. I just breathed and watched her breathe.

Suddenly she sniffed and stood. "Get up," she said.

I did, carefully. She stepped around the coffee table, stopped an inch in front of me, then wrapped her arms around my shoulders, squeezed, and buried her face in my neck. My heart beat harder, and her voice was muffled in me: "Thank you. Thank you again. Just for being here."

And for I don't know how long, we stood there, and I felt her against me. Once or twice it felt like her chest shook. Then she said into my neck, "You're allowed to do it back."

So I put my arms around her, trying to keep them up around her shoulder blades. After a few seconds, it felt like we squeezed in tighter together, and our arms slid down a little. I could feel how thin the material of her robe was, and how warm her body was under it. My own body started to respond, and I felt it happen with a mixed feeling of dread and rightness. She twitched in my arms when she noticed it. Then I felt her hips shift back, just enough so that we stopped pressing together that low, but she still held my chest tight to her. Like she was saying *Yes, I understand that happens, but we can just put it aside for now and not let it interrupt this moment.* And I felt understood, and accepted without judgment, and that flooded me with wonder.

For a second she burrowed her face deeper into my neck. Then she loosened her arms, pulled back away from me, and looked at me. Her eyes shone, and her smile was shy. "I bet that stuff in the dryer finished a long time ago," she said.

I nodded. "Probably."

Quietly she said, "I'll go get it. Be right back."

I watched her go, heard the door close, then turned around to look at Alan. He was curled up on the couch, asleep.

Chapter Twenty-Six

T minus 57 days

Early November came with an early snow: unlikely but not unprecedented. I had to dig my boots and heavy coat out of the closet before I left for work, and stamp my boots off under the awning before I went into the office.

As I went by the front desk, Dawn called out, "Sing 'True' for me!"

"Too cold!" I called back, and kept going.

The temps and I exchanged good mornings as I went into the office. Lately they seemed more relaxed. Already we were well into the tail end of dealing with Y2K, less testing and more triple-checking what already seemed to be working well. Thanks to their help, the work had progressed really fast, and I couldn't blame them for feeling like the next month or so would be easy money for them.

Before I could even turn on my computer, Steve was in the doorway, tapping on the frame. "O mighty Ward," he intoned. "Can you spare me a few minutes?"

I stood up. "Sure." He slid his hands into his pockets, beckoned with his head, and slunk away toward his office. Of course I worried instantly. For some reason, I always assumed that being called into the boss's office without warning equalled something bad.

He stepped behind his desk and rolled his chair out beside it. "Get the door, will ya, man?" I swallowed. A closed-door meeting equalled something worse.

I sat in one of the chairs around his table and held my knees. "What's up?" I said. "Something wrong?"

"Hm? Awwww, no, man, no, quite the contrary. All is cool." He leaned back and gave me a slow, reassuring nod.

"Okay?"

"First off, I wanted to let you know that I put the new Y2K-compliant overnight up live in the server yesterday, and it ran last night like a dream. Like. A. Dream. That was one of our biggest hurdles, and we cleared it with a foot to spare, man."

I nodded. "I, uh, glad to hear that."

"As am I. It bodes well. I've also been looking over some of the reports that Guita and Neil have turned in, and yeah. At the risk of hubris, I will say that we have this whole Millennium Bug thing well in hand. So kudos to the team."

"Great." Still couldn't see why any of this called for this meeting, so it was too soon to relax.

"I'm sure you'll appreciate that a lot of that is down to that search algorithm back in the summer, and the weeks if not months of time it saved."

"Well, yes, that, uh, that's what it was for. Heh."

"Just so. A sweet piece of work. Impressed Inez, impressed people outside the Institute. You've seen the source code for that program, right? You must have."

I swallowed. "Yes, of course. I, uhh, I looked at it more than once."

"My good man, I would call that source code a thing of beauty. A work of art. I hope you could appreciate that when you saw it. Concise, ingenious, masterful use of subroutines. And it's so thoroughly commented, too, which makes it so smooth and easy to follow. Not everyone is so willing to put that extra effort into the commentary."

"I, uh, I understand that's good form. Though."

"True enough, Ward, true enough. In fact, after Patrick brought it to me, and I had time to read it over closely... I couldn't help being reminded of some of the things I've seen *you* write."

My stomach fell.

"I've been waiting since then to see if you... ever had anything to say regarding that. Maybe shed a bit more light on it for me."

After a couple of breaths, I said, "I'm... not really sure what to say. I know that Patrick sees my work, too. Maybe he saw how I do commenting and, and thought that might be something he, he could use?"

"So, like, your good work habits have been rubbing off on him?"

"Maybe?" I hated how my voice squeaked when I said that.

"That could be it, I suppose." Steve ran his tongue behind his upper lip. "Well, can you think of anything else about that algorithm I should know?"

I sat and squeezed my knees. The right word and I could dump Patrick in deep trouble. Maybe. Maybe in the world of office intrigue, something like this was trivial. But maybe it could get him fired. And I couldn't live with myself, doing that to anyone. Not even Patrick. I had my own peace of mind to think of.

"Steve, I...." He leaned forward a little. "The thing that matters about it is that it worked, and it helped us when we needed help. It's good for our department and good for the Institute. We, all of us, we're a good team and we do good work. I, I just want things to stay like that." And I realized what I said was true. Even though bridges weren't mended between Patrick and me, and I didn't expect them to be. I recognized that, between us, we still got the work done, and done well.

Steve tapped the armrest of his chair, then gave me a slow nod. "You are a team player, man, and a good one. I'm glad it's my team you're on. And I hope you'll stay on it a good while yet." I nodded, and he leaned in a little closer. "I just want you to know that I notice, and I understand, and I appreciate you. Can you dig it?"

I nodded again. He clapped his knees and stood up. "Okay then, I guess that's dismissed, man. To the salt mines with you."

Just after lunch, I heard a "Hsst!" from my doorway. I turned to see Dawn's head poked in. "Lord Ward! C'mere!"

I said "What?" but she was already strolling past the temps' stations and I was already standing up. So I followed after.

We passed through Outreach and I saw where Patrick had gotten to. Serena the Dark-Haired Twin was still there, but a week ago, Barbie had quit and a new

blonde now sat in her place. Since then, Patrick had spent a lot of time providing New Blonde with lots of orientation about her computer and our file systems and whatever else might occur to the two of them. We all ignored each other as Dawn and I walked past, finally coming to the building's rear entry near the Lecture Hall doors. She walked over to the first set of double doors leading outside, leaned on it, and looked back at me. "C'mon!"

"What are we doing?"

"We're gonna dance barefoot in the snow!"

I scowled. "How about no?"

She pulled at my arm. "I was looking out the window at all this gorgeous snow and suddenly thought this would be so fun. You need more fun, mister!"

I tried to pull back. "This is not fun. This is nuts."

She just said "Ohhhh!" and somehow tugged me through the outer doors, both of us without coats, til we stood beneath the tiny awning over the doorway. The snow was still falling heavy, looking like fat stars blinking before the Research Building across the compound. There weren't many footprints running through the snow – with it rolling thick over the ground just a few feet away, and the breathless silence of the flakes drifting down, it all did look a little like a Christmas movie. So, yes, nice to *look at*, but.

I heard rustling beside me. Dawn had taken her shoes off, and was pulling off her socks and stuffing them inside. She hopped from one bare foot to the other on the cold cement of the entryway, her indrawn breath hissing between her teeth. She flashed her wide eyes at me. "Come on, Ward! Let's do it!"

I tried to look stern at her. Not sure if I succeeded. "No! And you shouldn't, either! I mean, who *does* something like this?"

"I dunno – *Swedes!* Okay, I'll get started, you'll see." She jumped out into the snow, and as soon as she touched it let out a sound that was part laugh, part shriek. And she hopped and swirled and kept screaming, lifting her arms up, the snowflakes collecting in her hair. And I stood under the awning, hugging my shoulders, and my heart jumped to see the smile that lit her face. I still thought this was insane, and I felt no impulse to join her, but I couldn't help admiring her

daring.

I'm sure it was less than ten seconds before her hysterical sounds changed to, "Oh, god, that's enough," and she jumped back under shelter, grabbed my upper arm, and shivered. She grabbed her socks out of her shoes and handed them to me, saying "ow ow ow". I saw her feet bright pink and shiny wet. She said "eww" as she slid a wet foot into its shoe, then "eww" again for the other one.

She leaned on me. "Oh god, I dunno if I can make it back." But she giggled. I put an arm around her shoulders, carried her socks, and helped her hobble, panting, back to her desk. I could feel the Outreach girls looking at us as we passed by them.

When I finally got Dawn to her desk, she kicked her shoes off, sat on her chair, curled up to pull her feet up onto the seat, her knees near her ears, and wrapped her hands around her toes as best she could. Then she looked up at me, bit her lip, and giggled.

"Wait here," I said, "I'll be right back." "Right back" turned out to be closer to ten minutes when I came in the main foyer, in my boots and coat, carrying a couple of white cloth towels. I trotted over to Dawn's desk and handed them to her. "Wrap up in those for a while."

She frantically wrapped the towels around her feet, saying, "Oh my god, you completely rock!" Then she took a deep breath, sighed it out, and looked up at me, almost shy.

"I went over to the nurse's station in Facilities to get those," I said. "I told them something about possible frostbite, to make it sound more medical."

That got a laugh out of her. She blinked up at me. "Thank you again."

I just shook my head and said, "Swedes?"

She looked at her feet, and rubbed them through the towels. "I guess in a way it was nice to see you say no. You only let people push you around so far."

"I don't feel like I let people push me around at all. I mean, maybe it looks like it from the outside, but I always know why I do what I do."

"Well, that must be nice – sometimes I'll do something and then wonder what the heck I was thinkin'!"

"Like today?"

"Maybe." She chuckled.

"Well, I guess a lot of us sometimes need someone to, to save us from ourselves."

"I guess." She looked up at me. "That's something else I like about you. You're, I dunno... grounded? Like you feel connected to the real world, maybe."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "I don't think you'd say that if you saw how much time I spend playing StarCraft."

She grinned. "I know you seem kinda anxious to other people, but I dunno... I think things feel peaceful around you. Maybe that's what Alan picks up on. He's a smart puppy."

"Except when he runs away and gets lost in the rain."

"I guess he takes after me, that way."

"There are worse people to take after," I said.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

T minus 41 days

On Friday the 19th, Dr. Nathan's study wrapped up. She emailed Dawn and me, thanking us for our participation and reassuring us that, even though the study wasn't groundbreaking and would never be famous, the results were exciting and worthy. She also asked me to collect the camera and cell phone and return them to her office at my earliest convenience. And so now, on the afternoon of Saturday the 20th, I was stamping the snow off my boots in front of Dawn's street-level door, holding a bag of equipment, and pressing buzzer number 203.

As soon as I made my first tap on the apartment door, I could hear Alan yapping and scrabbling around the floor inside. Dawn let me in, and while I opened my coat and hung it on a hook, Alan made two more frantic barks, noticed it was me, and then went quiet. He trotted over to my feet, wagged, and looked up with his *how ya doon* face. Of course I bent down to pet him.

I pulled my boots off and Dawn picked Alan up to cuddle him. "I think he recognizes your name now," she said. "When you buzzed, he started barking, and I said, 'That's Ward – remember you like Ward?' And when I said that, he stopped barking and started wagging for a second."

"Huh. Well, that's kind of sweet." I squatted down by the camera, took a quick look at its control box, then shut it down and unplugged it.

She stood close beside me and watched me work. "So this experiment ended up being really cool, eh? I mean, like, Alan must be psychic or something."

"Sure seems like it." I unplugged a cord, wrapped it, and stuffed it in my bag. "To hear the doctor tell it, there are lots of those. Makes me wonder why it's so hard to prove so that everyone accepts it."

Dawn shrugged. "It's complicated, I guess." She lifted Alan til his snout was level with hers. "But I already knew that Alan was the most super special puppy. Didn't I, cutie?" She made kissy lips at him, and a sound like *moo-wuh, moo-wuh*. I watched those lips, and for a second forgot what I was doing.

I turned toward the wall and started pulling up the long phone wire taped along the baseboards. "Yeah, he's a great little guy. I'm really glad I got to meet him."

"And you already know how special *you* are to *him*, right?"

"Yeah, that's, uh, flattering." I wound the cord into a loop as I crawled along the wall toward her modem. I wanted to say I'd miss him – and her – but wasn't sure if I dared. I mean, yes, I would see her at work, but that wasn't the same.

I gathered all the stray pieces of tape into a messy ball and asked Dawn to direct me to her garbage can. Then, while I collected the wires and equipment into my bag, she said, "Oh yeah, I have to give that phone back, don't I."

I sighed. "Yeah, it was just a loan."

She walked over to the coffee table and got the cell phone out of her purse, then the charger from beside her TV. While she brought them over to me, she said, "Too bad. I was sorta getting used to it." She looked at the phone while she placed it in my hand. "It was nice, being able to get in touch with you any time I felt like." Then she looked in my eyes, deep, like she was searching for something in them. "Actually, it was nice to have all these excuses to spend more time with you."

I kept my eyes on hers, hoping it would help her find what she was looking for. "Yeah, it was."

"I mean, I'll still see you at work, but that's not the same."

I nodded. "I get that."

She bit her lip, and took a breath, and watched my eyes.

This one time, I decided to let go and go for it. "We still could," I said.

A slow smile grew on her face, like she suddenly saw what she was searching for. "We could."

I nodded.

"Hang out after work?" she said.

"Sure. Go for coffee."

"Invite you over for grilled cheese."

"Have ramen at my place."

"Go out for lunch like Grace and Steve."

"That'd make Patrick gossip some more."

Dawn giggled. "So let him. Go jogging around The Square with Alan?"

"Well, I'd probably just watch you guys do it, but maybe."

She sighed. "I really do like this hanging out with you. I don't wanna lose that."

"Same here." Then I cocked my head. "Hey. You have internet. We could gab on ICQ."

"I *have* internet but don't really *use* it. My brother got it for me, I think so *he* could use it when he visits." She made a crooked smile.

"Well, if you want, we could get you set up so that you know your way around. I mean, you do know an IT guy."

She grinned. "That's right, I do." Her eyebrows lifted. "Oh hey! The Fist Buddies are playing The King Eddie next week! We could go to that!"

"Could we?" I blinked. "I mean, I like them, yeah, but.... That sounds a bit more like a date, doesn't it?"

"I dunno. Could be. Doesn't have to be."

"What about policy, though?"

"Oh." She blushed, and it looked pretty. "Ahhhh.... actually, Patrick was kinda right about that. I don't know if that really is policy or not. I don't think it is. I just said that to him."

"Aha." My turn for eyebrows to go up. "So, really, you just don't want to go places with him."

"I so don't."

"But you *do* want to go places with *me*."

"I so do." Her eyes got warmer. "I don't wanna miss out on hanging with a guy who knows the word 'milliner'. Plus, I don't want Alan to be missing you."

"You're right," I said. "We can't have that."

Not long after I got home, I heard my front doorbell. I peeked through the little window and saw the top of a gray toque. Judging by how far down it was, my guess was Mrs. Goodenough.

I swung the door open and invited her in out of the cold quickly, then closed it behind her. She looked down, to be careful to keep her boots standing on my floormat. Then she looked up at me, and I had a chance to take in the tartan scarf wrapped around her head and neck and lower face, the thick brown coat with fleece collar, and mittens of fat yarn. She reached a mitten up to pull the scarf down, then blinked and gave me a small, lined smile. "Hello, Warren," she said. "My, but it's rather brisk out there today."

"I noticed that. You need to be careful not to be out in it too long."

"Oh, not long at all, dear. I just came over here to ask a favour of you again. You must think I'm awful."

I smiled down. "No, I don't, really. What is it?"

She drew a quavery breath. "I was wondering if by any chance you were going to be here for Christmas and Boxing Day?"

"This year, yes, I am." Normally I would drive up to Owen Sound and stay with my folks then. But this year, they were going to Florida for two weeks over Christmas and New Year's to visit my grandma. They invited me, but I couldn't spare the time or money for a trip that long. So we already arranged to have early Christmas the weekend before, and see each other before they flew south. Sounded like that was a lucky break for Mrs. Goodenough.

"Well, then, could I ask you to feed Aggie for me, those two nights?"

"No trouble, ma'am. How is she?"

"Ohh, managing well enough, dear." She reached out to grasp my forearm, but at least the thick mitten cushioned some of the pressure. "Sometimes I think she still misses Dorothy. They were together a long time, you know."

"I can understand that," I said.

"I'm still thinking about getting another one, but maybe in the new year. After all the holiday hullabaloo dies down, you know."

I nodded. "Yes, ma'am, I know hullabaloo."

She released my arm and started to turn to the door. "I won't keep you, dear. Thank you again for being so sweet. You have a good evening, now."

"Thank you. Be careful on the steps."

She sang back, "I will!" But I had to watch her ease herself down one step at a time, gripping the handrail, and didn't exhale til she reached the ground and was heading next door.

So now I had the excitement of cat-sitting over the holidays. Well, why not? It's not like she was asking me to dance barefoot in the snow.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

T minus 4 hours

The next month passed in a rapid jumble for me.

Dawn and I did go see *The Fist Buddies* the following week. We had a great time, but we agreed it was not a date. Nothing datey happened. Her made-up policy remained standing, unchallenged.

We did many of the hanging-out things we said we would do, and thought up some new ones. I chatted with her on ICQ. Also with Nat. Also with Bill. I wrote new entries for my OpenBook journal. Some of them were about all these new hanging-out things I was now doing. But of course I still didn't name names.

Our battle against Y2K wound down a little ahead of schedule. Speaking of battles, I had a chance to tell Neil that his StarCraft strategy worked, which gave him a chance to wear his triumphant smirk. Then as December wore on, the temps found themselves more often sitting around with nothing much to do. But Steve felt like he promised them jobs til Christmas and wanted to make it worth their while. So Patrick spent a lot of time with them, training them to monitor the help email account and make service calls, possibly giving them valuable job experience for later. I also suspected he spent a good chunk of his time hitting on Guita. Not sure how far he got.

I spent more time building a prototype website for **IFPS.ca** and trying to make Ulrich's materials as useful and attractive as possible. By Christmas it still wasn't ready, but Ms. Szabo was very understanding about it. (I found out later that Steve had a word with her, and let her know that, under the circumstances, it would take a miracle for it to be ready before March, and that she should "be cool".)

The weekend of the 18th, I drove up and spent early Christmas with my folks. The travel tired me out a little but we all had a good time. Mrs. Goodenough pushed a Christmas card through my mailslot. Got together with Bill a few days early and we traded albums: he got me a Hendrix bootleg, I got him the new *I Mother Earth*.

Christmas morning itself was strange, not being with the folks – or anyone – so it seemed too quiet. But there were Merry Christmas emails and ICQs waiting for me from Bill and Nat so I'd know they were thinking of me. And in the

evening, after I finished feeding Spacey and had a chance to admire Mrs. Goodenough's cute tabletop tree, I got an ICQ from Dawn. She was back from spending the day with her family and invited me over for hot chocolate. We exchanged gifts. When I saw that she had a boombox but no CD player, I got her King's X on cassette. She got me a T-shirt with the cover of *The Last Unicorn* printed on it. Where she found it, I had no idea. And it fit. And I also learned that Alan loved shortbreads, and would eat them off anyone's plate, with or without an invitation. You had to watch that guy.

Which all finally brought me to New Year's Eve. The end of 1999. The culmination of months of work and a little more drama than I had anticipated. Steve asked me if I was available to work a few hours that night to babysit the Institute's servers and troubleshoot if the worst befell them. He offered triple-time overtime to sweeten the deal. But he didn't need to. I had no other plans, and I wasn't sure if I'd be able to relax anyway if I were someplace else, worrying about the servers instead of watching them. Besides, I got the feeling that he asked me because he trusted me.

So I sat at my desk, the rest of the building outside my office dim in the emergency lights, prepared to ring in the new year with my friends the computers. I had my web browser up, watching live news feeds from around the world. My ICQ was open but no one else was on it. And tonight, instead of CDs, I had brought my old radio with the telescoping antenna for my tunes. I had it tuned to Happy1460, the Top Forty station back in Belvedere.

It was my personal tradition to listen to their Top 100 of the Year countdown on New Year's Eve. They'd time it so they played the year's number one song just as the clock struck, and when I was a kid, that filled me with awe. (The idea of it, I mean – I couldn't stay awake long enough to hear it for myself, back then.) It was a tradition I kept all my life, except for one or two years when I somehow managed to get invited to someone's New Year's Eve party instead. It didn't matter that these weren't the songs I preferred listening to: it was the concept that counted.

They just finished playing a Britney Spears when I heard the front doors open and the sound of a noisemaker horn, the kind that sound a bit like a kazoo. Then a voice, louder than usual since there was no one to disturb now: "Happy New Year, Lord Ward!"

I grinned, and called back, "You're too early for that!"

In a few seconds, Dawn appeared in my doorway. Cheeks pink from the cold, a few snowflakes still on her shoulders and in her hair, a heavy cloth bag in one mitten, a New Year's horn in the other.

"Well, what the heck," I said. She grinned and her eyes flashed. "I thought you said you were going out with the girls tonight."

She put the bag down. "No, I said they *invited* me to." She opened her coat and tossed it over Patrick's chair. "I did that the last like four years. I don't mind a change this time."

"I'm glad you don't." I watched her pull items out of the bag and set them up on Patrick's desk, out of my way. She held up a Tupperware container. "Sausage rolls."

"Mmm," I said.

A green glass bottle. "Champagne. Chilled, cheap, and cheerful. As opposed to good."

I nodded. "Fancy schmancy, Nancy."

Plastic cups. "Champagne glasses. Or what passes."

"*Haute couture.*"

She hauled out her boombox.

I blinked. "Did you think I didn't already have music here?"

"Trust me, milord." She reached again, pulled out a conical paper party hat with a stretchy string and fitted it onto her head. She grabbed another one, set it on me, then got another noisemaker and stuck it in my mouth. Of course I blew it. And then of course she reached over, pulled up my hat, and let it pop back down onto my head. And laughed.

"Well there," I said. "I'm all partied out now."

"Lightweight." She adjusted her coat on the back of Patrick's chair, then sat and

swivelled. In the background, the pop countdown continued.

"Just so you know," I said, "I *am* getting paid to do actual work here tonight, so sometimes I'll be busy. I mean, you can talk to me, but sometimes I might get quiet."

"No problem. I'm used to that around you now and then. And besides, I brought – " She reached into the bag again and pulled out: " – my cross-stitch."

"Well prepared." I gave her a nod of appreciation, then turned to my screen and quickly scanned a few tabs on my browser.

"So have you run into any trouble yet?" she asked.

"No...." I said to the screen. "And I don't really expect I'm going to." I turned to face her. "The news is coming over the net. It's already 2000 in Australia and Japan, and everything there is fine. No reason to expect different here, really."

"So it was all nothing?"

"No, more like so all the work we did actually helped fix things so they'd be okay. I'm a hero, baby." And I made a bicep at her.

She sat back and laughed. "Don't give me the vapours there, Your Lordship."

I took a quick glance at the servers' error reports and saw nothing. Then I pulled up the prototype website and made a few lazy pokes at it. Just so I could say I did something. This was turning out to be the non-event we all prayed for. At least, as far as the computers went, I mean.

I turned around to face Dawn again. "So this is your idea of how to whoop it up for New Year's Eve? Spend it in an office, cross-stitching with a computer geek?"

She lowered her hoop and gave me a bright look. "This year it is, yeah."

For a minute, all we could do was smile at each other. Then I turned back and tried to be busy. Part of me couldn't believe that she wanted to do this.

Time ticked by. Off and on we gabbed about Alan, and we finally cracked open

the champagne and tasted a bit, and I lectured her about how the year 2000 was *not* the beginning of the third millennium, or even the twenty-first century. "Those are both *2001*, dammit! *That* is the hill I choose to die on!"

"How about the beginning of the decade, then? The ohs?"

I sighed. "All right, I'll give you that one."

She smiled into her plastic cup of champagne. "Nerd." And I laughed.

We ate sausage rolls [I probably had too many], and I checked the news, or non-news, coming from Europe, and we talked about our families and what it was like to be with them at Christmas, and pop songs were rolling by, and we just hung out, just being us, and it was wonderful.

Once it passed 11:30, we started checking the time more and more often. At 11:59, she made me stand up and put my hat back on. We watched the seconds tick by, and in the back of my head I thought, *What if our hydro company is the only one who blew it, and the power goes out?* I couldn't help it, I braced myself for a blackout –

Which didn't come. The radio DJ said "Happy New Year". Far off in the distance there were car horns from those few people driving by. The radio started playing Ricky Martin's "Vida Loca". And Dawn stepped close to me, pulled me by my shoulders, and kissed me.

This one wasn't nothing. Sweet. Soft. Delicious. And just a little longer than it needed to be. Then she pulled back, and looked into my eyes as if there were nothing else in the world to see, and very quietly she said, "Happy New Year, Ward."

"Happy New Year, Dawn," I near-whispered back.

After a few seconds of just watching each other, she stepped back and said, louder, "Happy Twenty-First Century!"

"No!" I said, and she cackled. I turned to check my monitor, just to be sure the Institute's systems were all running fine, and of course they were. "All systems go," I said. "Guess that's it. We made it."

Dawn made a little golf clap and said, "But that's not quite it. Can you turn the radio off, please?" I did, and she picked up her boombox, set it on Patrick's desk beside her, and plugged it into his power bar. "I thought we should start the new year off right. The way we mean to go on."

I nodded. "That sounds wise."

She reached a finger over to the Play button of the cassette controls, and I saw she already had a tape cued up in the player. Then she turned to me, looking relaxed and self-satisfied, contented and glowing, and she pressed the button.

And her boombox started playing the intro to "True".

She said nothing. She just looked at me and her smile got wider.

I blushed, and shrugged, pulled the hat off and tossed it onto my desk. Then I turned to face her, and I realized that I would do almost anything for her. Almost.

I didn't sing "True" for her. I did an imitation of Tony Hadley singing "True". But I did it. And I did it for her. And through the whole song, she watched me again with that Christmas-surprise expression. I could get used to that.

When the song ended, she clicked the player off, stood up, and stepped closer to me. Sounding a little breathless, she said, "Now *that* makes it a happy New Year."

And this time her arms went right around me, and mine went around her, and we kissed again, no way of knowing how long, this time there were soft sounds and deeper breaths, and this time we both knew that we meant it. We meant everything.

This time only her mouth pulled away from me. The rest of her stayed where I had it. "I have an idea," she said.

"That doesn't surprise me," I said. "You're a clever lady."

"Off and on." We both grinned. She went on. "Your work is done here now, right? Everything's okay. You're a hero."

"Correct."

"So we don't need to stay here anymore, milord." She leaned in for a tiny, fast kiss. "But we could keep celebrating New Year's if we want to. For a while longer. Start the new year off right. The way we mean to go on."

"I like the sound of this idea," I said. And we kissed again. Not as tiny, and not as fast.

A while later, I saw for myself that a couple of the things Dawn previously told me were indeed true.

One: once Alan was asleep, the noise of someone entering the apartment did not wake him up – he was a terrible watchdog.