

The Kids Are Alright

(Tales of Westgate #2)

by

John MacLeod

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The Kids Are Alright

One

It seems to me that the whole thing really started at The Loft with The Doughty Swains, which I would never have expected – and I guess it ended up somewhere I never saw coming. But yeah, it started that night at The Loft.

The wooden beams in The Loft's ceiling always felt so low that I wanted to duck my head when I went in, even though I'm not what you would call tall. A few space heaters scattered around were enough to keep away the evening chill of November in such a small space. I looked around to see which empty table I felt like claiming when I heard someone call "Hey Mari!"

I turned my head and saw Mitch Sano waving at me from a table near what they called the "stage". He beckoned me over so I went to sit with him. What with us both wearing our black leather jackets on this night, we looked even more alike than usual. (Although I am pretty sure his is real leather.) People who didn't know us and saw us together would sometimes mistake us for brother and sister just because we both have Oriental features. I just shrug it off.

Mitch is basically the biggest rock star in Westgate, which is like the biggest fish in the world's smallest pond. He's a fantastic guitarist, a decent singer, and his band Ikiru really rocks. But he never acts like a rock star – we may not bump into each other all that often, but he's always friendly and he always talks to me like an equal.

I scraped my chair out so I could sit by him, both of us facing the two empty chairs and small amp by the wall where the magic would happen. We both said our how-ya-doons and I rubbed my hands together to try to warm them up.

"Been a while," he said. "You still singing with, uh, Pink Riot?"

"Pink Rage. And yeah, still." Well, singing in Cat's basement is still singing, right? I had asked the other girls in the band if they wanted to come with me to catch The Doughty Swains, but none of them did. Cat even snorted at the idea, I think.

Mitch stood up. "Hey, I'm gonna grab a drink before they start – you want one?"

"Yeah okay, thanks." I fished out two bucks from my pocket and handed it to him. I watched him shuffle over to the back corner where Vito sat near a cooler full of Labatt's Blue. If you didn't want a Blue then you did without. And exact change only. The Loft was a pretty casual place.

I looked around while I waited. There were maybe ten other people here; I nodded at a few I recognized. The whole place could maybe hold two dozen. Vito kept The Loft operating over top of his restaurant downtown purely as a labour of love. Tiny, no actual stage, no sound system, no lights – a place this small, you could sing without a mike and everyone could hear you just fine. When some anonymous folkie with an acoustic guitar and mandolin would come wandering through this part of Ontario, The Loft is the kind of place they'd play.

And also the kind of place The Doughty Swains played, every month or two. Just as Mitch returned and set my bottle in front of me, The Swains decided it was time to start. They walked through the door from a back room, weaving through the tables, carrying their instruments and drinks, and sat in those two designated chairs at the front. Frank with his acoustic guitar, Inch with her electric bass.

Let me tell you about Frank and Inch.

Back in '92, Frank and Inch, along with Mitch and their drummer Dougie, were Vog – Westgate's first grunge band. A lot of us thought they were Westgate's first *good* band. At first they only played the King Eddie and other bars downtown, and back then me and my friends were still underage. (I only just turned twenty a month or so before this gig now.) But by the following year, they were also playing the local schools and even opened for somebody at the hockey arena, and we finally got to hear Vog.

Oh. My. God. They were fantastic. We fell for them, we fell hard. We went to every Vog gig we possibly could. We couldn't believe they didn't have records, we couldn't believe they weren't on the radio and MuchMusic, they were The Best. Cat and the others would tell you, Vog was what inspired us to form our own band. I still feel so lucky to have been there, to see and hear them.

And then, just last year, Kurt Cobain died, and that derailed Frank completely. No one saw him for about a month. And then he announced that he was leaving Vog, and Inch decided to go with him. No hard feelings from Mitch and Dougie, as far as anyone could tell, but they wanted to keep going. So they got in a

couple of new guys and, out of respect, changed the name – to Ikiru, and they were still going strong.

Ikiru were playing bigger places and drawing bigger crowds than Vog ever had. They played Toronto now and then; they even put an album out. They had real punk-pop appeal, and I loved that and loved them. But Frank had a kind of I guess you'd call spirituality about him, something you couldn't replace. Ikiru were great, but Vog were magic.

No one heard Frank perform for maybe half a year, and then word got around that he had formed an unplugged duo with Inch, playing acoustic Nirvana covers along with some new originals. They were called The Doughty Swains. Playing only sporadically, they'd been going for close to a year now. And tonight here they were.

I watched Inch plug her bass in and adjust the knobs on her amp. She was even shorter than me to begin with, but sitting down with the bass in her lap made it look bigger than she was. Frank pulled the pick out of his guitar strings, settled in, and gently shook his long blond hair back from his face. He gazed out at his dozen listeners with a smile that looked a bit tired but still felt as glowing peaceful as it had always been.

"A good evening to all adherents of Euterpe," he said, almost like a blessing. "Most of you have by now deduced that we are The Doughty Swains. Our first attempt to regale you is of course a Kurt Cobain composition called 'About a Girl'."

Frank started off alternating two chords on his worn guitar for the intro, then Inch's bass joined in softly when the first vocal verse started. There was nothing like the raw energy of Vog's gigs, but the two of them looked really serene. I saw Mitch was watching and listening with silent focus. I looked back at Frank and couldn't help noticing the black band on his left bicep. Kurt had been gone over a year and a half, but ever since that day, I had never seen Frank without a black armband. Out on the street, playing here, at his job, didn't matter – it was always there.

They finished the song to quiet applause, and then went on to play a few others, including some Vog songs that brought back memories. At one point he

introduced "a new original, provisionally entitled 'Be Here Now' ". And when I heard that, I couldn't help thinking that my mom would approve – I couldn't tell you how many times she has said that. She would probably also like the song, too: it was thoughtful and pretty.

Then Frank paused for a drink, looked our way, and nodded at Mitch with a smile. And he saw me sitting there, too. He leaned over to Inch and spoke too quietly for anyone else to hear. Inch looked directly at me, gave a little smile, then turned back to Frank. She nodded and they spoke in near-whispers a bit longer.

Frank looked over toward Mitch and me, and called "Mari?" I could feel my eyebrows go up, but nothing else moved. He beckoned me to the "stage" with long gentle fingers. I know I blushed, but I got up and went over to him.

He leaned in close and talked very quietly again. "It seems reasonable to assume you know 'Come As You Are'?" I nodded. I loved Nirvana almost as much as he did, and that was one of their big hit singles, of course I knew it. "Can I interest you in singing it with us? It'll be fun."

My mouth moved silently. Pink Rage hadn't had a gig in over a year, and that was the last time I sang for an audience that wasn't the band or my parents. "I..." And suddenly I realized how I missed it. I grinned. "Yeah okay!"

His eyes crinkled. "Capital. Procure one of those chairs there and slide it beside mine – I'll provide the backing vocals for you." Then he spoke up so the room could hear. "Please allow us to introduce Mari Takamura, a rising young chanteuse and one of Westgate's finest." There was a polite spatter of applause as I set my chair beside Frank's and cleared my throat. I felt quivery but not as bad as I expected.

Inch's bass started off the opening riff and there was louder applause from the small audience as they recognized it. Frank's guitar joined in, then he nodded at me for my cue.

As always, I tried to put some Joan Jett grit into my voice and I dove off the cliff:

*Come as you are
As you were
As I want you to be*

I know I was blushing but it felt more like glowing. I could feel the smile in my cheeks and eyes, and my heart pounding. I glanced over at Frank and saw him gently nodding in encouragement. He leaned in toward me a bit when his lines came up, and I felt like we sounded smooth together. Suddenly, gazing at those bright, pale eyes, I was flooded with the awareness that, back in the Vog days, Frank was my hero – and he still was. And I had the hugest crush on him back then – and I still did.

Still trying to focus on my voice, I looked at Inch, wondering if maybe she would be ticked like I was trying to Steal Her Guy or something. But she was just giving us a small smile, and playing fluid and sweet. She generally seemed happier and more relaxed than she used to, back in the Vog days. And back then, *she* was my hero, too. (I remembered my attempt in '93 to copy her short spiky bleached punk 'do, which I quickly regretted and abandoned.) And she still *was* my hero. And I had the hugest crush on *her* back then, too – and I still did.

We came to the end of the song, people clapped, and I let out a long breath. Frank raised his hands and gently applauded toward me, saying "Mari Takamura!" I gave a little bow of the head toward the audience before I got up from my chair and went back to Mitch's table, feeling a little wobbly still. Mitch gave me a grin and nod as I sat by him, and he said, "Good one, Mari!" By then, The Doughty Swains were already beginning their next number.

After the Swains' set, Vito switched on the boombox he used as The Loft's P.A. system and provided background music for those who wanted to stay and drink a bit longer. Frank and Inch came over to greet Mitch; they also thanked me and told me how great I was, which was nice to hear whether I thought I was or not. I stood and thanked them for inviting me up and told them I had fun, because I did. I promised myself I would push Cat harder to find real gigs for us soon.

When Inch noticed I was readying to leave, she said, "You wanna stay and have another one with us? C'mon."

I shook my head. "No, I gotta work tomorrow, I gotta go. Thanks again." We all nodded goodbyes and I started heading for the exit. Then I heard sharp, crisp footsteps coming toward me and an unfamiliar voice said, "Mari?"

I turned toward the voice. A man came striding toward me, slow but full of purpose and confidence, like he owned the place. I had sorta seen him sitting at the back before. Tallish, I guess, but next to me everyone is. Older than me – late thirties, maybe? He smelled like he'd just been smoking. There was something in his face that reminded me of a fox. He looked like he put gunk in his thick, dark-blond hair and spent hours getting it to look exactly, perfectly wild and casual. He was taut and lean, in a neat black suit. I know it sounds weird, but there was something about him that made me feel like I was looking at a scalpel.

I looked him in the eye, trying to read him, and I was glad I had friends nearby to be witnesses. "Yes?"

"I really enjoyed your singing." He held out a business card which he'd kept ready in his hand and pressed it into my fingers. "Dev Knight. DevilKnight Productions." He looked into my eyes a bit deeper, like he was trying to find something. "Call me. I'll make you a star."

And then he turned and his shiny black shoes made those sharp sounds again as he headed out the exit before me.

Two

"Mariel! You're late!"

I barely managed to lift my head from the pillow. "I'm up, daddy!" I called down to him. When daddy calls me by my full name, I know I blew it somehow, but he also has a way of making it sound not too disastrous. The clock beside my bed said 7:10. Hmm yeah, I was late. I must've turned the alarm off instead of snoozing it, again. Gotta find a way to stop doing that.

I padded downstairs in my way-too-big old T-shirt that I sleep in, and saw some toast waiting on the kitchen table along with a coffee. If I took the toast with me and skipped the coffee I might still be able to make the bus to work, but I knew how daddy frowned on anyone eating breakfast on the run – especially me. "Sit down and eat, Mari, I'll drive you," he said over his own coffee. "But this is the last time." No it wasn't.

"Mm, thanks, daddy." I bit into my toast – nice and crunchy but not enough butter. While I chewed it loud, I thought about that Dev guy at The Loft last night. Daddy sometimes played trumpet for commercials and stuff in Toronto, but not as often as he'd like. But he had connections in the music business in the area – he knew people. "Hey, have you ever heard of a guy called Dev Knight?"

He looked across at me, puzzled. After a second, he said, "Don't think so. Why?"

I sipped at my coffee – not enough sugar, but cool enough that I could gulp it, at least. So I did. "When I was at The Loft last night, he comes up to me and gives me his card. DevilKnight Productions. Says he can make me a star."

Daddy's eyes opened wider. "Really? Well, isn't that just like something out of the movies, eh?" He drank some more. "Give me his card and I'll see what I can find out – I'll ask around." I nodded, then finished eating and trotted upstairs to get my work uniform.

While daddy navigated through downtown to get to the little plaza where Calder's Food Mart ruled, I got my wallet out and found the business card. When we stopped at a light, I handed it to him and he tucked it in his jacket pocket.

"Thanks, punkin."

"Hey, where was mom? She's usually up before I leave."

"At work – she decided to walk today."

"It's Saturday."

"Special meeting of the board. A big investor is in town and wants to meet them all, and this morning is the only time they can make it." Mom works at the Institute for Paranormal Studies, like a lot of people in Westgate do – I think she's the CFO or something. You'd think in a place like that, she'd come home with a lot of weird and cool stories, but no. Unless you think quarterly reports are weird and cool.

After we drove a couple more blocks, daddy suddenly said, "Do you *wanna* be a star?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, if it turns out that this Knight fella is someone you actually wanna get mixed up with. Is this what you want?"

"Well..." I thought a bit. As if I hadn't been thinking about it all along. "He *is* talking about me being a singer. I got to sing at The Loft last night – "

"Wow, really?"

"Just a bit, but yeah, it was great! And he heard me there."

"Well, I know you always loved to sing, punkin, ever since you were tiny."

"So I guess yeah, why wouldn't I wanna take a shot at it, right?" And somehow, talking about it out loud, I finally felt like maybe there was some small possibility that something could really come of all this.

Daddy pulled up in front of Calder's to let me out. When we stopped, he turned to me and said, "Just remember: when you win the Juno, your acceptance speech has to thank Ken Takamura for giving you his musical genes."

I rolled my eyes a bit, but also half-smiled at him and said, "Deal."

After work, I caught the bus back home, had dinner, packed my good microphone in its little steel suitcase, grabbed a ginger ale out of the fridge, and walked in the chilly evening to Cat's place. For the first, and likely only, time this month, Pink Rage were going to rehearse.

I could hear the dull thumping of their music coming from below as soon as I walked into her kitchen with its odd smells. I opened the door to the basement steps and called down, "Hey up!" The guitar roar lumbered to a stop and I heard calls of "Hey up!" as I eased myself down the rickety wooden steps.

No surprises here tonight. Cat leaned her battered guitar on the wall, got her cigarettes and lighter from the top of her amp, and lit another one up. The lighter flame made a glow on her sunken face and short, angrily chopped dark hair, but the blaze in her eyes was always there, even without the lighter. Her dull white T-shirt hung limp on her, but her black pants looked too tight to move in them.

Not far from her, sleepy-eyed Ali ran her fingers back through her thick shaggy mop, dyed dayglo pink, and smiled like she'd just thought of a joke she would never remember to tell anyone. She was wearing the same tight black pants as Cat, and a tattered gray T-shirt that she filled out more. Her bass hung crooked around her neck, and she seemed to carry the weight of it without even noticing.

Cat and Ali had been basically inseparable since they met back in junior high, and it was rare to see one without the other. In high school, we used to refer to them as one single entity named AliCat. Even now, after high school, Cat was majoring in women's studies at Royal U. And Ali did the same, for no other reason than that's what Cat was doing.

Back in the corner, Esi sat behind her drum kit, chewing gum and gazing seriously at me. Those big brown eyes of hers always gazed seriously. And the mouth always chewed, but said not very much. When she did speak, I listened carefully – she could surprise you with her smarts. Her tight white wife-beater glowed against her skin and left her arms free to move when the time came.

I walked over to Cat's wobbly mike stand and set my mike up. "What were you playing just then?"

"I figured out a new Heavens To Betsy tune the other day, teachin' it to them," said Cat, blowing smoke in my direction. "Once I get the lyrics then you can learn it, too."

I nodded. "Cool." I tested the mike, tweaked a couple of knobs on its amp. "Okay! Uhh... can we start with 'C.N. Tower'?"

Cat's nose wrinkled. "Aaaa, not yet, let's do 'Rebel Girl'." Ali chimed in, " 'Rebel Girl' ! Yeah!"

I shrugged. It was Cat's band – unofficially, maybe, but true anyway. She was way into riot grrrl, and so was Ali of course. Any time I tried to steer us more toward the classic rock 'n' roll that I really loved, I got shot down. Had been that way for two years now.

Esi counted four – her voice deeper than you expected, the first time you heard her – and AliCat bashed into the song. This one was tough for me, it strained my throat pretty hard. As always, we sounded kinda ragged – Esi was by far the strongest musician of all of us, not super fancy but really tight and solid.

AliCat always told me that riot grrrl didn't need to be all slick and polished, that's why they didn't wanna practise too much, it was more punk rock that way. And I respected the riot grrrls, and the punks, I really did... but if I was being honest with myself, it didn't quite feel right for me and what I wanted. But while I was doing this material, I gave it my best.

When the song finished, and Ali played a couple notes too many after everyone else stopped, I opened my ginger ale and had a couple of swigs. Long ago I learned that I needed this to soothe my throat after the way I had to push it here.

Cat called out, "Pop Princess!" Half a beat behind her, Ali said, "Pop Princess, drinkin' pop, ha!" I just nodded. It wasn't really funny even the first time, but I was tired of it long ago. AliCat never were, though. I glanced over at Esi – she just looked at me calmly and chewed.

Then Cat got a strange look on her gaunt face and said, "Hey, speaking of pop princess, what's this I hear about you singin' with Frank last night?"

Oh, word got around, huh? "Uh, yeah, he asked me to come up and do one

song with them. So?"

"So? It woulda been a good chance to put in a word about us! Did ya even?"

"I never really had a chance for anything like that, no. Besides, what would I say? It's not like anyone can ever come out and hear us anywhere." In our two years together, Pink Rage had played in public exactly twice. Once at a special all-ages open-mike kind of thing at The Ambassador. And once we actually got to open for Ikiru, but that was only because they were playing our old high school, and some of the older kids on the events committee remembered us and pulled a few strings. Otherwise, we were nothing but a bunch of loud girls hacking around in a basement once or twice a month. Fun, but nothing more than that. I at least wasn't kidding myself about us.

"So what? So you're gonna turn folkie like Frank just so you can play to ten people? You gonna sell out like your precious Joan Jett?" The way Cat spat that name out made me angrier than it should've. "We're doing serious work here! I thought you were supposed to be part of it!"

I could feel my lips pressing tight together, then I said, "Cat, there is nothing 'serious' or 'work' about what we do here."

The next few seconds felt slowed down and unreal. Cat suddenly lunged at me, swinging her arm like she was trying to slap me. I jumped back, Cat's forearm clipped the mike stand, and it toppled over hard. My mike bounced off the cement floor with a loud squeal.

I cried out, "Hey!" I pushed Cat away and knelt down by the mike. There was a big dent where the fall had flattened some of the screen, and I could feel my eyes welling up. I moaned "No". From the corner of my eye I could see Cat's feet coming back at me, but before I could move, Esi's voice said "Cat" a lot louder than I had ever heard her. I didn't see what happened next, I was busy unhooking my mike from the stand and looking it over for more damage... but after a second Cat backed away from me and let me finish.

My parents gave me this mike for Christmas a couple years ago. It was pretty nice. From where I kneeled, I looked up at Cat, glaring and blinking. I could feel my teeth gritting behind my lips.

She didn't even have the grace to look sheepish. She just muttered, "It'll still

work, what the fuck."

I packed the mike into its little case and stood up. Still blinking, I looked at AliCat and said, "I'm done."

Cat spoke up a little bolder. "Damn right you are. About goddamn time."

"Mari." I turned to look at Esi. Her eyes were bright. "This is not just about tonight. Or last night. This has been a long time coming." She glanced at Cat for a second, then back at me. "Some people were just looking for a reason."

For a second I just stood, feeling unsteady, then went to the stairs. The basement was so quiet that every footstep on the way up echoed. I gave the back door a good rattling slam on my way out.

I cried off and on during my walk home, watching my breath make white clouds under the streetlights. I tried to remind myself "you don't lose when you lose fake friends". By the time I got home I just felt quiet. When mom remarked that I was home early, I just mumbled a non-answer and went up to my room. I didn't really feel like talking about this with them.

Not yet, at least.

Three

A few days later, I was just in the front door getting home from work when I heard daddy call me into the kitchen. When I got there, it looked, sounded, and smelled like he was stir-frying something for dinner. Mom was sitting at the table and looked up from the notebook she was writing in. I said, "What's up?"

Daddy tried to turn toward me and keep an eye on his veggies at the same time. "I finally heard a little something about your Mr. Knight."

"Yeah?"

"Not a lot, though." He stirred the wok pan for a second. "First off, his name is really O'Leary. He works at one of the big booking agencies in Toronto, has done for a few years now. Seems okay to everyone I talked to – nothing bad to say about him, at least. Sounds like he's interested in getting into management, going off on his own. New business, new name."

Mom peered over her glasses at me. "He's trying to reinvent himself. That can be a good thing. Sometimes."

"So yeah," daddy went on, "he's just getting started, really, trying to build up a client list. That's why he was so keen to come to you."

I rubbed the small of my back. "So does this mean he's okay to work with or no?"

Daddy shrugged. "Hard to say, sorry. At least he does have some experience in the business – he'll have connections. That helps, for sure. Just... just go slow and be careful, okay?"

"And listen to your heart," mom chimed in.

I gave mom a crooked smile. "You always say that."

The lines in the corners of her eyes got deeper. "I always mean it."

I didn't know. I thought about it over dinner, and while I was watching TV after,

and I felt like I was just going in circles. I guess I was hoping for a sign, something that would make me feel sure, and there wasn't one. This guy could be okay, he could be a total dolt, I had no idea what I was getting into.... Maybe I should talk to him and find out what he had in mind? But going to him felt like I was already telling him yes, and I wasn't ready to. And yeah I know that doesn't really make any sense, but none of it felt like it did, somehow. I felt confused and stuck. I just didn't know.

Mom would tell me to just let myself be confused and stuck for as long as I needed to. So okay, I would. There was no rush. I slept on it. For several nights.

The next Sunday afternoon, I was sprawled on my bed, playing with my old Rubik's Cube, my headphones cranked, Joan Jett's *I Love Rock-n-Roll* album in my old cassette player. Suddenly, in behind the guitar crunch I could hear my door thumping and mom calling me. I clicked the tape off. "Yeah?"

Mom cracked the door open. "Phone for you – it's that Mr. Knight."

My heart gave a little jump. How did he get our number? I slipped the headphones off and trotted downstairs to the kitchen, then picked the phone up from the counter. "Hello?"

"Mari? Dev Knight, how ya doon?"

"Uh, okay?"

"Yeah, I figured on Sunday you might not be at work or wherever, hope I'm not disturbing anyone there."

"No no, it's okay." Then I just waited for him to go on.

I didn't need to wait long – he was kinda chatty. "So listen, I waited for you to call me back, but when you never did, I thought maybe you didn't think I was serious, or really interested. Well, I *am* – *both*. Wanna make sure you realize that, awright?"

I nodded. "Yeah okay."

"So did you think about what I said?"

"I did, yeah." More times than I could remember.

"And?"

"And I dunno. I mean, I don't know what I think about it. Really."

"Hmm yeah okay. Tell you what – how about we go out for a drink and really talk about it? I can tell you about whatever you're not sure on, you get a good idea of what I can offer you. Wanna do that?"

I thought. No way I felt ready to go out for drinks with a stranger. But I really did feel like the best thing was to get more information about what the deal was with this guy. And him coming to me again like this felt a bit like the sign I was waiting for. I thought some more. "How about this?" I finally said. "There's a restaurant downtown called The Wien – you know it?"

"The what?"

"Wien. W-I-E-N."

"Oh! Oh yeah yeah yeah. I live here, eh, I go by there all the time."

"Okay. They aren't open today, but tomorrow they are, and I'm off, and I like the coffee there. How about you meet me there tomorrow sometime?" Everyone there knew me, so I felt like people would have my back. I was a lot more comfortable with this.

"Ahhhhhh.... yeah. Yeah sure," Dev said after a second. "Eleven okay?"

"Eleven is good. And, just to be clear: you're buying."

I heard him chuckle. "See you tomorrow." Then he hung up.

And only then did I notice how my heart was racing.

At 10:55 the next morning, I was already sitting in The Wien with a coffee,

nervously watching the door. (Yeah I didn't feel like waiting for him to buy, I wanted one now.) Effie came by to make small talk for a minute, and I tried to focus on what she was saying, but it was hard.

Bang on eleven, the door eased open and Dev stepped in, wearing a beige trenchcoat and carrying a briefcase. He stopped just inside the door and glanced around with that unmistakable air of "never been in this place before". When he spotted me, his head perked up and he came over with his slow, crisp, king-of-the-world walk. He nodded and said "Mari," set his case beside the other chair at my little table, took off his trenchcoat to reveal another sharp, dark suit, and draped the coat over the back of his chair. Then he sat and scraped the chair in closer.

He glanced at my coffee and grinned. "I thought I was buyin' that for ya."

I picked it up and sipped, watching him over my cup. "I'll let you off the hook. Just this once."

"Awright." His eyes moved around to take the place in. "So. This is The Wien, hah?"

"Uh-huh. You never been here?"

"No, I, uhh..." He made one more sweep of the antique décor, looking kinda unsure. "It's, ahhh... cozy." Then he fixed his eyes on mine. "So. Thanks for meeting me. You tell me what you wanna know."

"Actually? The very first thing I wanna know is how you got my number."

He gave a little smirk. "Wasn't hard. The Westgate phone book doesn't have that many Takamuras in it."

"So... you just called them all til you hit the right one?"

He nodded, self-satisfied. "It was worth it to me."

I moved my tongue in my cheek for a second, then said, "We aren't in the phone book." (Well, we were, but under Hemphill, not Takamura.)

"Ah." His brow furrowed just as Effie came back to take his order. "Just coffee,"

he said, dismissing her. Then his whole story came out.

He actually did call all the Takamuras in the phone book; then, once he hit that dead end, he remembered that he saw me sitting with Mitch at The Loft and figured maybe we were friends enough that Mitch would have my number. Ikiru were big enough to be familiar to a number of music-biz folks, so he got the number for Sano's and called there. Mitch didn't know my number but suggested that my bandmates would, so Dev should call them. But Mitch didn't know Cat's or Ali's last names, so that didn't help. But then he remembered Esi's name – Nkrumah, which kinda stuck in his brain and came back to him somehow. And so then Dev called both Nkrumahs in the phone book, eventually got a hold of Esi, and she gave him my number. End of story.

During that story, Effie brought Dev's coffee with a sweet "There we are", like she does, and offered to top mine up. He didn't even notice her, was too busy rummaging in his jacket pocket.

I sipped at my coffee again. "So why didn't you just give it to me straight to begin with?"

"Meh." He waved his free hand while he pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his jacket. "My version was short and sweet, and woulda saved us wasting five minutes on trivia. And it's basically what happened." He started to tap one out of the pack when we heard a sharp "Hey hey!"

We both turned to look at Anna over at the till, giving Dev her little granny glare and pointing at his hands. He eased the cigarettes back into his pocket and sneered down at the table. Then he picked up his coffee, black, sipped at it, and muttered to himself, "Hey this *is* good. Hah." He looked up at me. "So c'man. Let's get serious. Whaddaya want?"

"I wanna know what *you* want. What do you want me to do?"

He gave me an easy smile. "I want you to sing."

"But sing what?"

He looked above me for a second, then back into my eyes. "Okay. I, ahh... I have a vision. Let's see if I can get you to share it." He gently rubbed his hands together. "Where to begin... okay. This year has basically been the year of

women in music, right? Like, you talk music now, first name you think of is Alanis. There's a bunch of others."

I nodded. Even in America, Alanis was massively and unexpectedly huge this fall. Big hit singles, selling millions. I liked her okay.

He went on. "So, we've got that. Women makin' a big splash. On the other hand, everything for the last few years has been grunge and rap. And a coupla boy bands. Even Alanis has a bit of that rough grungy edge goin' on now. I feel like it's time for a reaction. A backlash. The Anti-Alanis. And sumthin for younger kids who don't get into all this dark heavy stuff. I wanna be there when that reaction happens. If I'm lucky, I can *make* it happen." He took a sip of his coffee. "You ever listen to what's happening in Japan?"

"Japan??" I'm sure I must've looked really confused. "Uh, no, how would I?"

He gestured vaguely toward my face and said, "I dunno, you maybe coulda somehow..." He waved his upraised hand like he was erasing. "Never mind. / listen to it. A buddy of mine at the agency got me into this J-pop stuff a couple years back. Lemme tell ya about it.

"Back in the eighties, all the big Japanese music was these frilly pink cuties who couldn't hit a note to save their life but nobody cared, they sold zillions anyway. Whatever. But just lately, there are these new girls comin' up. Stronger voices, they can actually sing. They look a bit tougher, a bit more street – but not too much. I guess you never heard of Namie Amuro?" I shook my head. "Yeah well... she was in a girl group over there and now just this year they're pushin' her solo. She just put out her first solo single a few weeks ago and it went through the frickin' roof, sold zillions. They're sayin' she's gonna be like the Madonna of Japan!"

"*Madonna?!?*" I could feel my mouth hang open. "Are, are you saying you want me to be like a *Madonna?!?*"

It was Dev's turn to look confused. "What, you don't like Madonna?"

"*No! God no!*"

"Hah." He scratched his nose. "What *do* ya like?"

I blinked and smiled. "I love rock 'n' roll!"

"Ah." He rubbed his chin a second. "Well, ah, maybe you could learn to love sumthin else, too, hah? Maybe?" He leaned in, his elbows on the table. "This Amuro girl is gonna be a superstar. And you could be, too, I'm tellin' ya."

"Not if I have to be one of those Squeak-and-Clatter bimbos!"

"The what?"

That was an expression we came up with in the band while we bad-mouthed pop music between songs. "That whole eighties thing where some cute little blonde squeaks out a nothing song with a bunch of clattering synthesizers and then she grinds her ass at everybody and squeals 'Buy me! Buy me!' And the guys back then were no better, the music was hair metal but it was still ass-grinding and 'Buy me! Buy me!' I am *not* doing *that!*"

Dev sat back quiet, just looking at me, pursed his lips, then finally said, "Do you know what Alanis was doing five years ago?"

"What?"

"That Squeak-and-Clatter music you're so down on. This year she's tryin' to get everyone to forget it, but she put out two albums of dancey poppy stuff before she got massive now. She needed to start someplace." He tapped his fingers on the table a couple of times. "You need to, too. Maybe you should think about that."

I did think about it. Didn't like it much, but I did. Finally I said, "So you think this thing happening in Japan could happen here?"

He nodded. "Something like it. Something inspired by it. I think the only reason it hasn't already happened here is that people haven't heard it yet. That's my vision."

I looked at him, a bit wary, a bit curious. "And you think you can make that happen?"

"I hope I can." He ran a finger over the rim of his cup. "Look, I admit, I'm a bit of an unknown quantity here, I'm fairly new at the management side of this... let's

say I'm hoping we can find out if we can make it."

I was a little surprised to hear him sound tentative like that. "So am I like the first person you tried to work with?"

"Oh no no! No, I have clients already, geez. You ever hear of Debra Sinclair?" I shook my head. "Yeah, well, if you hung in the clubs in Toronto you would. I signed her back in the summer. New indie R&B singer, she's great. Yeah, no worries there..." He tilted his head. "So have you heard enough?"

"Enough for now, yeah." I felt a bit dizzy, actually. "I, uh, I'm gonna need to think about this a bit more, though." A lot more.

"Yeah, of course. Let's call it for now, I think we covered some good ground here today." He leaned over his briefcase and snapped it open. "Lemme give you these." He reached across the table to hand me a long manila envelope and an audio cassette. "The tape is some of that J-pop I was tellin' you about – give you some context."

"And this?"

"Our contract – in duplicate. If you decide you wanna sign, it'll save us some time." He gave a crinkly smile; I just stared numbly at the envelope. Then I heard his chair move as he stood up, tossed on his coat, and picked up his case. "Right, I gotta dash. Thanks again for meeting with me, I appreciate it. Call me, hah?" And he walked briskly out the door.

I guess we both forgot that he hadn't paid for his coffee yet.

Four

I took the stuff Dev gave me up to my room and laid the envelope on my desk-table – I didn't feel ready to look at any contract yet, or even think about it. First I needed to know if there was even any remote possibility that I might want to sign it.

I popped Joan out of my tape player and stuck Dev's homemade Japan compilation in. Slipped my headphones on, clicked Play, waited...

Oh. My. God. The very first thing that went through my mind was "You Spin Me Right Round" – mega-ultimate keyboard keyboard clatter clatter clatter. Everything I was afraid of when he was telling me about his "vision" and more. Then the singer came in. And yeah, okay, I had heard worse, she didn't exactly squeak, but still. Could I actually see myself doing this? And didn't these girls always dance along with it? I shook my head. If Dev thought he was gonna get me to dance, he was in for a real comedown.

I listened to a few more songs. I noticed that sometimes there were English words here and there in the lyrics. One of the songs had a chorus where she sang "try me" a few times, and once I caught on, I sang along with her – only I changed it to "buy me". That got me to giggle a little, at least. But overall, I couldn't really see what was supposed to make this stuff any better than all the Tiffany or Kylie Minogue we had here years ago. Was I just supposed to trust Dev on this?

Anyway, I sat there and listened through the whole thing, both sides, just to be as fair as I could. And when I was done, I had no urge to go back and hear any of it again. If this was supposed to be his attempt to convert me to The Clatter Side, well, sorry, Emperor, it didn't work.

I sighed. At least I had more of an idea where he wanted to go with this. I mean, yeah, this stuff was not dark or heavy (or cool), and a younger audience would like it, and it would be a change from most of what people were hearing lately, so....

So. Did I wanna go there with him? Did I think I could? I had never even considered it for a second, before today.

Then I remembered what he said about Alanis. She started off like this, and now

look at her. If I could end up in a few years where she was, I'd be doing okay. Maybe that was what I needed to do. Get in there, get seen and heard, take my shot. Try to move the music over more where I wanted it, as we went along. Maybe I could get Dev to compromise on what kind of sound we were putting out to begin with, even. But I needed to start. Somewhere.

And then I thought about singing with Frank and Inch – and god that wasn't even two weeks ago! But yeah, when I did that, the kind of sound I was singing with that night, with them, it wasn't the loud rockin' roar I usually worked with... but I still enjoyed doing it. It reminded me how much I just loved singing, and singing *for* someone. It didn't matter that it was only a few. It didn't matter if I never got to sing for the massive stadium crowds that Dev was obviously hoping for. It felt good and it made me happy. Here was a chance to get more of that happiness into my life.

For all I knew, the Squeak-and-Clatter bimbos all felt just like I did now. For I guess the first time, I really seriously thought about the fact that they were all real people, real women like me.

I picked up the envelope and took it down to the kitchen – time to grab some lunch. When mom got home from work, I wanted her and daddy to help me go over this contract.

Mom and daddy huddled near each other at the kitchen table, each with their glasses on, each reading one of the duplicate copies of the contract, each frowning in focus. We'd all talked together about my thoughts on going for this – by now I was pretty sure I wanted to try, and they were okay with it, at least in principle.

The contract was like three pages and the print wasn't that fine, so it didn't take them long to get through. Mom dealt with contracts a lot more often at her job, but daddy had more experience with contracts specific to music, what with the session work he did sometimes. So I expected they'd each have something useful to tell me.

When mom laid down her copy first, I asked her, "So basically what does it say? In non-contract-ese?"

She slid her glasses down her nose a bit. "Basically it says that you agree that Mr. Knight will be in charge of your musical career for the next five years. He will find and arrange places for you to sing, and you will go there and do it. He will arrange for your music to be recorded and sold. And he will keep twenty percent of anything you earn from singing. Oh, and you also agree not to sing for anyone else during that time."

"What, you mean not even in the shower?"

Mom actually giggled a little. "Ahh, no, anything professional. Anything where you get paid."

"Or might reasonably expect to get paid," daddy chimed in.

"Yeah okay. So, does all this, uhh, sound normal to you guys?"

Daddy rubbed his forehead. "Well, the twenty percent is on the high end of normal, but considering that you haven't even started to earn anything yet, I guess it isn't crazy of him to want that. But there are a few things about this that I find less than ideal."

Mom looked at him. "Like correcting the spelling of the name?" Then she turned to me. "He has you down here as M-A-R-Y." I rolled my eyes but was not even a bit surprised.

"Well, of course there's that," daddy said. "But also, I see that it says that Mari *will do* all these things, but that *he* will 'make *reasonable effort* to' do *his* things. I never like it when 'reasonable' shows up in a contract. It's easy to dispute and hard to enforce."

Mom nodded. "Well, what if we add in the 'reasonable' clause to Mari's section, too? Would that make you feel better, Kenny?"

Daddy grinned. "You know it would!" But then he looked more serious and said to me, "This is for your protection, too. Like, what if some day he wants to book you to do something when you're at work, and you can't get the time off, but he's like insisting? You wanna be able to say, 'that's not reasonable,' you wanna be free to say no then and not get in trouble for it."

"Wait," I said, "you can change this?"

"Dear," mom said, "you can add in or cross out anything you want in any contract. All you have to do is be sure to initial any changes you make, and get the other person to initial them all as well, before anyone signs it. If you both do that, then the changed version is your legal contract. If the changes aren't initialed, then you don't actually *have* a contract."

"The trick is," daddy added, "if you make changes the other guy won't agree to, then you've blown your deal."

"Yeah okay." I thought this over. "Is there any other stuff?"

"A couple, yeah," said daddy. "I'd wanna change that five-year term to one year. If this guy is actually gonna do anything useful for your career, then he ought to be able to do something for you within a year. If he can't, then you don't wanna be stuck for five years with a guy who isn't doing you any good."

Mom said, "What if we change it to one year with his right of first refusal to renew?"

Daddy nodded. "Yeah, he'd probably go for that." The two of them took a minute to neatly print in the changes they were talking about, comparing to make sure they worded it exactly the same on both copies.

Then mom spoke up. "What about this, Kenny? It says here that either of them can terminate the contract early just by giving written notice – but if Mari does it, then she has to pay him a thousand dollars!"

"A kill fee," daddy nodded. "I was gonna get to that. A bit weaselly but not unheard of. I can see the point of it more with a five-year term, but now that we're changing it to one year, then I dunno."

I spoke up. "How much does that part matter? I mean, if I'm gonna give him a year so he has a chance to get my career going, then I'm not gonna want to cancel out early anyway, am I?"

Daddy's mouth went crooked. Mom just said, "A fair point, dear. Maybe. Don't worry, we'll sort that out." She made some more notes on her copy, then daddy's, then slid them both to me, along with a pen. Then she looked back at daddy. "Do you think that was it?" He nodded. "Okay, then, Mari, put your initials

beside every place where we crossed out or wrote in. Both copies. But don't sign it yet – not til he's with you and he initials it, too. Plus it looks like it needs to be witnessed."

"Yeah okay." I neatened the pages up and slid them back in the envelope for later. Just for a second I felt weird and nervous, like I was getting in over my head. Mom said I should maybe get a glass of water, almost like she could read my mind.

Then daddy said, "Just remember, punkin, none of this is any guarantee of anything. A year from now you could find yourself exactly where you are now. So keep it in perspective, eh?" I gave him a crooked little smile and nodded. You'd think a musician would be a bit cooler and not so much of a wet blanket, but this was him.

Mom glanced down at her hands and just shook her head, once, then looked up at me with a little smile. "Honey, just remember *this*: anything that happens with this is a chance for you to grow. And I'm proud of you."

Daddy nodded. "Oh yeah, of course, we *both* are! Always, punkin." I smiled. Nice save, daddy.

The next day started off with me and Dev playing phone tag. I called him in the morning before I went to work, when I knew he wouldn't be up yet but whatever. Then when I got home after work there was a message from him – he sounded kinda happy that I was ready to sign. So I called back... and got his machine again. Finally, after dinner, he called when I was watching TV, and daddy called me to the phone. "Hello?"

"Mari, hey. So yeah great, let's do this. Can you bring the contract to the King Eddie in about half an hour? We can have a drink to celebrate, hah?"

He sure was keen to have a drink with me. I would've thought we'd be doing business in his office. But no wait, his office was in Toronto, right? And I guess it would usually be tough for me to meet him during office hours anyway, what with my job and all, so there was that. Meet at The Wien again? Well no, maybe one drink would be nice... and I didn't wanna look like I was chicken. "Ummm.... how about The Ambassador in an hour?" It was closer for me to walk than the King

Eddie, and quieter if we wanted to actually talk about anything. Plus, I went there a bit more and knew more of the people there – again, someone to watch my back would be nice.

"Ahhhh... yeah sure. Can do. The Ambassador in an hour." And he hung up.

There was no live music at The Ambassador that night, so the overall noise level was about as good as it can get there, and it was easy to find a table. I was just pulling out a chair for myself when I saw Dev come in, trenchcoat and briefcase again. His face was flushed from the November cold, but he still carried himself like he owned everything and had specially ordered in that cold weather cuz he liked it. He nodded when he saw me and strode over.

We put our coats on our chairs and Dev said, "So what can I get ya? I'm definitely buying this time, sorry." And he made a little grin that looked more clever than apologetic.

"I, uh, I'll come order my own. But yeah I'll still let you buy." He shrugged easily and we both went to the bar to place our orders.

I was kinda happy to see that Estelle was tending the bar tonight. She looked a bit biker for The Ambassador but she was okay. And if there was any kind of trouble, I felt like she could handle it. "Devlinnnnnnnn," she said when she saw us approach. "Been a while. Scotch on the rocks?"

"Aaa, not tonight, no." He sniffed and looked at the blackboard over Estelle's head. "Ah, ya got Sleeman's on tap – I'll have a pint o' that. And Mari will have a?"

"Moosehead, please, Stell?"

Estelle nodded at me with a little smile, then said, "I didn't know you knew Dev, Mari?" Did I see a concerned look in her eyes? Or was I just nervous?

"Oh, not for long," I said. "We, uh, we're talking about doing some, some business together."

She nodded again. "Ah okay. Well, good luck with that, eh?" She got our drinks,

Dev paid and left a bit of a tip, and then we sat back down.

I got right to business, handed him the envelope, and told him, "We, I made some changes that I need you to initial?"

He scowled a little. "Oh?" Pulled the papers out and looked. "Oh, *that's* how you spell your name? Ah yeah sorry, yeah."

He scanned farther down and I volunteered what I knew. "Um, we added a 'reasonable clause' in there somewhere, mom said?" He glanced up at me and nodded once. "And we changed five years to one."

At that, he said, "Hmmm," and flipped to the next page.

"With an option to renew?"

When he heard that, his face made a "hm yeah sure I guess why not" expression. "Yeah okay, that works. Yeah that's good, no problem." And then he got a pen out of his jacket pocket, hurriedly went through and initialed next to my initials in every place on both copies. Then he stood up with the pen and contracts. "We need to sign these in front of a witness. Estelle'll do that for me. C'mon."

"Wait." I didn't stand up yet, and he looked at me. "I wanna at least have some say in my material. Like, I don't wanna be anywhere singing songs that embarrass me, y'know? So we'll discuss that stuff?"

He gave me a brisk nod. "Of course." Then he head-gestured toward the bar and I got up.

And so we went back to the bar again, and Estelle took a minute to watch both of us sign and date the papers, then she did the same. Then Dev smiled and let out a little sigh. I felt excited, almost like a dream. It was almost like it didn't feel legal to do business stuff like this in a bar, but hey.

Back at our table, Dev slid one copy of the contract into his case, put the other one back in the envelope, and handed it to me. "Your copy – put it somewhere safe," he said, then nodded and sniffed.

"Are you getting a cold?" I said, more just to make conversation and try to relax

than anything.

He sniffled again. "Ahhhhh.... I dunno. Maybe." Then he made a little cough into his sleeve. "I, ahh, I do seem to catch those a lot, gotta warn ya."

"Vitamin C," I said in my wisdom.

He looked at me with a smirky scowl. "I do that! Geez, what *are* ya, my *ma*? Heh." He sipped some foam from his glass and looked over it at me. A little quieter, he added, "I'll try not to kiss ya, awright?"

I nodded. "That sounds safe."

He lifted his glass to me and said, "So here: to, ahhh... to the next singing sensation!"

I clinked my bottle against his draft. "I can live with that."

We both took a couple sips, then he set his glass down and leaned in toward me. "Awright look. First off, I gotta warn you not to expect anything much right away. I've got a lotta things to arrange with a lotta people first before we'll be ready for you to do much of anything. Plus, the next few weeks it'll be hard to get hold of anybody or get them to do anything, cuz everyone'll be busy gettin' ready for Christmas, right? I mean, *you'll* be busy with that, even."

I nodded. "Yeah, I guess I can see that."

He leaned back and said, "Yeah, so what I'm sayin', if you don't hear from me til after New Year's, don't be surprised, awright?"

I nodded again. There was no real hurry, I knew that. But at the same time, I was kinda vibrating inside, I wanted to see what would happen. I wanted to *make* things happen. "What sort of arranging are you gonna do?"

He tossed his hands up in front of his face. "Ah! Well! I gotta consult with your musical director, work out your, ah, your repertoire, song arrangements, all that... gotta talk things over with your wardrobe consultant – "

"Wardrobe?"

He nodded emphatically. "I see you not just as a sound but as a look. It helps that you got a great face, but you are gonna create a whole visual vibe to go with the sound. You... you are gonna be an arresting presence!"

I couldn't imagine me ever being anything like that, but something in his voice and his eyes made me feel like maybe I could. I felt like I was letting wild fantasies carry me away. And I liked that feeling – it never happened much.

But that was when I stood up and took my coat. "Hey," Dev called out, "where ya goin'? C'man, you didn't even finish! And it's still early."

I shook my head. "Not for me it isn't – I gotta be up for work in the morning. Um, thanks again for everything. And, uh, Merry Christmas if I don't see you before then?"

He nodded, with a quiet little smile. "Sure, you too. Take care – I'll be in touch. And don't worry. You're gonna be big. And I'll make you happy. You'll see."

I gave him a nod and little smile of my own, then turned and headed out into the cold night. I wondered if this was gonna make me happy. I hoped it would.

Five

On December 1, I came in out of the cold and dark after work into the light and warmth of the family hearth. Stomped my boots and toed them off onto the mat, hung up my coat, then exchanged hi's with mom as I went past her reading quietly in the living room. I could hear the clatter of daddy doing dishes when I got to the kitchen. "A-*hem*," I said, trying not to startle him. When he looked back at me, I waved a little envelope full of twenties. "Rent day."

"Thanks, punkin, just leave it on the table for now, eh?" Then he turned back to the sink and said, "Leftover fish and rice in the fridge if you didn't eat already."

"Cool, I didn't." I had to maneuver past him to get a plate out to nuke my food on. While I made clinking noises dishing up my dinner, daddy said, "So I guess it's too soon to hear anything about that contract and all?"

"Way too," I said over the whirr of the creaky old nuke. "Dev said it'd be after New Year's before he got back to me with what's going on."

"Well, I hope that won't be too much time for you to just be sitting around worrying about things. That ain't really right."

He couldn't see me grin at him. "Well, I know that's too much time for *you* to sit around and worry about it."

He chuckled. "Well, yeah...." The nuke made its loud annoying beeps and I took my food to the table. It actually smelled good – it had been a long day, like Friday usually was. Daddy let me eat a couple of forkfuls, then said, "I, um... I hope this business isn't going to distract you from other things. Important things, like."

I swallowed. "I dunno how you mean."

"Like I don't want your singing to be a reason for you to not go back to school."

I sighed a bit. "Daddy, I keep telling you. I don't need a reason to not go back to school. I'm just doing what I'm doing."

His turn to sigh. "You're a bright girl, Mari. You could do so much more."

"Yes, and once I figure out what that more *is* that I wanna do, I will do it then, okay? Promise." He shook his head, still looking in the sink. "I'm still saving up for it, right? Like I said?" Yeah, saving up for school – or a place of my own, more like. "I haven't ruled it out."

"I mean, Calder's is fine, but do you really wanna spend the rest of your life there?"

"Well, Doris has been there like forty years and she seems pretty happy."

"I know I've told you this a million times before, but the way the world is today, you really need to get a degree if you're gonna get anywhere."

I smiled at him again. Again, he couldn't see it. "I *am* somewhere."

He made a small sigh. "Heh. That sounds like something your mom would say."

"Well, I thought that one up all by myself." It sounded like he was washing cutlery now, while I focused on eating for a while. He didn't need to tell me what he was thinking – we had had this conversation more than once before. There was always a part of him that felt guilty about not being the main breadwinner. Even though he loved being a music teacher for his couple of students, and playing studio sessions now and then, it still bothered him sometimes that he saw himself as dependent on mom. That we could never afford this house without her income from her Real Career. I know that mom honestly didn't mind at all, and neither did I – we loved him just as he was. But he couldn't quite believe it.

And so he wanted *me* to do better than *he* did, and get a good job. He thought I should be an accountant – I was good at math and it was good money.

An accountant. Me.

I heard the water draining, and daddy dried his hands and turned to me. "Well, I know we aren't gonna get all this sorted out tonight, are we, punkin?"

I looked in his eyes and felt a warm little flush. He was the best. "Probably not, nope."

He stepped to the table and leaned in to pick up the cash envelope... and while

he was leaned in, he put a long soft kiss on the top of my head. Then he stood up, gently mussed my hair a little, and went out to the living room.

And I sang to myself, *Never said I wanted to improve my station....*

Christmas was nice. My folks got me this fantastic, way-too-big, thick green sweater, a way-too-big sweatshirt with a Royal University logo on it (nice hint, daddy), some dark leggings, and good chocolate (boo-yah). I got them gift cards – bookstore for mom, music store for daddy (no-brainer). And Uncle Ray and Aunt Judy came to visit from Toronto with my little cousin A.J. I like seeing them, I sorta wish it happened more.

Of course it came up in conversation that I had signed with a manager and was gonna start singing more, and they were really happy for me. As soon as I said it, Uncle Ray's face lit up and he said, "Ha! Are you gonna sing 'I Love Rock 'n' Roll'?" and Aunt Judy made a little laugh. They were remembering from visits as far back as when I was six, when I was in my room with my beat-up little portable record player, singing along with my only forty-five.

A.J. started singing it then, which made all the older folks laugh. I always used to let him come into my room and listen to it with me. I blushed a bit, but smiled and said to Uncle Ray, "I hope I will, yeah." Then after we talked a bit more about the contract and all, A.J. dragged me up to my room so we could listen to The Tunes together. I still enjoyed being a Cool Older Cousin.

It was about two weeks after New Year's before I finally got a call from Dev. By that time, my New Year's resolution had gone from "doing ten sit-ups every day" to "doing some" to "doing at least one". I got that little leap of excitement when I heard his voice, and thought that something was finally going to happen.

"Mari. What're ya doin' Sunday afternoon?"

"Nothing I can't move, I guess."

" 'Kay. Gimme your address, I'm pickin' you up at 1:30 to meet your musical director. Time to make the music happen."

By about 1:15 on Sunday afternoon, I was still trying to decide what to wear to this meeting. I wanted to make a good impression on this person, but I also still wanted to look like me, so they'd know what they were really dealing with. I finally settled on my plain black T-shirt and black jeans, both still looking neat and new. And my black leather-ish jacket – my puffy winter coat would fit over that. Once I had the jacket on, I checked myself in my bedroom mirror and realized that I had basically opted for Joan Jett Business Casual.

Rock 'n' roll.

By about 1:45, we were driving out beyond the bus routes, into the suburbs of Westgate – which to be honest look more like being out in the country. There were snowy fields with black trees, and just the occasional big low house.

Dev's car was not dressed to impress, a maroon Chrysler that smelled like cigarettes and had cracks in the vinyl, but it ran. On the way out to the north boonies, he kept up a steady stream of patter. "Oh hey, this might interest you," he said. "I found out that that Amuro girl put out another single last month. It entered the Japanese chart at number one and sold twice as many zillions as the last one. She's goin' ballistic over there, I tell ya." He looked at me sidewise. "This thing can work, Mari."

Then he told me a bit about this director. "Her name's Gwyn," he said. (Oh, it was a *her* – okay.) He waved his cigarette toward his window that he had rolled down just a crack. "Really talented musician. Writes music, arrangements, has a home studio even, the whole bit. She's about your age, too, I guess – you should get on okay, right? Found out about her a year or so ago, I, ahh... it's not like she's on staff, I just commission her on an as-needed basis, I guess you'd say. Got her to write an original for Debra Sinclair last year, I hear the clubs love it."

I did wonder how there could be a good musician in Westgate that I never heard of. I mean, I had been to a lot of gigs the last few years, talked to a lot of musicians, didn't remember the name Gwyn ever coming up. Guess I'd find out.

And I'd find out soon. Dev was pulling into a big semicircular driveway, its snow neatly plowed away and sanded, leading to an even bigger bungalow. Huge

windows with shrubs wrapped in burlap on either side. To me it looked like a fancy place. A money place. I suddenly felt shy.

Dev parked by the front door, we got out and went up the few flagstoned steps. He rang the doorbell, straightened the collars of his dark greatcoat, and sniffed. I watched our breaths in the cold air for a few seconds, then there was the click of a deadbolt and the somber-looking door opened quietly. A tall lady with graying temples stood in the doorway, looking at me with no expression. Thin gray sweater, dark blue slacks, fine necklace – she looked like she didn't know how to relax.

Then she noticed Dev and made a gentle scowl. "I didn't realize *you* would be coming, Mr. Knight." She said his name like it was covered in thorns.

"Well, ah, Ms. J., Mari needed a lift and I thought I would, ah, introduce the girls to get them started – "

"I can do that," Ms. J. said. "Come in, please, Mari." She moved aside to let me in, then pointedly put herself back in the doorway to prevent Dev from following me. To him, she said, "I do understand that Mari will need transportation back to her house. I'll see that Gwyneth takes her." Then, not waiting for any kind of reaction from him, she closed the door, quietly but firmly, and clicked the deadbolt.

I took off my coat and boots at the door while Ms. J. waited, not making a move or a sound. Then I padded after her across glossy hardwood, through a living room the size of our ground floor. I looked around at the pastel walls, curly-swirly furniture like my friend Sophie's mom would keep under plastic... down a wide hallway til we came to a door at the far end, which she tapped on. "Gwyneth?" she called. Then she eased the door open and stepped in ahead of me.

The first thing I saw at a glance was a wall covered in shelves almost up to the ceiling, and all the shelves filled neatly with CDs and cassettes. The shelves flanked a stereo even bigger than the good one down in daddy's studio – it looked like a spaceship. Around the room were amplifiers, headphones, a mike stand, a nylon guitar, a flute resting on an ottoman... closer to the door was a synthesizer keyboard, with another smaller one beside it making a corner... and sitting at the synthesizers was a young woman. She stood and turned to us, and then I really saw her.

She was equally tall. Pale hair down past her shoulders, big black-rimmed glasses that made her look like a deer in headlights, her mouth small and tense. She wore a white blouse, a navy blazer over it that made her shoulders look big, a dark pleated skirt. She just stood. She wasn't afraid to be tall. I liked that.

Ms. J.'s idea of making introductions was to gesture to each of us in turn, say, "Gwyneth. Mari," and then step back out of the room and close the door. Quietly.

I turned my face back toward Gwyneth, and I dunno what it was – mom might say I could see her aura or something – but suddenly I had this feeling that I was looking at someone who was even bigger on the inside.

Finally she spoke, and I had to strain a little to hear her. "Just call me Gwyn," she said, looking at me seriously. "Devlin says that we're going to be musical partners."

Six

For a few more seconds we just stood and looked each other. Then Gwyn turned toward the room and gestured stiffly toward a big soft chair near the ottoman. "You can sit if you like."

I said, "Thank you," then walked kinda gingerly over to the chair, and perched my butt on the edge of the seat. Then I realized I was sitting there, back up straight, my knees together and my hands resting on them, and I thought, *Who am I?* I couldn't relax yet. Gwyn sat back down on the bench behind her keyboards and looked across them at me, saying nothing.

I didn't know if I should be making small talk or what, so finally I decided to treat it like a business meeting and get to the point as much as I was able. "I've never done this before. How do we do this?"

Somehow that made her shoulders relax, just a touch. "Well, from what I understand, Devlin would say that our job... my job, at least... is to come up with some music that makes him happy. He figures that's it." She pressed her lips together for a second. "The way I see it, I have two other jobs. One is to come up with some music that makes *you* happy."

"Ah okay. And?"

"And the other is to make *me* happy. So, we need to start figuring out what we can do to make all those happen."

"Do, uhh... do you think we can?"

"Today is when we try to find out." She pushed her glasses up her nose a bit. "When he called me about this project, the gist of what I got from him is that he wants something bright and fun and bouncy and happy and easy. He mentioned Tiffany a few times." I rolled my eyes. "I had to go find out more about her. And a few other people. And he sent over a tape of Japanese things that he wanted me to study."

"Oh yeah, me too!" I waved my hands and sang, "Buy me! Na na-na na-na na na –"

And Gwyn rocked her head back with a loud "Ha-*haa!*", a big, teathy, nose-

wrinkling laugh that looked embarrassed and wicked. She blushed, lowered her face and put her fingers over her mouth, giggled and kinda moaned, "Oh, yeah, exactly! That's it!" Her shoulders jiggled a couple of times, and I realized that she had nice-looking teeth that she never wanted anyone to see.

And, somewhere in the back of my mind, this occurred to me: I remembered how that chorus went after hearing it only once, a couple of months ago. Despite everything else, it was catchy, at least. And that made me feel like maybe Dev was onto something with all this. That gave me a bit of hope.

She sat up straight, brushed her hair back from her face, and slid a finger behind her glasses to wipe her eye. Her mouth was still curved up a little. "So, yes, that's his part of it. Honestly, I don't think it's that hard." She looked at her lap. "I've done a couple of things for him before, and I don't think he actually appreciates what's in a song. He doesn't know and doesn't care. So he's the simplest of the three jobs, really – he's easy to please. At least as far as music goes." Then she looked up at me. "So what would make *you* happy?"

"Well, uh, I like to rock out, basically." I grinned a little.

Gwyn nodded. "Devlin said as much. He, um, warned me that you are a 'rocker chick' but that 'you'll do'."

I crunched my forehead a second, then called back over my shoulder. "Thanks, Dev!"

She smiled a bit bigger, and her eyes looked less tight now. "Well, if *that* was all we did, then *you'd* be happy, but no one else. So that won't really work."

I tilted my head. "You don't like rock?"

She shrugged a little. "Not so much."

My misgivings about this project got a bit louder. "So then what *do* you like?"

She looked at her hands. "Believe it or not, I mostly listen to songs from before I was born. I'm what you might call a student of classic songwriting." She looked up at me like she had a delicious secret. "Burt Bacharach is my hero."

"Um." I think I might've heard daddy mention him once? "Okay, so what would

you say classic songwriting is, then?"

"You really want to talk about this?" She lifted her eyebrows and held her head a bit higher.

"Yeah okay. I mean, I do wanna try and understand what you're into, I wanna learn how we can work together, right?" I wanted to learn *if* we could work together.

She stood up, a look of quiet pleasure starting to form on her face. "All right, let me play you a couple of things." She walked over to the CD shelves and pulled a disc out without needing to hunt around for it. While she turned her stereo on and opened the CD tray, she said, "This is one of the best examples I can think of – for me, this is wow stuff." She pressed a few buttons, and then there was music. Her system sounded fantastic.

But the song, not so much. Even through good speakers, it sounded ancient. It started off with some sort of xylophoney notes, and then an old guy started singing, with a bunch of old ladies singing woo-woo kinds of noises. I know I made a face like there was suddenly a bad smell in the room. "Um, this sounds like something my grandma would listen to."

Gwyn nodded at me. "It is. Frank Sinatra, singing 'Stardust' with Tommy Dorsey's band. 1940."

"Seriously? This is what you think I should sound like?"

"Um, no, I...." She paused the music and stood by the stereo, searching for words. "I'm going to try to tell you something that might help us with this. All right?"

I nodded. With her standing there and me sitting listening, I felt like I was back in class. I guess I sorta was, for the time being.

"All right. Yes, I know this sounds old, and it doesn't sound like rock, I get that. But music isn't just that, it... okay, this is something I believe, something I learned a lot from.... One of the, um, greatest honours you can give a musician – any creator, really – is to... listen to what they're actually saying, instead of... of judging them for how well they, they fit into the box of what you want them to do. Does that make sense?"

I thought, then nodded slow. "So, what makes this a great song, then?"

She pushed her glasses up again. "A lot of songs are built on simple patterns that get used over and over. There could be a short simple line, and then it repeats. Everyone knows what to expect: you can almost sing along the first time you hear it. People like it because it sounds familiar and comfortable. I think, anyway."

I thought about how even I could recognize some songs having the same chords as other songs, classic riffs and all that. "Yeah okay, I get that."

"You listen to 'Stardust,' and for the longest time nothing repeats, you can't see the pattern. The music is always going someplace that surprises you, someplace new. But it never sounds just random, it always sounds like it fits. For me, that's great songwriting. That's what I want to do."

"Did Burt Bacharach write this?"

Her head gave a gentle shake. "Hoagy Carmichael. Another one of my heroes." Another weird name I never heard of.

I looked at my knees for a few seconds. Then I said, "Okay, start it over." And she did. And I tried to listen close. Not to the old-fashioned granny sounds, but to the melody of the song. After a while, I could sorta hear what she was talking about. You could never tell where that tune was gonna go next – there was no easy pattern to follow. It'd be hard to learn how to sing it. For me, at least. But it was different, and interesting, and it was pretty. I guess it was the first time I really listened to something that way. This class was all right.

Gwyn clicked a button when the song got to the end. I told her, "Okay, I think maybe I can see a bit of what you said. So, basically, you like pretty songs, is what you're telling me."

She made a little smile and a little blush. "Yes, I guess I do.... Can I please show you one more?"

"Yeah okay." And she walked away from the stereo and back behind her synthesizers. My head perked up. "Oh, *you're* gonna play this one?"

She unbuttoned her blazer and adjusted its shoulders, then stretched her arms out. "Uh-huh."

I stood up and stepped closer. "Is it okay if I watch you?"

She blushed again, but said, "Sure, c'mon around." So I stood beside her, and a little behind, and watched her hands, and she started playing. Her fingers were long and looked like she took care of them.

The sound of the keyboard surprised me. It sounded like a piano, but I was expecting something cheap and fake. This sounded full, and real, and nice. It was like she knew how to do things with this instrument that I didn't realize you could. I was impressed.

I didn't recognize the song – and I didn't really expect to – but it reminded me of the albums daddy listened to. Except his were usually full of pianos and horns doing swirly-random things that I didn't really get. Gwyn didn't sound swirly-random, she just played a pretty melody with some nice harmonies under it. And this time I could hear that, yes, this song didn't follow the usual simple patterns, it had surprises that sounded good.

I leaned in to peek at her face. Most of the time her eyes were closed, and she wore a quiet, relaxed smile. When her eyes were open, she was looking at the keys but it seemed like she wasn't really seeing them. Even I could tell that she was a really talented player, but she made it look so easy. She made it look like it was the best thing a person could do for themselves. I felt a kind of soft magic in the room with us, around us...

When she finished, she turned, looked up at me, and said, "I hope you liked that."

"I did. You are really good."

"Thank you."

"So who did that one? You?"

"Erroll Garner. That was 'Misty'. And he's my hero for other reasons besides being a great writer."

"Like?"

"Well, he was also one of the greatest pianists who ever lived – I will never be one-tenth the musician he was. But he was completely self-taught. Never had a lesson. Never learned to read music, even. But he could write that song, and play like... like... well, he inspires me. He shows me how much I could do, just following my heart and listening to my ears."

My stomach fell a little. "Are you telling me that you – "

She nodded. "No lessons. Can't read. Father offered to hire a teacher for me more than once, but I felt like it was more fun to figure it out on my own. I do all this because it's fun, for me, anyway."

I burst out, "Are you shittin' me?!" and then I clapped my hand over my mouth. Gwyn giggled. I mean, geez. All of us in Pink Rage were self-taught, too, but we couldn't do anything like *this!* I shook my head slowly, then looked her in the eye and said, "Well, that is just fantastic."

She shrugged, a little uneasily. "This is what you've got to work with." To me, it felt more like having a secret weapon. And she felt like Dev didn't appreciate what she could do? That just made him a dolt.

Gwyn rubbed her hands together for a second. "So now you heard me. Do I get to hear you?"

"Um." I rubbed the back of my neck. "Well, yeah okay, I guess. If I can think of something to do." She nodded, and then just sat still and watched me.

What could I do? Even better, what could we *both* do? If we were trying to work together on this, that would be best, right? I knew she liked pretty piano things, and I was all screams and guitars...

Then I had an idea.

On Joan Jett's first album – which I knew inside out by now – she did a quiet piano-ey song. Back when I was little, I kinda tuned it out cuz the loud guitars were more fun. But once I was around eleven, and starting to argue with my folks a bit more, I started to notice that song. It had lyrics about being young and free, and people not telling you what to do, and that really spoke to me then. It

was a song I ended up loving.

I asked Gwyn, "Do you know 'You Don't Own Me?'"

She smiled enough that I could see her teeth again for a second. "I do! Let's!"

"Sure! Does it matter where I, uh...."

"Um, if you go around in front of me, I'll be able to hear you better?"

I nodded and stood in front of the black slab of her synthesizer, and tried to clear my throat a bit. I could already feel my palms wet and my chest a bit tight, so I took a deep breath. She reached over to the other keyboard to her right, adjusted a few switches and buttons. After that, she turned back to me and played a descending piano pattern I recognized. She got the swaying rhythm just right, and I was impressed again. Then it was my cue:

*You don't own me
I'm not just one of your*

and then she stopped playing and said "Stop stop, sorry, stop."

I blinked. "What?"

"Are, are you forcing your voice to do that sort of raspy sound?"

"Well, yeah, that's how I always sing, yeah?"

"Oh, Mari, no, you can damage your vocal cords if you do that!"

I shrugged, confused. "That's just what rock singers sound like, eh?"

"Well, can you try not to? Just for this? Don't force your sound, don't think about it, just focus on hitting the notes. It'll help me if I can hear *you*. All right?"

"Yeah okay. Um, let's take it from the top!" And we did. Gwyn introed me again, and I sang relaxed, and tried not to worry about my sound. When we got to the cool part of the song, where there's a little surprise chord change at *I'm young and I love to be young*, she hit that change no problem, and it made me smile – she really did know this song. It was exciting to finally be able to sing a Joan

song for someone besides family.

When the break came, where I was expecting to hear a saxophone, she reached her right hand over to the other keyboard, and suddenly there were violins instead. But again, not cheap fake ones: this sounded like an orchestra full of them, massive and epic. I actually got a little chill. Wow she was good.

Then we got to the ending, I realized that I wasn't sure how to fade out, and then Gwyn hit that chord change again when I wasn't expecting it. That threw me off, and we both kind of stumbled to a stop. Sorta like how Pink Rage did most of the time. I blushed and chuckled. She said, "Yeah, we'd need to work out an actual ending for it, I guess." We grinned at each other, and I felt good about working with her. I had hope for this.

"Okay, so: Dev wants catchy and bouncy, and you want pretty and surprising. You think we can have both?"

"I'm beginning to, yes. And *you* want?"

"Well..." I looked overhead for a second. "If I can't have actual rock 'n' roll, I at least want a bit of energy in it, something that doesn't sound lame or silly?"

Gwyn nodded. "Something with some oomph to it."

I blinked at her and grinned. "'Oomph' ? Uhhh, yeah okay, sure."

She frowned a bit. "Oh, and he said he wants us to focus on covers to start with. Oldie covers, with new arrangements and new sounds. He said once we work on an album, then we'd need to put a few originals together. 'For filler', were his exact words." She made a small grimace.

I shrugged. I had nothing against covers – Joan did lots. "So can we start working on that, now?"

She stood up. "I'm a little tired today. How about this: you go home and put together a list of covers that would be fun to do, that you think would work for this, and I'll do the same. Then we get back together and compare notes. Sound good?"

I nodded. "Sounds good."

She headed for the door. "I just need to get my coat and borrow mother's keys, then I can drive you home, all right?" She stopped, then, and turned to flash me a little smile. "I feel good about this. An hour ago maybe not so much, but now I do."

I gave her a little smile back. "Same here." Then I followed her into the hallway.

Seven

When I got in, mom was sitting in the living room, writing in a notebook in her lap, the TV on too low for me to hear. I didn't really understand what she got out of having a show on that she could barely hear and wasn't really looking at, but that seemed to be how she rolled. She turned to me and lowered her glasses a little. "Hi, honey, how did your meeting go?"

"Real good," I said while I hung my coat up. "I think you woulda been impressed with her." I know I was, obviously.

"Oh, a 'her'?"

"Heh, that's what I said. Yeah, and she's younger than I expected, too, like early twenties, I guess. And a fantastic musician – I think it's gonna be really good working with her."

"Ah, so you've decided that you do want to. That's a good sign." She gave a little nod. "I suppose this means that *she's* a rock 'n' roll woman, too."

I leaned back on the wall by the staircase. "Actually, that's the weird thing. She isn't, really, at all." Mom's eyebrows went up a little. "But I.... you know how sometimes, when you come home after work, you'll tell me and daddy about how you got a good feeling about someone new at your office?"

She nodded. "Or sometimes not so good, yes."

"Well... I think I get a good feeling about this girl."

Mom's eyes got smiley. "I always said that you have more sensitivity about these things than you want to think about."

" 'Good vibrations', huh?"

"If you like." She blinked a few times, then said, "And what kind of feeling do you get from this manager of yours?"

I looked away from her for a second. "Honestly? I'm still not sure. I don't feel like I get a lot from him either way, yet." I shrugged. "Oh hey, where's daddy? I wanna ask him something."

"Down in the studio. Just practising, I think, so it's okay to interrupt – go ahead."

I mimed a little kiss at mom and headed down the basement steps. Extra chilly down here in January, but I didn't figure we'd be able to finish the basement any time soon. Not that it mattered, I didn't need to come down here much. I could hear trumpet coming a bit muffled from behind the battered little door beside the laundry sink. I knocked.

The trumpet stopped and then the door creaked open. "Heya, punkin, what's up?"

"Can I just ask you something quick for a second?"

He nodded and stepped back for me to squeeze in. How he managed to fit a stereo and so many LPs and CDs into this little closet, I had no idea – plus a card table with a four-track recorder on it, plus notebooks, plus the space heater. He didn't offer me a seat cuz the old wooden stool he was perched on was it. He cocked his head and waited.

"Do you know a song called 'Misty'?"

He smiled his easy, carefree smile. "Do I ever!" He reached for a mute on the table beside him and said, "This one calls for the ol' Harmon." While he fit it into the trumpet bell, I half-smiled and said, "Yeah, I had a feeling you would." Then he licked his lips, flexed the fingers on his right hand, and started to play.

I recognized the tune as the one Gwyn played for me, but daddy took it maybe a little slower. The mute gave his horn a classic, late-night, black-and-white-movie feeling that was, I had to admit, extremely cool. And once again I found myself paying attention to the surprises and things that Gwyn had told me to listen for, and I liked this song even more the second time.

After a couple of lines daddy stopped, and I found myself nodding at him to go on. He smiled again and then kept playing. I watched him closer than I usually did, his fingers, his face. He had a peaceful, faraway look, like Gwyn did when she played. He wasn't playing any of those swirly-random things that he liked to listen to on his records, just the melody. But he sounded so good. I felt like I had never paid enough attention to what a beautiful sound he got when he played. I felt like any studio in Toronto that didn't hire him was a dolt. And suddenly I was

so proud of him, and I wished I didn't feel so awkward about ever actually telling him so.

Before I knew it, the song was over, and for a second daddy just sat, and looked down, and gently shook his head, and gently smiled. Then he looked at me and said, "So what brought this on? Not complaining, just curious."

"Well, I, uh, I heard that song today at my meeting with that music director – Gwyn. And I thought it sounded like something you would know or like."

"Well, that does surprise me. 'Gwyn', you said? A lady?" I nodded. "I take it she's a musician herself?"

"Oh, she is way a musician. I bet you'd like her."

"What does she play?"

"Keyboards – but she had a bunch of other instruments around, too, so I guess she plays them all?" His eyebrows went up a little. "And she's really more into music that sounds like what *you* like. She actually played 'Misty' for me herself."

He gave a crooked little smile. "Yep, that really does surprise me."

"She, um, she said that that Garner guy who wrote it couldn't read music and just taught himself – is that true?"

"That's what I always heard. Sounds like she knows her stuff. Or at least she knows *my* stuff."

I smiled a bit. "Yeah, I think you guys would get along."

"It's beginning to sound that way to me, yeah. But, um, it's more important if *you* guys get along, right?"

"Well, we do, so far. More than I expected, even... yeah, I think we do."

For a couple of days after that, I thought about a song list for Gwyn, off and on. Mostly on, I guess – there were a couple of times I let my mind wander at the till

at work and messed up a bit, til I cracked down and focused harder. I was having a hard time coming up with ideas. Something old for Dev, something pretty for Gwyn, something I liked okay....

There wasn't that much old stuff I really listened to that much or was very familiar with. My music library was pretty small: besides Joan, all Joan, the complete Joan, I had a few grunge albums, a Ramones, Ikiru's CD that I got daddy to tape for me so I could play it in my room.... The only oldie stuff I had was a few Kinks and Who, and that was only because now and then daddy would buy me one for Christmas or my birthday. He said that was what the stuff I liked reminded him of, so maybe I would like them, too. And some of them I did.

I started a list of a few oldies I knew which I thought were kinda pretty, like "See My Friends" and "Behind Blue Eyes". Eventually I decided it would be more fun to tape them for her so they'd be right there for her to hear. Daddy let me borrow the good stereo in his studio that had a dual cassette deck, and I took my tape library down to the basement along with a blank. For this job, I wore my way-too-big green sweater and cranked the space heater up.

I copied those songs onto the blank, then felt stuck for a minute... and then I felt like the hell with it. What I really wanted to do was share music with her that I hoped she might like. I wanted her to hear songs that might give her an idea of who I was.

I put on almost the entire ***I Love Rock-n-Roll*** album cuz it was my best friend since I was seven. Some things from Joan's first album, like "Bad Reputation" and "Shout" cuz they really rocked... and "You Don't Own Me" so she could hear it sung by someone good. Some Nirvana, some Alice in Chains. "You Really Got Me", "The Kids Are Alright", "Waterloo Sunset"... I just kept going til the cassette was full. And before I knew it, I had made Gwyn a mixtape.

Then I had to wait for Gwyn to call me, with no idea when that might be. When she drove me home after that Sunday meeting, she got my phone number, but when I asked for hers, she said that she'd have to ask her parents first. Which made me look sidewise, but away from her. And so far, I still hadn't gotten it.

Once or twice, in my room in the evening after work, I played back my tape, just to satisfy myself that it sounded good. And yeah, to me this all sounded great – I

thought I had made a fantastic list. But I wondered how much she would agree.

On Thursday night, I got a phone call right after *Friends*. (Not during, thank god.) Mom called from the kitchen and said there was a Gwyneth Jones asking for me, then handed me the receiver.

"Hi, Gwyn?"

"Hello, Mari. Um... I was wondering if it would be all right for me to drive down to your place tonight? I have something here that I wanted to give you."

"Oh, are you finished your song list for me?"

I heard her make a little "heh" sound. "Yes, just." I thought there was mild pleasure in her voice. "I felt it would be good for you to spend some time with it before we get together again to work."

"Well, that's great. Because, as it happens, I have something here that I wanted to give to *you*, too."

This time she actually giggled. "I bet I can guess what it is."

"Maybe." If she was expecting a paper list, then I had a fantastic surprise for her.

"I can be there in about thirty minutes."

"Great, see you then." Then I heard her breathe a couple of times and then finally hang up.

I told mom that Gwyn was coming over around nine-ish, just to drop something off. Mom just said that was fine, and I went up to my room to get the tape and stuff it into my pocket.

Thirty minutes later I hadn't heard anything. Or thirty-five, or forty. I wasn't sure what was going on. I peeked out the front door to see if there was any sign of her coming up the street. And I noticed a car sitting by the curb in front of our house, the engine running, the headlights on. Just sitting. From what I could make out in the streetlights, the shape of the car looked like Gwyn's mom's

Volvo. And that looked like Gwyn's hair in the driver's seat. She must've just pulled up.

I waited for her to turn the car off and come to the door. But she didn't. I waited like a full minute. She just sat there, looking straight ahead.

I slipped my boots on, went out to the street, and waved at her when I walked into the headlights, then came around to her window. She rolled it down about halfway and looked up at me.

"Oh, hi," she said. The streetlights made her eyes look really shiny.

I leaned down closer to the window. "Are you okay? You gonna come in?"

She shook her head once, small and tight. "I can't. I'm sorry. I...." Her voice sounded wavery and little. "I couldn't go to the door in case someone else answered. Phoning was hard enough. I'm, I'm sorry, I'm not ready to meet them. Not yet."

"Ummmmmm....." It looked like she shivered for a second. "Hey. It's okay. You don't have to. I, uhh... well here, this is what I wanted to give you, okay?" I reached in my pocket and handed the tape to her.

She giggled, covered her mouth, then said, "Oh my. You made me a tape. Thank you. Oh, that's funny."

"Funny?"

She reached over to the dark seat beside her, then brought her hand to the window. "Here." And she handed me a tape.

"Ahh." I made a soft chuckle. "Wow, that's pretty cool. In a kinda spooky way, I guess."

She nodded and actually managed to smile. "It is." She looked at the steering wheel. "I, I should go. I told my parents I wouldn't be very long."

"Oh, yeah okay. So, uh, so you call me when it's time to get to work again? And thank you." I held the tape up.

She wiped her eye and nodded. "I will. Soon. Good night, Mari."

I nodded. "Night." And stepped back while she rolled her window up, put the car into gear, and drove away carefully into the night. For a few seconds I just watched her go, then noticed how cold I was and went back inside.

I took a closer look at the cassette she made for me. The liner card looked like she had used a fine-point marker and had training in hand lettering. There was a long list of titles and names I didn't recognize: "Cherish", by The Association; "Time of the Season" by The Zombies; "Walk On By", by Dionne Warwick; "My Little Red Book", by Love; "Accidents Will Happen", by Elvis Costello; on and on.

But the ones that caught my attention the most were the ones she had put at the beginning of Side One, to make sure I heard them: "Misty", by Lesley Gore. And "You Don't Own Me", by Lesley Gore.

Eight

On Saturday night, the phone rang. I happened to be right in the kitchen getting a glass of water, so I answered it. "Hello?"

"Hello – oh! Is this Mari?"

"Yeah – Gwyn?"

"Yes!" I could feel her relief. "I'm calling to see if you had a chance to listen to the tape yet?"

"Uh-huh, a couple times."

"Oh, that's good. Because if you had, I was thinking of us getting together tomorrow, at two again?"

"I should be able to, sure."

I thought I could hear her swallow. "Um, the only problem is that I won't be able to drive you. Mother's away tomorrow, and father doesn't let me use his car. So this is only if you can get a ride?"

"Hang on lemme check." I covered the mouthpiece with one hand, leaned out the kitchen doorway and called toward the living room. "Mom?" I waited a few seconds, then heard her steps coming. And then she was in the hallway, holding her notebook with her index finger acting like a bookmark, giving me a question look. "Would you be able to give me a lift to Gwyn's and back tomorrow afternoon? Uh, please."

She blinked. "I suppose so. Another business meeting?"

"Sounds like. Thank you!" As mom returned to the living room, I put the phone back to my ear. "All good, I'll be there. You said two?"

"I did. I'll see you then." A short pause, then she hung up.

I didn't need to give mom directions to Gwyn's house. Back when Dev took me

the first time, mom insisted that I get the address from him before we left, and she wrote it down in her trusty notebook, just so she'd know where I was. Which is just as well, cuz I dunno how well I remembered the way there anyhow.

The snow on the fields wasn't quite as deep as last Sunday. There hadn't been any fresh snowfall and we'd had a couple of sunny days in there. Today the sky was pale gray, though, and the snow didn't glare as much.

Mom and I gabbed off and on during the drive. "I only spoke a few words with Gwyn when she phoned the other night," mom said, "but she sounded very well spoken. I might even say 'rather proper'. /s she, do you think?"

"At first, I guess. I'd say she loosens up a little, after a while. I dunno, I think she sounds a bit like money. I think she said her dad drives a Mercedes."

"That does sound like money. But if they don't have a chauffeur, then I guess it's not *too* much money." She smiled – I think she enjoyed her line more than I did.

"So were you gonna say you wished that / sounded that proper?"

She glanced over at me, and I swear her eye twinkled. "Dear, I have never once wished that you were anything other than what you are."

"Even that time I got into your makeup and used your mascara as eyeliner and eyebrow pencil instead?" I was seven and trying to look like Joan Jett, who else.

Mom shook her head. "Even that time. Although there was a second there when I wished that you were you in another room where I couldn't see."

I tisked and said sorry. I still felt a bit bad about that, years later.

"No worries, dear, it was a learning opportunity for us both."

"So why did you mention Gwyn's properness?"

She thought for a second. "Just trying to get a better sense of who she is, I guess. I mean, you two are going to be working together, it looks like. I know things have just barely gotten started, but if the universe is generous, you could end up working with her for years. She could be a big part of your life."

This made me think. I had barely let myself think about the possibilities of this whole business beyond a vague snapshot of Being A Star. But it sounded like mom had already considered that I might have a musical career, long-term. It felt like she took me seriously as a musician, and for some reason that surprised me.

"Well," I said, "if that happens, you'll have lots of chances to get to know her."

"You're right, honey. Patience is always a good idea. And non-attachment to outcomes – just let things be what they are."

This time it was Gwyn who answered the door. Today she was dressed a little more relaxed, in a pale blue blouse with long loose sleeves and no jacket. She said hello when she saw me – then when she noticed mom idling in the driveway, waiting to make sure I got in okay, Gwyn gave her a short deer-in-headlights stare and then a timid wave. Mom waved at us both and then drove off.

While I got my coat and boots off, I said, "Mom said she wants to be home before four for something I forget what, so she needs to pick me up at three-thirty. I hope that's okay, it's the best I can do."

Gwyn hung my coat up for me and nodded. "I'm sure that will be fine. We can get a lot done in that time." Then she led me down the hall to her studio.

She sat at her keyboards, and I realized that she looked most comfortable there. I took the stuffed chair again, but this time I sat back and sprawled more. She didn't give me the impression that she wanted to speak first, so I gave her a shove by saying, "Okay. So." Hey, the meeting was her idea.

She gave her shoulders a slow roll. "So. Devlin's instructions are to come up with a set of five songs, three minutes each. In his bouncy, catchy style. No long instrumental breaks, no fade-outs. I can write new arrangements to make all that happen, so I'm not worried. I say we give him six, so he can remove one and feel like he has some power in the process. Today is when we agree on the six." I nodded, and she went on. "First, was there anything in the tape I gave you that jumped out and made you say 'oh yes Gwyn please we have to do this'?"

"Well, I did really like 'My Little Red Book'." It was the only thing on her tape that actually rocked. I mean, it didn't roar, but it had a nice little stomp.

Gwyn laughed. "I knew you were gonna go for that one, I knew it the second I put it there. Yes, that one will be easy. There, we already have one of the six picked in two minutes. We've got this." She smiled, and let me see her teeth for like three whole seconds.

"Yep, we rock." I thought for a second. "Oh, I also liked 'Here, There and Everywhere'."

She lowered her glasses a little. "You did? I mean, I'm glad, but I thought that was one of the softest ones in the list, so I didn't think you'd choose it."

"Well, it's really pretty. And concerts and albums usually have a slow-dance song in there somewhere, maybe we should, too."

Her mouth pinched a bit. "I'm not sure Devlin would go for it, though. And I don't think it would work if I tried to speed it up and make it bounce."

"You don't think he would? I thought he would respect it cuz Beatles." She shrugged. So I said, "Let's call that one a 'maybe' for now."

"Did you like 'Walk On By'? I was really hoping we could try that one."

"Um... play it for me again, lemme see."

Rather than trying to search for the song on her mixtape, Gwyn chose to put on one of her Dionne Warwick CDs to zero in on the song faster. She pressed Play and once again I snuggled up in how good the sound of her stereo was. When the singing started, I tried to follow along – going la-la-la cuz I didn't know the words yet. Once we got to like the second line, I gave up. "No, those notes there are too high for me."

She frowned a little. "Maybe I could try rewriting that line for you. Or just transpose it."

I shook my head. "Naw, I'd rather not do it than sound like I'm doing it wrong."

"All right, I want you to be comfortable," she said, rubbing her forehead.

I had a sudden thought. "Oh, before I forget: am I right that the "You Don't Own Me" on your tape was done before Joan's?"

Gwyn nodded. "1963. Lesley Gore's version was the first ever." She smiled, and her eyes were warm, as if she saw something special in me. "When you sang it with your real voice, I thought you sounded a lot like Lesley. That's why I wanted you to hear her." Listening to that song on Gwyn's tape was something of an eye-opener for me. For one, now I knew where Gwyn got the idea to put those violins in – she was playing the arrangement she was familiar with. And just as I was touched and inspired by those words when Joan sang them, I imagined Joan being eleven, and being touched and inspired when Lesley sang them. Knowing that this version meant something to Joan, made it mean something to me. I thought about us doing this song, but then dismissed it as not bouncy enough for Dev.

I was having trouble remembering anything else that jumped out at me. Finally I said, "What about *my* tape? Can we do 'I Love Rock 'n' Roll'? Can you turn it into a bouncy Dev sound thing?"

"Oh, I'm pretty sure I could do something with it that even *you* might be satisfied with, but Devlin won't go for it – not oldie enough for him. But I can tell you really like that one."

"Oh gee, can ya?"

"So I'm going to suggest that we work that one up anyway, as something fun to do in rehearsals. Or maybe it could be for the album."

"For the album!" I proclaimed. "That can be our battle cry!" I raised a fist. "For The Album!" She giggled. After a second, I looked her in the eye and said, "Do you think we ever will do an album?"

"No way to know that yet. But gosh wouldn't that be great," she sighed. And I saw a new light in her pale eyes.

After an hour, we had settled on our list. Songs that Gwyn felt she could turn into something which would give Dev the sound and feel he was looking for. Songs that I was willing to take a shot at. There were a couple from each of our tapes. From mine, she felt ready to tackle "Waterloo Sunset" by The Kinks and "The

Kids Are Alright" by The Who. From hers, we settled on "My Little Red Book", "Here, There and Everywhere" (even though she was pretty sure that it would be the one he would pull, but she wanted to let me have my shot), and "Along Comes Mary" by The Association, which she insisted on because of the "Mary". She thought that would be cute.

The final selection was a surprise to me: Gwyn had thought of it after she compiled her tape, but its possibilities had sparked her imagination. "You Were On My Mind", by We Five. "It's already bouncy and catchy," she said, "it's inventive but pretty simple, therefore easy to write a new arrangement for – and it's written by a Canadian. Which means CanCon, which means easier to get it played on radio and Much. Devlin will eat all that up, you just watch." She copied it onto a new tape for me to take home and learn.

And so we were all set. There was still a while before mom was due to come pick me up, so Gwyn spent the time showing me some of her plans for rearranging the songs. A lot of them had harmony vocal singers (The Association sounded like they had a hundred), and that was not going to be an option for us. So she had the idea to do those parts with instruments instead, to keep the songs sounding full. It sounded to me like it could work. I felt like I could work on this arranging stuff and listen to it for hours. It was Gwyn who was keeping a responsible eye on the clock and finally hustled me out to the door when it was time.

Nine

Neither of us knew how long it would take Gwyn to arrange those six songs, but it sounded like a big job to me. Not that she was worried about that – in fact, I got the feeling that she was excited, looking forward to it. But my best guess was that it would take weeks before I heard from her and we'd be ready to work again. Months, maybe? I hoped not. I realized that I was excited and looking forward to this, too. Curious about how it might come together.

Still, she had her work to do and now I had mine. First thing I did after mom drove me back home was bug daddy to use his stereo again, so I could copy the other songs onto this new tape with the We Five song on it. So then I had my set list all together in one place for practising with.

Next, during my off hours over the next several days, I huddled up in my room with my tape player and headphones and a notepad. And I listened to those songs over and over – and over – trying to work out and write down all the lyrics. This part wasn't boring, exactly, but nowhere near as much fun as actually singing. And yes, there were times when I couldn't really hear the words that clearly even after dozens of listens, so I finally just had to put down my best guess what it sounded like. Probably I got some of them wrong, but hey, it was the best I could do. I figured as long as I was giving this my best shot, then okay.

And then – finally – it was time to start singing them. And oh, I sang them. And then sang them some more. I hoped I wasn't driving my folks nuts hearing me sing the same things over and over. But then I remembered back when I was little and singing "I Love Rock 'n' Roll" over and over, and back then I never worried about it. So with any luck, they were used to this and knew how to roll with it. I guess I'd hear about that if I was wrong.

I tried to just focus on the notes like Gwyn said, and let the sound just be what it was. Non-attachment to outcomes, sorta. And to start, I sang while holding the lyric sheets, but I was also focused on learning those til I could sing them all from memory. With Pink Rage I did okay with that part, so maybe this was something I had a bit of talent for. I hoped.

Gradually, everything started to sound smoother, and I needed the lyric sheets less. And I think it was during "Here There" that there was a moment where I could really hear myself, how my voice was actually sweet. I almost stopped, then, just from the surprise. It's not that I felt this was better than my gritty rock

voice, although it didn't seem worse. It was more like I had never realized that this was something I was capable of. It felt like I was growing, like there was more to me than I ever knew. And once again I had a sudden surge of hopefulness about this whole project.

Days went by. I sang my set list, feeling like I was getting better at it. I went to work and cracked wise with Doris and Henry and Sharra. I watched TV. I vacuumed the house. I went to The Ambassador on Grunge Night. I sang some more. I waited for Gwyn to call me. More days went by.

After a couple of weeks, I finally did get a call, but from Dev. He said that the stage wardrobe part of things was finally getting under way, but his consultant needed me to go get measured for it. So, some time during business hours when I was able to, I was to go to this address he gave me and ask for Chester.

That address was downtown on Hamilton Street, a bit past the music store, so I could walk there easy. And, on the next Monday morning, my day off, I did. When I went past the drugstore, I remembered that they might still have some marked-down Valentine's candy – I promised myself I would check on the way home. I counted the street numbers on the doors till I came to a narrow, old shop where the sign over the door said "Delta Sewing Machines".

I frowned. This was one of those hole-in-the-wall places around town that I saw fairly often but never really paid any attention to. I realized I was expecting something like a big white design studio – not thinking about the fact that I had never noticed any of those in downtown Westgate before. And I suspected that this Chester was someone else who Dev contracted on an as-needed basis – it occurred to me that his business might not have any actual staff. I shrugged and made the bell on the door jingle when I went in.

The cramped, stuffy place was crowded with small tables with a wild assortment of sewing machines on them, glittering under the glaring fluorescent lights. Some of the machines in the back corner looked dusty. A bored old lady sat behind a worn wooden counter. She looked up when I came in, then immediately looked at her fingernails again. I guess as soon as she saw that I didn't look like I could afford a sewing machine, then I evaporated.

I walked over to her counter. She smelled smoky. "Hi," I said. She looked up

again, almost surprised. I went on. "I'm looking for Chester?"

She head-gestured toward the back and grumbled, "He's upstairs, honey." Then I was dismissed again.

I had to sidle between the random tables to get to the doorway at back, where a narrow dark staircase led up. Every step squeaked and groaned under my feet.

Then I came to a low, slanty-ceilinged attic with bare wooden beams, kinda like The Loft. Unlike The Loft, this place was kept warm. Too warm, really. I looked around – seemed like a tailor's shop, I guessed. Sewing supplies and workbenches scattered around, garments on hangers on nails and hooks almost everywhere they would fit. A small man in a white shirt, with his back to me, was bent over a long table under a bright light at the other side.

I softly called out, "Hello?"

He straightened up and turned to face me. Very short gray hair, mild lined face, neat little gray mustache, small wire-rimmed glasses. He blinked for a second, then perked up and said, "Oh! Could you be Mariko?"

It was my turn to blink. "Mari," I corrected.

"Mari." He smiled a warm, gentle smile, then walked over to me with clipped steps and his hand extended. He sang "Hiiiiiii" as he glided to me and picked up my hand which I hadn't had a chance to offer yet. "I was wondering when you were going to come by!" He put his other hand over mine, softly shook, and looked at me like I was his favourite niece. "I'm Chester."

I nodded. "Hi?"

He let go of my hand, rested his hand between my shoulder blades, and softly guided me back to the table he was working at. "I really only need you for like a minute or two, sweetie, just measuring a few things for your costume. Oh, can you take your jacket off? Just lay it on the table there for now, it'll be fiiiine."

While I took my black jacket off and laid it down, he picked up a worn, cloth measuring tape, kneeled at my feet, and measured from the floor up to the bottom of my knee. "What size shoe do you wear, sweetie?"

"Um, six."

"Six," he said, and stood up and jotted a couple of numbers down on a sheet of paper resting on the table. "Greaaaaat. Now hold your arms up, out straight to the sides, dear. Like a crucifix." He measured from my armpit to my wrist, then looped the tape around me surprisingly fast, measured my waist, then hips, then from waist down to knee. "Mmmm-hm?" He stopped to write down a few more numbers.

"Are you going to be making my stage outfit?"

He looked at me and grinned. "Oh, sweetie, I *designed* it! I'm not letting anyone *else* make it!" Then with a scoffing little laugh, he went around behind me and I felt him measure across my shoulders. Next, down my spine from the little knobby at the top down to my waist. Then I could feel his face moving in closer to my ear, and he was murmuring, "Now Mari, I'm really sorry about this next question, but there's no way around it, and remember that I *am* a professional, okay?" And then he actually whispered, "What's your bra size?"

I snorted trying to hold back a giggle. Still looking ahead, my arms still out, I whispered back, "I don't wear one, Chester."

"Okay-yeeee!" he said. And then very gently looped the tape around my chest from behind, peering over my shoulder to make sure that he had it around what passed for my breasts. I could feel his fingertips on my back as he held the tape together, and I couldn't help but be a little impressed that he was enough of a gentleman to take this particular measurement with his hands well out of harm's way.

He slipped the tape down an inch or so and measured again. I said, "Exactly the same, right?"

He tisked. "Nothing wrong with having a happy back, dearie."

Then he sang, "You can breathe now, honey, we're donnnne." I actually did let my breath out, lowered my arms, then shrugged my jacket back on while he got his pencil and jotted more numbers down.

Then he straightened and looked at me with what I would swear was fond regard. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Marik– Mari. And I guess I'll be seeing

you again after I'm finished?"

Of course I was curious. "Hey, um, what is this outfit gonna be, exactly? Can you describe it to me?"

His eyebrows got sad. "Ohhhh, I could but I can't, sweetie, I'm sorry. Dev kinda-sorta swore me to secrecy – he said he wanted to surprise you with it himself." And he cocked his head at me. And now I was even more curious.

"Well, then, I guess that's it." I shrugged. "Bye." And he fluttered the fingers of one hand in my direction as I turned and headed for the stairs. Hoping for cheap chocolate.

I guess things were shifting into high gear – at last – because on Wednesday evening, Dev called again and directed me to contact his "theatrical consultant". Again, he gave me a name – Rhonda – and an address in town, but this time a phone number as well. "These guys are busier," he said, "so you probably wanna call ahead, hah?"

First chance I had to call was the next day, during my lunch break at work. I asked Doris if I could borrow the phone in the office. She grinned and said, "I see nothing, I hear nothing."

What sounded like a young woman answered after the first ring and said, "Good afternoon, Pastorage Dance Studio."

"Sorry, wrong number," I said, and hung up quickly. I took a couple of deep breaths, then got Dev's card out of my wallet and dialed again.

For once it didn't go to voicemail. I heard Dev say, "Yeah."

"No," I said, as flatly as I could.

"Wha– ?"

"No, Dev."

A short pause for him to blink. "Mari?"

"Dance studio?! Are you ffffrickin' kidding me?! No way!"

I could hear him huff through his nose. "Meet me at The Ambassador. Now."

"I'm calling from work."

"Then *after* work. *Right* after."

"Nine," I said, emphatic but flat.

"Awright, nine." He hung up loud.

He could wait til nine. No way I was missing *Friends*.

For once, he was already there when I arrived. Nursing what looked like a scotch with ice, an empty sitting beside that, glaring at the doorway, willing me to arrive. I put on a tough scowl and walked to his table. He didn't offer to get me anything – he just said, "Sit."

So I sat. And looked at him, and waited. He looked like he was straining to stay calm.

Quieter than I expected, he said, "What *is* this? What's your problem?"

"I. Am. Not. Dancing." I tried to stare him down. But he was as good at it as I was.

He was still trying to win as he said, "Do you even understand what you're doing?"

"No dancing! We never once said anything about me dancing in all of this!"

"Now look, Rhonda is really good, she has a great background, she's worked for –"

"I don't care!"

"This is a great oppor– "

"I don't care!"

He put his hand down flat on the table, almost slapped it. "This is how these things work! This is part of that 'arresting presence' I was tell– "

"No!"

"Why not?" He leaned in. "Will you tell me why the hell not?!"

We both stared and breathed heavily for a few seconds. I felt all agitated inside. Then I listened to the clatter coming over The Ambassador's P.A., looked over at the nearest speaker... and I pushed my chair back with a scrape and stood up.

All my life, I have been the crappiest dancer I ever knew. My ears and throat and brain have a good sense of rhythm – this is not the time to be modest about that. But my arms and legs: not so much. Any time I was at a party or gathering and wanted to get a laugh out of my friends, all I had to do was so-called dance.

And I stood by our table and made an honest attempt at dancing where Dev could see me. I held my fists up and swung them over to one side, then the other, rocked my shoulders back and forth, rolled my hips and flexed my knees, slid one foot over, then the other.... I knew people were looking at me and could see what a total dolt I was, but I was so mad at Dev that I didn't care. I did this for like most of one verse, and then just stood there, my arms limp, and looked at him. I could see his shoulders were drooped.

After a few seconds, he reached into his jacket pocket, took out his wallet, and said, "Awright, no dancing. Change of plan." He handed me a five. "Here, go get yourself sumthin." As I headed to the bar, I could see that he wasn't watching me. He was just staring down into his drink and shaking his head.

Ten

February finally got its extra-long butt out of my face, and was immediately followed by a weekend of delicious thaw that filled the streets with meltwater. Still no word from Gwyn yet, but the warmer weather was good for my spirits and gave me hope that I'd hear from her soon. It almost felt like we were in for an early spring, but I had lived in Ontario long enough to know better.

Even so, on Monday afternoon I took advantage of the break in the weather and went walking downtown for a while – first day this year I was able to wear my lighter coat and leave my big puffy one at home. That alone was freeing.

I checked out the music store, just browsing, maybe looking to see if there was a new Joan Jett in – but I really knew it hadn't been long enough yet since her last one. I saw Inch behind the till, and when I happened to catch her eye, I lifted my hand a little in a brief hello. (Yes, we both belonged to the Sisterhood of Cashiers.) She nodded once and maybe one corner of her mouth lifted, then she went back to sorting things under the counter. That was all – I wasn't gonna go over there and be one of those annoying stalkery fans. No, we were cool. But I could still feel a tasty little pressure in my chest even as I was heading back out into Hamilton Street.

I turned in the direction of Newman when I saw a tall blonde girl, with glasses, in a long camel coat, coming out of the New Age health food store across the street. I stopped for a second – she kinda reminded me of Gwyn. I watched her take a few steps down the sidewalk – it *was* Gwyn.

I called out her name across the street, and she gave a little start and looked over, like a deer. She leaned toward my direction a little, trying to make out if it was actually me. I waved, trotted across the street, weaved through a couple of high school guys skipping class, stopped at her side and looked up at her. "Heyyy, Gwynnieeee!" I said, and I could feel myself smiling.

"Mari! Hi!" She smiled, too – easily, and for once she didn't worry about covering her teeth. She reached out a hand to touch the sleeve on my forearm, but like she was checking to see if it would burn her. "This is nice! How are you?"

"Good, I'm good. What are you doing here?" I was a little shocked to find her out in the crowds – or what passes for crowds in Westgate. But I hoped I didn't *sound* shocked.

She looked back for a second at the store where she had just come out. "I just finished having a massage – see?" And she held out the back of her hand near my nose. I leaned in to have a smell, and without meaning to I let the tip of my nose touch her skin. And I noticed that she didn't pull away.

Yes, I recognized that soft, exotic scent. I knew there was an RMT working out of that store cuz mom sometimes went there, and she'd come home smelling just like this. I looked up at Gwyn and said, "Yep, you did just have one."

She gestured ahead. "I was just going to go for coffee. Do you think you'd want to come? Do you have time?"

"Yeah okay, sure." And I let her lead me to the little pricey place a couple of doors down. Of course, the first thing I said was, "How are the songs coming?"

She smiled quietly to herself. "Ohhh, I'm happy with them so far. I really am." She looked at me. "I so hope that you will be, too. Gosh, this is exciting."

"So how much longer? Almost done, I hope?"

"I still have two to do. My guess is two more weeks, maybe?"

"Can't wait," I said as we went through the glass door into the glorious coffee air.

We were lucky enough to find a table for two. We draped our coats over the backs of our chairs, and she also set down what looked like a book bag on hers. Then we got into the thankfully short line-up to order. She said she was planning to get a chai tea latte, which immediately made *me* feel like one. And she insisted on buying. It felt a little weird to have her insist. On anything. She said she had a membership card and got a discount. (Plus, I'll be honest, I was pretty sure she could afford it easily enough.)

We sat down with our head-sized cups, and she actually started talking first. "I was planning to just sit here and relax with a book for a while. But oh, I am so glad *you* came by instead – this is so much nicer."

"Yeah, it is. Remember, I always have Mondays off, eh? If you're coming downtown on Monday again, you should call me."

She blew gently across her latte and stirred it for a second. "Well, this is not something I do all that often. The doctor says massage is good for me once in a while, so I go. But yes, I'll remember Mondays for next time." Then she gazed down into her drink. And she smiled a longer-than-usual-for-her smile.

"You're thinking about something," I said, and then sipped at my cup. Still pretty hot.

She blinked and then raised her eyes to mine. "When you came over and said 'Hey Gwynnie' – I was just thinking that it's been a long time since anyone called me that. A couple of my school friends back when I was little, I suppose."

"Well, I know your *mom* would never call you that."

She giggled. "Not in a million years, no. But, um... it was sort of nice."

"Maybe I can do it again sometime."

"I guess we'll see." She licked her lip and glanced down. "I am sorry to make you wait so long for the songs. I know it's taking a while. I even had Devlin phoning me once, asking about them. But I reminded him that he told me there was no firm deadline for them, so that was our agreement. And I got him to admit that that hadn't changed. He was just getting impatient." (Well, so was I.) "So he can sit. I don't mind making *him* wait." She smiled for a second. "Also, I need you to understand that I'm not working on these full-time. I'm still busy with school, and other things."

I realized that this had never occurred to me til that moment, and I felt a bit doltish. "Oh. Where do you go?"

"I'm at North Regal, the Belvedere campus, studying to be a paralegal." She didn't look keen about it.

"Oh. I guess that could be interesting."

She shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I'm just going to end up as a legal secretary in father's firm – I need the training for that. He already tried sending me to law school in Toronto til I was required to withdraw."

I frowned. "You *wanna* do this?"

She looked into her cup. "Father wants me to have a proper job. Which for him means one where his friends can see that I have it. And he wants mother to *not* have one." She softly tapped her cup with a fingernail. "He's not an easy man to know." She sat quiet for a moment, then looked up at me and put on a small smile. "This is so nice, being able to sit with you. I feel so lucky that you found me." She looked sweet and relaxed.

I decided to take a chance and risk putting her guard up. Curiosity. "Uh, Gwyn? I can't help noticing that you, uh, you seem to be doing pretty well here today with all these people around. Is, is that because your massage got you relaxed, maybe?"

She blushed, and looked down at the table, but at least she didn't seem to tense up. "Ah," she said. "Yes. You're, you're probably thinking about that night a while back when I was parked at your house, aren't you?"

"Well.... well, that would be part of it, I guess, yeah."

She stirred her drink again. "I can understand that. I...." Finally she looked at me again. "Do you really want to hear about this? This, um... this is not something I'm used to talking about."

I nodded and said, "I believe that."

She sipped her latte and brushed back a strand of hair. "Things are... are not always simple and obvious with me. The same situation doesn't always get the same result. I.... well, right here and right now, I am fairly comfortable, yes. With you here, even more so.

"All these other people here, I don't know them. They don't really matter. I mean, as far as how I feel. They don't make me worry. They're just here. But your parents?" She paused a while. "Look, I like you. I already feel like you're my friend. I hope you don't mind my saying that."

"No, I don't."

"And it's been so long since that happened. So, your parents, I... I feel like I need to like them because I like *you* and *you* like them. They *do* matter. But I don't like them yet because I don't know them. But I still need to. But what if I get

to know them and I *don't* like them? Or *they* don't like *me*? I would just... and then I get all tangled and bunched up inside, and I, I...." She took her glasses off and wiped her eyes, then slid her black rims back on. "I just can't handle it. I... I don't always know ahead of time what things will be hard. I just have to cope in the moment the best way I can." She gave me a quiet smile. "Like I said before, this is what you've got to work with."

For a moment, I was keenly aware of how much easier my life seemed, compared to what Gwyn was dealing with. I slowly shook my head, but I was smiling back at her. "Lady, I bet you have no idea how *glad* I am that I'm working with you."

She closed her eyes, blushed, and quietly said, "Oh gosh."

When I got home, I found mom and daddy in the kitchen, busy putting dinner together. They were standing at the counter with their backs to me – mom laying wide flat noodles down into a casserole dish, daddy grating cheese. I walked up quiet behind them, then put an arm around each of them, gave them a squeeze, and kissed the backs of their heads. Then I turned around quick and headed for the doorway.

Mom called after me, "What brought *that* on?"

"We're having lasagna."

Eleven

A couple more weeks went by and the calendar said it was nearly spring. After work one evening, I finally got a call from Gwyn and immediately felt a little surge. "The songs are done?" I said, not even trying to sound casual about it.

"The songs are done."

"So that means we record the vocals next, right? When?"

"No."

I frowned. " 'No' ? What?"

"We, I...." I heard her take a breath. "I was going to ask you if I can bring it down to you this evening? I have some other things for you along with it, and there are some things to discuss, so I'd feel better if I could brief you in person. If that's all right."

Now I grinned. " 'Brief' ? Uh, yes, ma'am. When do you want to come?"

"Is eight o'clock a good time for you?"

"For sure. Umm... do you want me to come out to the car when you get here?"

"Thank you. That would help."

"No problem."

A bit before eight I was standing by the front door, peering out, with my boots on, and my light coat on but unzipped. I saw a car coming down the street, but I couldn't recognize it in the dark – it wasn't til it stopped in front of our house that I was sure it was Gwyn. This time she didn't leave the engine running. As I headed down our front walk, I could make out her form undoing her seatbelt, then leaning and stretching toward the passenger door, trying to open it for me. Okay, so this time she wanted me to sit in the car – good, that'd be warmer.

I slid into the deep car seat and thunked the door shut, then turned to face her

as much as I could. The car was nice and warm inside. The dimness and close quarters made me feel a bit like I did when I was in one of Sophie's blankets-and-pillows secret forts, way back when. "So let's see it!" I said.

She smiled a little as she handed a cassette to me. "And I also have this for you." It was a big envelope, manila I guessed, though I couldn't really see the colour now. "I wrote out the lyrics to make sure you could learn them correctly."

"Wow, thank you." I looked up from the envelope to her eyes. "Was that a lot of work for you?"

She shrugged. "Honestly, a little more than I expected. I ended up going to the library in Toronto and a couple of places that sell sheet music. But it's my job. And it was also sort of fun." Then she looked a little worried. "Also, may I please ask you a really big favour?"

"Well, Gwyn, I'm not gonna say yes til I know what it is."

She held up a small bundle I couldn't quite make out. "Would you be willing to get these tapes to Devlin? He said he wanted three copies – didn't tell me why. And it would save me the trouble of trying to mail them. I'd really appreciate it. But if you don't want to, that's all right."

I reached toward her so she could hand me the tapes. "Yeah okay, I can do that. I, uh, I guess you can't take them to him yourself."

"No." I waited a second to see if she had any more to say about that, but she didn't.

So I went on. "Okay, so you said that we aren't gonna record vocals for this. So why does he want us to make tapes that aren't finished? Why am I learning to sing these?"

Gwyn sighed. "He didn't tell me. He was just very clear about exactly what he wanted me to produce. This is what he hired me to do." She rubbed her shoulder. "Maybe he doesn't believe I can get a good vocal sound in my home studio. The vocals are the only part that you can't patch directly into the board, so you need a room with good acoustics and a good microphone and everything. I think the soundproofing in my studio is plenty good enough, but he might not. He might even want to record everything over in a professional

studio."

"Well hey, that might be fun."

"I don't know. If he does want to redo them, he wouldn't necessarily need me for that. He might want to hire professional studio musicians who are a lot better than I am." I didn't believe for a minute that any of them could be. And I couldn't imagine trying to record these songs without Gwyn. "He never said anything about that to me. I was hired to write and record these arrangements for him, and that's all."

I sat for a moment, thinking, then sighed. "I guess I'll find out what's going on when I give him these."

"I guess," she said. It looked like she was blinking, but she wore a soft little smile. "Anyway, I am so glad I got to know you, even for only a little while. I'll miss you."

For a second I blinked really fast, then said "What what?"

"We're done. That's it."

"Wh.... whaddaya mean?!"

"I don't know for sure that he'll want me to do any more work on your project. I tried to stretch this one out a bit because I was enjoying it so much, but there's only so much you can do, I suppose."

"Are, are you saying you only spent time with me cuz Dev paid you to?!"

Her eyes got wide. "No! Oh gosh no! I didn't mean that! No! I...." She blinked and fluttered a hand in front of her face. "I.... I just wasn't sure why you'd want to come back, after."

I gaped a little. "Maybe cuz I like you?! I like hanging with you?! You said back at the coffee shop that we're friends, didn't you?"

"I, I said that I felt like you were my friend. I didn't know if you felt the same."

I reached over and squeezed her upper arm through her coat, then gave it a

short gentle shake. "Well, I do! Okay?" I made a soft little laugh.

And so did she. Then she said, "Okay." Even in the dimness, I could see teeth in her smile.

"And aren't we having fun working on this stuff?"

"Oh gosh yes. The most."

"So let's keep doing it! Just for fun, just for us! Or how about For The Album?"

"Oh yes. For The Album!" And she actually lifted up her fist, but sorta unsure.

"Look, we know that he wants you to be my musical director, right? He's already said as much before. So with any luck, if there ever is an album, he'll wanna hire you to work on that – and we'll already be ahead. Win-win." She nodded. Then I said, "Win-win, Gwyn-Gwyn," and she giggled. I added, "As long as you're okay working on it now without getting paid, I mean."

"Oh, definitely. I told you before, this is the sort of thing I do for fun anyway."

"So okay then. We can keep working on songs. We can write our own if we want." Gwyn nodded and almost dared to let herself look eager. "And we can go for coffee downtown. We can do whatever we want."

I could feel her just looking at me for a moment. "That's the sort of thing that I never say. But when I listen to you, it makes me feel like we actually can."

I nodded. Then I noticed her looking off to the side and tapping her fingers on the steering wheel. "Let me guess," I said. "You're thinking that it must be time to be getting back."

"I am." She buckled up again, then looked over at me. "I feel better now. Thank you."

I opened the door and said, "Good." Then I slid out onto the sidewalk with my loot in my arms.

She leaned toward me. "Thank you again for taking care of those other tapes for me."

"No worries. Call me." I thumped the door shut and watched her pull away and recede into the night.

When I got back in the house, I phoned Dev and of course got his machine. I left a message letting him know that I had Gwyn's tapes for him, and did he want me to bring them by his place. If he said tonight, I was pretty sure I could get mom or daddy to give me a lift, if I needed one. At this point I still didn't actually know where his place even was: I'd never been there, and the only address on his business card was a suite number in Toronto. So I couldn't very well take them to his office, but I remembered that he had told me he lived here.

About half an hour later, I heard a car honk out in front of the house. I peeked out and saw what looked like Dev's car idling loud there, and his stylish mess of hair inside it, the tip of his cigarette glowing. He honked again.

I got his little bundle of tapes, slipped into my boots, and went out to stand by his car window, which he was rolling down. He said, "So the tapes finally, hah?", held a hand out and made his fingers beckon impatiently. "C'man." I plunked the tapes into his palm. He made a wolfish grin and I could see the streetlights glitter in his eyes. "Ahhh yeah," he said to himself.

"You're welcome," I said. "Y'know, I coulda brought these to you like I said – I didn't mean to make you go out of your way."

He waved his hand dismissively. "Meh, I, ahh, I needed to go out for sumthin tonight anyway so I figured why wait." Then he took a deep drag of his cigarette.

I nodded. "Well, good thing we are all still up, then, huh."

He looked up at me and leaned his face closer. "So! Now you're gonna practise with these, hah? How long will it take for you to get 'em down good?"

"Um, I'm not really su– "

"By this weekend?"

"Mmm-I don't think so, Dev, that's only a couple days – "

"Next weekend, then. That'll give you over a week. You can do that, hah?" He sniffed and fidgeted – he seemed really impatient.

"Ohh, yeah, in a week I'll have these down. No problem."

"Right. Then be ready. Next weekend, I am scheduling a big meeting. We pull everything together and get down to serious work. Ya got me?" I nodded.

"Great. I'll call ya. Be ready." His eyes widened for a second, and then his lean grin did. "We're pullin' into the home stretch, kid."

My heart made a little leap, but I gave him a gentle scowl. "I ain't no kid."

"Aaa sorry. Madam." And he slammed the car into gear and peeled off down the street almost before I could step back out of his way.

I took my tape back up to my room and my hands were actually trembling a little as I loaded it into my player and slid my headphones on. I think I was even more excited about this than I was about a new Joan album. I clicked Play....

And slipped into about eighteen minutes of sonic bliss. While part of my brain got me to mouth the words along with these instrumental tracks, another part was trying to pay attention to what Gwyn had done to make them work.

First off, the overall sound quality was fantastic – there was nothing about this that would tell anyone that it was basically recorded in a living room. I knew that she'd be using a drum machine, but hers must've been especially good, because to me they didn't sound fake and clattery. They were punchy and full. In fact, it seemed like she deliberately threw in a few clatters here and there, like at the end of a chorus, just so that Dev would hear some of the sounds he was expecting. She punched up the handclaps and kept a fast, steady bass pulse going through almost every song to make them bounce. She said she could do this, and it sounded to me like she had.

On "My Little Red Book", she came up with a burry-sounding, hard-hitting, steady bass-synth throb that made the simple riff sound like what I would call electro-punk, and it made me so happy I squirmed. "Here, There and Everywhere" has a lot of backing vocals making "ooo" sounds, and in place of

those she put something that sounded kinda like flutes, which to me felt like they fit perfectly. For "Waterloo Sunset", instead of the homey-sounding plunk of gentle guitars, she used a sweeping electronic hum that gave the song a twilight, movie-soundtrack feeling, surprising and breathtaking. By the time I got to the end of the set, I finally noticed that my heart was racing.

I wanted to call Gwyn right then and tell her that she was a genius. But I couldn't: all I could do was hope that she knew.

While I rewound the tape, I pulled out the lyric sheets and looked them over. Once again, she printed in black marker with an impossibly precise and regular hand. I immediately saw that I had gotten them so wrong, so much more often than I suspected. Even though this made me feel almost like I was gonna have to learn the lyrics from scratch, I was still very grateful that she did this for me.

I took my phones off so I could hear myself better and played the tape again, this time singing along from the pages. We sounded okay. I felt like she made me sound better. My sense of relief made it easier to focus on the notes. There were still some of those I would need to work harder at, but I could already get some idea of how the final product would sound, and everything felt far more possible than I imagined back when I signed that contract.

When I got to the end, I rewound and started singing again. How do I get to Carnegie Hall?

Twelve

On Sunday evening, I got a phone call from Gwyn. First thing she did when I got on the line was apologize for not calling in the afternoon, but her mother's book club were meeting at her house then and she didn't want to disturb them by using the phone if it wasn't necessary. The first thing I did after reassuring her that this was not a problem was praise her to the skies for her work on the tape; I could almost hear her blush. Then I asked her if she had a particular reason for calling, and she said no. She just felt like it might be nice to talk for a bit, that's all. I said that it was, and we did. Although I admit we mostly talked shop: I told her how I felt like I was coming along with the vocals, and she said she'd get me to sing them for her next time I was there, and I asked her questions about how she had made certain things on the tape happen, and she was glad to tell me...

And then after about five minutes, she asked me if it was all right if she went now. I tried not to laugh as I told her yes. I pointed out that she was free to call any time she wanted, for as long as she wanted – and also free to not call if she didn't want. Then we said our goodbyes and hung up. And I wondered if this was the first time in her life she had ever made a phone call that wasn't required for some concrete, practical purpose.

The week went by with work and singing practice and TV and dishes and oversleeping and singing practice and lounging in the bathtub and reading a few pages of a novel and singing practice. By now I didn't need the lyric sheets anymore, I was comfortable with all my cues, and I was just focusing on sounding my best. Then when I came home from work on Friday, mom said that Dev had called and left a message with her for me. (I guess he didn't remember I worked late on Fridays.)

Mom cleared her throat, then said, "He said that he will pick you up here at 2:45 on Sunday, that you weren't going out of town, that you should expect to be busy 'about an hour no make it two', and be ready to sing." She moved her tongue under her lip for a second and added, "And he addressed me as 'Ms. T.' " She tried not to smile.

"Did he say anything about who I'd be meeting? How I should look?" Mom just shook her head. I exhaled. That guy sure did love trying to cultivate an air of mystery or whatever. I thought about calling him and asking him, but decided no:

I'd just go with Joan Jett Business Casual again, and let them take me as I am.

According to the little clock on top of the TV, it was exactly 2:45 when I heard the honk outside. I went out with my puffy coat draped over my black outfit and slid into the passenger seat. Dev sped off, and I coughed while fumbling to fasten my seatbelt.

He glanced over at me. "Wuh-oh, hope you ain't catchin' my cold."

I cleared my throat and shook my head. "Nope, I'm good – once I get out of the car, I'll be fine."

"Great, that's what I like to hear," he said. "Positive attitude. Can-do." He flicked ashes into his tray.

"So where we going?"

"You'll see. Don't worry, it ain't far." He snuffled and ahemmed, then said, "So. The tape."

"Yeah! How did you like it?"

"Great, exactly what I had in mind. It'll work perfectly, you'll see." I waited for more but there was nothing from him about that. And I got a sense that, those creative touches Gwyn put in that I admired so much, none of them registered with him. I felt let down. "Had to pull one song, though," he went on.

"Yeah, Gwyn said. She wanted to give you more choice."

"Yeah, and that's great. But anyway, the Beatle song is out." Good call, Gwyn. "I mean, it sounded fine, but I don't wanna go there. Ya do a Beatles cover, everyone gets extra picky. I don't need that, not to start off with."

I nodded. "Okay. It could be an album track, though, maybe."

"Maybe, I dunno. That's jumpin' the gun, though, whatever. Anyway, I know a guy who spliced that one out of the tapes for me, just so you're prepared, hah?"

By now we had driven through downtown and were cruising through one of the industrial areas, over by the big hardware store and the Tim's. Then he pulled in just past there and stopped in front of a low white building with a big window beside the front door.

The sign over the door said Pastorage Dance Studios.

I whipped my head around to face him, but before I could even say "Wh" he gritted his teeth and said, "Will you relax?" I tried to open my mouth but he raised both hands up in front of him like he was trying to push my energy back into me, stared me down, and said, "Let. Me. Explain." Then he waited until he was sure I wasn't gonna yell – I just sat there glaring and almost panting. "I already said back in the bar, no dancing. That's not why we're here."

"Then why *are* we?!"

"Because this place has facilities we can use." Again he waited to be sure I was listening. "They're used to giving recitals and stuff here. They have an auditorium with a good sound system, dressing rooms, everything. Rhonda was good enough to agree to let us borrow her place – she's taking time from her day off for this. This is a chance for us to play the tape and have it sound great, and have you sing into a mike and sound great, in live-performance conditions. This is where you show me what you can really do."

I blinked, then took a couple of deep breaths. "I just, I just wish you woulda told me what to expect. So I could be ready for it."

He took a last drag on his cigarette, then ground it out in the tray. "If I told you that I was taking you to the dance studio, would you have even come?"

I glared at him. "No, probably not."

He gave me a "so there" nod. "You ready?"

I rolled my shoulders, took another breath, and then nodded. We got out and shuffled over the snowy tire tracks to the front door. While Dev buzzed the doorbell, I said, "So this Rhonda is gonna be there, too?"

"Uh-huh. And Chester – you remember him." He gave me a side glance and a thin smile. "Your outfit is ready." My heart lurched. Again with the surprises and

the mystery.

A woman who I guessed was Rhonda let us in. She was not much taller than me, with a lot of makeup and cropped hair dyed hot red. She looked lean and taut, even in a track suit, and there was an energy in her I could feel from a few feet away. She nodded and said, "Dev," then looked at me and said, "So I guess this is Mariko. C'mon." And she turned and led us through the dim front office into a large bright space.

The room was wide, low, echoey, white walls, some with mirrors, and glossy hardwood floors that reminded me of Gwyn's living room. There were four folding chairs set up casually in the middle. Chester was standing by them; he waved and sang "Hiiii!" A bit back from the chairs was a mike stand with microphone already set up. Back further, against the wall, was a table with a fancy sound system sitting there, lit up. And on the wall above the table....

It was a wide cloth banner, not monstrously huge but big enough to see clearly. It was white, and had curvy, navy blue lettering with red accents along one edge. It didn't look amateur, but it didn't look impressive, either – it was just there. And it read "Mariko".

I stopped before we got as far as the chairs. " 'Mariko' ?!"

Dev stopped a step ahead of me and turned. "Yep. That's you, now. New sound, new name. It's perfect."

I felt things sinking inside me. "You're changing my name?!"

"Uh-huh. Using a single – "

A lot louder, so I echoed, I said, "When were you gonna tell me this?!"

He glared at me. "Now." All I could do was stare at him in panicky disbelief. "Using a single name is distinctive. People remember it. Think of all the big one-name superstars you know. It can work for you."

"But then why not just – "

"Just Mari? Cuz it sounds plain. No one notices. And spelling it your way would look like a typo to everybody, it'll put them off. We don't want that. Over here, a

name like Mariko sounds exotic, like you have something new and different to offer – "

"It just sounds Japanese!"

"Same diff." He waited for me to argue some more, but I just felt stuck, so he went on. "This is all part of that 'arresting presence' I told you about. The name is part of what you present."

By this time, Chester decided to come over and shake my hand in both of his. "Hi again, Mariko. Listen, I guess I let the cat out of the bag a bit early about your name when I saw you the other day, I am so sorry about that, can you forgive me?"

I tried to calm the inside of my chest down and put on a little smile. "Yeah, no problem, Chester, how are ya?"

"Oh, I'm fiiiine. Listen, your costume is laid out in the dressing room back there." He pointed to a doorway off to one side of the sound system. "Will you go try it on, please? I can't wait to see you in it, sweetie, I am so proud of it!"

Dev nodded. "Oh yeah, we all can't wait to see it. You ready?"

I felt a little wobbly as I stepped softly into the backstage area. There was only one doorway there that was open with a light on. Inside the little room were tables, and folding chairs, and mirrors with lights. It smelled like makeup in there.

Some clothes lay on one of the tables. I saw glossy black flat shoes, white knee socks with navy stripes near the top, what looked like a knee-length pleated navy skirt, and a white blouse. I picked the blouse up. It had short sleeves with navy stripes near the cuffs, and a big flap collar with a red kerchief attached into position around it. I felt something like a punch in my chest when I recognized what this was:

A copy of a Japanese school uniform.

The blouse got bunched into my fist as I stomped back out to the doorway to the studio and yelled "What?!" It echoed a surprisingly long time.

Dev scowled and spread his hands. "What?"

"What the ffff – " I gave my head a short, hard, fast shake. "Get over here!" Dev held up apologetic hands and spoke quietly to Rhonda and Chester. They nodded and tried to look away as Dev came over to me with sharp, echoey footsteps. Once he was close to me, our conversation settled into angry mutters.

"Why are you making a scene here?" he said.

"*This* is your big plan?! You wanna turn me into some kind of anime schoolgirl fantasy?!"

He gave me an odd stare as if to suggest that I was oh so strange quite. "Pffff! What? No!"

"You – wait! Y-you signed me *because* you wanted me to wear something like this!"

"I – "

"Would you have even signed me if I wasn't Japanese?"

He glared hard at me, then his nostrils flared and he sniffed in a sharp breath. "No, probably not." Before I could even open my mouth to gape, he held up a warning finger and said, "No-no wait. If your voice was crap, then I wouldn't care if you looked exactly like Amuro, I wouldn't sign you." He paused to let that sink in and I tried to let it. "I told you, I had a vision. You fit it. And part of that fit is your look, yeah, I admit it. But the bigger part is the singing. That's the bottom line with this project. That's what you're here to do, right?"

I could feel tears wanting to well up, and a hammering in my chest. But I just let him go on.

"If you weren't Japanese, then I woulda just watched you that night. And later on, when I had another idea for another project, if you fit that, I would sign you then. The timing of *what* I'm working on *when* has a lot to do with how things turn out." He gestured at the blouse I was still strangling. "And look, this is a perfectly respectable outfit. It's modest, it's, it's cute. It's not like I'm asking you to flash your tits, it's not like I got 'Buy Me' embroidered across your ass – this is a nice, friendly, happy image."

He glanced at the floor and rubbed his nose. "I-I dunno anything about this amine stuff you were talkin' about." Then he fixed his eyes on mine again. "All I know is, over here, people see this, yeah they think Japan. When they see your face, when they see your name. This is an image that will stand out over here. Distinctive. People will notice it, they'll recognize you, they'll remember you. That's half the battle right there. This is an arresting presence – this is an image we can sell. This can work, if you get behind it and give it your best shot."

I took in a deep breath and could feel it shake. "Lemme go sit down and think."

His eyes softened and he nodded. "Yeah, go on. Go back in there. Take all the time ya need. As long as it ain't more than five minutes."

I could hear his footsteps in the studio as I went back into the dressing room, dragged out a chair and dropped into it. I stared at the skirt and socks. The whirl in my mind was starting to ease down, just a bit. This wasn't quite a nightmare, but it was so unlike anything I had ever imagined for myself. But when I forced myself to think about this from a business perspective, I realized that everything he said sounded to me like it made sense. For him. And I also reminded myself that, when I signed, I knew that I was entering into a business arrangement and would be doing some things for business reasons.

Do this now. Be Alanis Morissette later. It's just a blouse and a skirt.

I got changed.

I almost felt like I was doing this more for Chester than for Dev, right now. And for Gwyn – no one would ever hear the brilliant musical things she had put together if I didn't get out there and do them.

My face felt glowing red and the edges of my vision were foggy as I stepped out into the studio, my new shoes clacking loud. The three of them were sitting now, waiting for me. Dev sat with his arms folded and nodded with a quiet smile when he saw me. Chester applauded and called out, "Brava!" Such a sweet smile he had.

"Perfect," Dev said. "Exactly what I had in mind." He looked over at Chester and said, "Good goin'." Chester's smile grew sweeter.

I walked up to the mike, and it made a nice deep solid thump when I tapped it. I said, "Test, test," into it, just because we do. The room was really echoey but the sound was powerful and rich. My heart fluttered.

Rhonda held up a remote and said, "Just tell me when you're ready, okay?"

I glanced down, rested one hand on my chest, one on the mike, and took a deep breath. Then I looked up and said, "Ready." I sounded big and real. Rhonda nodded, aimed her remote at the equipment behind me... and in a couple of seconds, Gwyn's drum intro to "You Were On My Mind" started playing through the P.A., sounding bigger and better than I had ever heard it before.

And I sang. And I sounded bigger and better than I had ever heard me before.

It only took a few lines for me to get swept away by the music and I felt fantastic. I started letting myself imagine a big happy crowd out there instead of just the three of them. I then thought that singing in a small place for three people would be okay, too. And I wasn't thinking at all about how I looked.

I noticed Rhonda watching me closely, gently bobbing her head and swaying sometimes. Sometimes she and Dev would lean together, talk quietly, and nod. Chester just sat with his warm, gentle smile. Dev watched me, but sometimes it felt like he was looking over me, trying to take in the view of a larger scene.

When the song ended, Chester applauded; Dev glanced over at him with a "what the" expression. Rhonda moved to turn the tape off but Dev gestured toward her. "No, let's just run through it. See how it flows." And so within a few seconds, "My Little Red Book" kicked in and I had the chance to belt it out a bit more.

The rest of the set ran pretty much like that, with Dev talking to Rhonda off and on, and Chester applauding after every song. At the end of the very last one, all three of them clapped for a second or two.

I felt flushed and exhilarated, not exactly winded but I noticed the effort I had put in. "So how was that?"

Dev stood up. "Ya sound great, exactly what I had in mind. We gotta work on your presentation, though. Polish it up a bit. Rhonda has some ideas about that, so I want you to stay and talk with her a bit, awright?" He was belting up his

trenchcoat.

I blinked. "You're going?" I mean, I knew how to get the bus home from out here if I had to, but I wasn't sure offhand if I even had fare on me.

"Yup, gotta meet somebody. Keep practisin'. Thanks again, Rhonda."

Rhonda came closer. "I can give you a lift after if you need one, honey. Don't fret."

Then Chester sailed over and rested his hand on my forearm. "Mariko, you were absolutely delightful. So talented and so lovely. You truly honoured my work and gave it, um... gravitaaas." He made a little bow, said "Best of luck with everything and I hope to see you again," and then stepped quickly toward the front office, calling out, "Can I get a lift with you, Dev?"

And then it was just us gals.

Thirteen

For a second we just stood quiet and gave each other a quick up-and-down. I noticed Rhonda stood upright but relaxed, poised and alert. Then she said, "So Mariko. You got a nice voice – it's got character. And you do look really cute in that costume."

I felt myself blush. "Um, could you just call me Mari? Uh, please?"

One corner of her mouth lifted a little. "If you want." She covered a little cough, then said, "So Dev wants me to give you a few pointers about being on stage. I take it you don't have a lotta stage experience, right?"

"Like two or three times? Mostly I sing in my bedroom, or my friend's basement."

"Okay. So here's what I'm thinkin' of now. You don't seem that comfortable right now, and you wanna be." I nodded. "So the idea isn't to teach you how to dance, or strike a dramatic pose, or any of that. But I can show you things, little tricks that'll make you look comfy, like you really truly enjoy being up there doing this. Like this is where you naturally belong. Then you'll feel good about being there, and people watching you will feel good, too. How does that sound?"

I nodded. "Good?"

"I can show you a couple right now if you want, just to give you an idea." She pointed the remote at the player to rewind the tape, then gave me a questioning look.

"Well wait, what time is it?"

Rhonda glanced at her fine silver watch. "Almost four."

"Then okay, I still got some time."

She gave me one firm, decisive nod. We heard the tape click to a stop. She pressed Play, and once the sound started she turned it down a few notches. "I don't wanna hafta shout over that," she said. For a second she paused, thinking, then showed me the remote. "This is my mike, okay?"

"Right."

"Right, this is a nice one for an instrumental break, keeps the crowd occupied a few seconds. See, you lift your arms way up – not all stiff and straight, just kinda curved and relaxed. I am gonna tell you curved and relaxed a million times, so get used to it." Then she started swaying her arms from side to side over her head, slow and smooth. "But it's not just from the shoulders, see how your torso goes with it and even your hips a little." She moved slow, trying to sync her rhythm to every four beats of the upbeat song.

"And you look out at the crowd, and you smile." She had laugh lines that looked good on her. "Because you feel good, and you like this song, and you like being here. But you don't push it and grit your teeth, just go gentle. Once you start, you'll find that your mouth knows how much it feels like smiling right then, so you just let it. Just look natural." I found myself smiling back a little, and starting to sway with her. With my arms down.

Her instructions started to get slow and sing-songy. "And then when it's time to sing again, your arms circle around slow to this side, a nice sweep, and the mike comes back around to your mouth, and look how your other hand just naturally comes over off to the side from your shoulder and floats there, and you just let it. See?" I nodded. "And then you let your free hand down, but you don't just drop it limp, you don't push and hurry, you just ease it down in a smooth curve again. And this doesn't need to be some huge dramatic look-at-me wave, everything is just casual and easy. Curved and relaxed."

"I think I see."

"Good." By this time, "You Were On My Mind" was finished and "My Little Red Book" just starting. "Ah. Here's an easy one, seems like nuthin. Watch. For this, ya gotta remember to slip your free hand behind the mike cord to stay out of its way – we gotta pretend there's a cord here – and you just clap soft." She started clapping in time with the electro-punk beat I loved. "But look, see how I'm actually clapping my wrist bone here, so I'm not hittin' the mike. But it still looks like the basic idea, people get it. And then you nod, too." Which she did. "Not like some huge headbang, just naturally boppin' your head to it. It's nuthin special but you look like you're into the song."

"That's pretty much what I do when I'm singing in my room," I said.

"Yeah exactly, and most of the people out there watchin' you do that, too. But I

noticed that you never did it when you were singin' for us."

She was right. "Well, I was really nervous."

"Exactly. And you wanna look like you're not. You wanna look like you feel at home up there. See? We're just talkin' little things like that." And then the tape came to a chorus, and Rhonda sang into the remote:

*All I did was talk about you
Hear your name and I start to cry*

My eyes widened a little. Her voice was out of practice, smoky and gravelly, not pretty, but it had personality and I liked it.

Then she let her hand fall and she grinned. "Yeah, I love this song. I love that you picked it, that's great." Then she handed me the remote and said, "Now you do it."

So I bopped my head and clapped – taking care to not clap my "mike" – to a couple of lines of "Little Red Book". She nodded and said, "Yeah, see? Stuff like that goes a long way." Then she showed me a few more moves, all of them curved and relaxed, and got me to try out a few, sometimes reaching out to move my hips or arms into a different position while she gave more instructions.

Finally she said, "I bet you're a bit burnt out after all this today, and I could really use a coffee. How about we call it for now?"

I pulled my collar out a bit to let some air in. "Yeah okay, I'm good with that."

"You feel like comin' to Tim's with me? Still got a couple things to talk about."

"What time is it now?"

"Quarter to five almost."

"Can I call my folks to say I'll be later?"

"Sure, in the office. You go get changed." As I headed for the back, she went over to the sound system to turn it off. "Get the lights in the back there when you're done."

When I put my black outfit back on, I felt like I was turning back into my true self. Like I could finally breathe again. I looked at the sailor girl uniform, still not sure what to think. I rolled it around the shoes into a bundle, picked it up, and found the light switch.

I came back out to find Rhonda standing by the studio light switches at the door to the office. She called across to me, echoing, and started walking briskly back toward me. "Oh, honey, no, there's a garment bag back in there for that."

"Oops, sorry" I echoed back. I hadn't even noticed or thought of it. We went back into the dressing room and she showed me how to pack the costume, and then handed me the cassette to tuck in with it.

In the office, I called mom to let her know that I was going for coffee and running a bit later than originally planned, but that all was well and I'd tell her about it later. Then Rhonda locked up and we walked through the low evening sun and shallow snow around to the side of the building and her car. The Tim Horton's was only a couple blocks down the road from here, so it wasn't long before we were inside, carrying our double-doubles to a small table in a far corner. (Rhonda was kind enough to buy. "Next time, *you* do," she said.)

"Hope you're okay sittin' back here," she said. "I wanted to stay away from the smoking section."

"Ah, the smoke bothers you, too, eh?"

She scrunched her nose. "More like the smell makes me miss it. Not that long since I quit." She looked me in the eye, then said, "You don't smoke, do ya?" I shook my head. "Yeah, you never did – I can tell just by lookin' at ya. Well don't." She picked up her coffee and looked at it. "I might still have my voice if not for those things. Too little too late, I guess."

"What?" I said. "I *like* your voice."

She didn't quite laugh, but she smiled – it looked a little sad, though. "Aw, you're sweet, honey."

"Did you used to sing? Like professionally?"

"Well..." She covered a cough, then had a sip. "Ya ever see those guys where he's in a nice suit, singin' R&B, and behind him there's two or three girls dancin' and singin' back-up?"

"I guess sorta, yeah?"

"Well, for a few years I was Girl Number Three." She chuckled. "Quite a few years."

"Oh wow, what did you do?"

She waved a hand. "Nuthin' you ever woulda heard of. A few guys. For the longest time I was with Brant Benson – and if you recognize that name, I will fall outa this chair." Another chuckle, another sip. "We recorded one indie single in like '78 – he wanted to do 'Dock of the Bay', but no one ever noticed. Still kept goin', for years, little clubs in Toronto, restaurants, cafés, all that."

I just kept nodding to keep her going. She seemed like she didn't get much chance to talk about those days, and I was intrigued, hearing about her doing all these things that I was still hoping to do.

"I did some other things at the same time. Tried to sing solo in lounges for a while – that wasn't so much fun without the girls, but I plugged away. Got to do a few commercials here and there over the years – "

"Oh!" I burst in. "That sounds like my dad!"

"Yeah? What does he do?"

"Trumpet."

"Ah nice. Is he still doin' it?"

"Just once in a while."

"Well, good for him. So you got musical genes, nice." She nodded and smiled.

"Yeah, he told me to make sure everyone knows about it."

She chuckled, then fidgeted with one of her pearl stud earrings. "Anyway, I was out doin' all that, but I hardly made anything from it. Never enough to live on. So I dunno if you could say that I ever sang 'professionally', right? There's a lotta people out there that it never happens for. A lot."

I nodded. "So, like, brace myself?"

"Yeah. Brace yerself." She gave me a wink. "Anyway, here's sumthin I want you to take away from all this, it actually has sumthin to do with you. Most of the time when I was with Brant, he had us doin' the classic evening gown thing, and that was fine. But once in a while he'd get some bug in his ear about our show and think up new things to wear. Like, back in the early eighties there was this time he got us wearing silver wigs!"

I laughed. So did she, but added, "*He* didn't wear one, of course, but yeah! And oh, we weren't laughin' about it *then!* But we did it. Bunch o' tinsel-heads! Gave it a shot, he soon figured it out it wasn't workin', and then whatever. There were some other silly outfits, I forget. Oh, and when I was a lot younger, this one place hired me to be a cage dancer."

"What?"

"Ask yer folks. It's like, they put you up inside a big hanging cage like a, a budgie, and you dance to what's playing in the club. They have you wearing miniskirts and go-go boots and all that. I had to lie about my age to get that job and then wondered why I wanted it so bad. It was kinda pathetic, really, this guy had the idea like ten years too late for it to work, but it was extra money. That job didn't last long cuz the club didn't.

"Anyway! My point! Is that if you wanna feel like some kinda spectacle in fronta people, try doin' *that*. But I survived. Obviously." She spread her hands to me. "Welcome to showbiz, honey."

I blinked. "So, so you're saying I don't have it that bad?"

"Well, that happens to be true, but no, it's more like.... um." She had another sip. "The biggest lesson I got from the cage is, uh, perspective, I guess. I took that job, made a little money, got some practice dancing in fronta people.... and a year later, no one remembered that I was up in a cage. No one ever thought

about it. It was gone, over. You do sumthin like this, a year from now it'll be gone. Unless you succeed: then people will remember you. Which means, in that case, that it worked and it was worth it."

I sipped. "It'll be gone, but I'll be here."

Rhonda raised her eyebrows. "Whoa, *that* was profound, Miss Mariko."

I grinned and looked down. "My mom says stuff like that to me."

"Sounds like you come from good folks," she said. And for a moment she just gazed out the window into the approaching evening.

Eventually Rhonda told me about the arrangement she had made with Dev during my performance, to make sure I was on board with it. Just as he had wanted to hire her to give me dancing lessons, he was now hiring her to train me in what she called "stage presence", a much smaller undertaking. Just a few simple moves, plus some understanding of when and how to use them, and some practice. She felt that four one-hour sessions would be enough: the idea wasn't to make me appear trained, just some gentle polishing so that I could move on a stage like I lived there. I found myself looking forward to the idea.

We compared our schedules and found that the only time that would work for both of us was Sunday afternoons. So, starting in two weeks (skipping next week for Easter), I would catch the bus out to the studio every Sunday afternoon for a month, and practise with Rhonda for an hour. And then, hopefully, she would report to Dev that I was ready.

We finished our coffees and then, true to her word, Rhonda drove me home. As I went up the walk to my front door, she called out to me to stand up straight.

Fourteen

Of course, when I got in, I had to tell mom and daddy all about the upcoming lessons with Rhonda, and the new stage name – and stage outfit, which they of course wanted to see. I just held the bits up to show them, grimacing while I did. Daddy said, "Well, uh, that is certainly, um, a change of pace for you, isn't it."

I gave him a grim nod. "Yeah, I think I noticed that, too." He shrugged.

But mom chimed in and said, "I think this would actually look rather darling on you, Mari. When are you going to try it on so we can see?"

I looked at her in disbelief. "How about never? Does never work for you?"

I tried to explain to her my misgivings about the whole anime schoolgirl thing, like I had tried with Dev. I had only ever heard about anime because of a couple of guys I knew in high school, Keith somebody and some other I guy I forget. They were like the two geekiest guys in the school, and they were always talking about this anime stuff, whatever it was. But I remembered that Keith had his locker lined with pictures – they looked like he had cut them out of magazines, I guess. And they were all these weird cartoon drawings of girls with gigantic eyes and endless skinny legs, and hair colours not found in nature. And many of them were wearing outfits very much like this one Chester made for me. Keith seemed really hung up on these drawings, in a way that made me feel uneasy. He was always trying to draw these girls in his notebooks, too, although let's be honest his drawings looked awful. (I also remembered him trying to ask me out for a coffee once or twice – do I need to tell you he was outa luck?) Anyway, I had no way of knowing how many other guys like that were out there.

"Well, honey," mom said, "you say it was only a couple of the boys who knew anything about this. I've never heard about any of this. I bet most people never have."

"And they were *geeky* guys, too, you said," daddy chipped in. He looked like he was trying not to be amused. "How many geeks can there be?"

"I just hope I never find out," I said.

The next morning Gwyn called – she remembered I was off Mondays and wondered if I wanted to get together for coffee downtown. I suggested we meet at The Wien for 10:30, and she was good with that once I gave her directions to it. (I realized that Dev couldn't be the only person in town who had never been there before. Hey, I was glad that The Wien wasn't trendy or super-popular – meant it was always easy to get a table.)

I walked cuz it wasn't far and a nice day – the sidewalks were full of meltwater puddles. When I got to the restaurant I saw Gwyn waiting outside by the door, surveying the street. She stood tall and relaxed in a long, pale blue coat, and she looked kinda elegant. When she saw me coming, she smiled, raised her hand from the elbow and gave a little wave.

I nodded up at her. "Hope I didn't keep you waiting long."

Her big glasses made her blink look owlish. "This is fine. It's nice out."

I opened the door for her, we went in, and I led her to a booth. Effie waved at me from the back and I nodded. Gwyn hung her coat on a hook at the edge of the booth – I just tossed mine in a heap beside me, because I do – and she looked around us, taking in the unusual antique furnishings.

"Ooo, I like this place," she said as she sat down. "It's funky!"

I blinked, then chuckled. "That is not a word I ever expected to come out of your mouth, somehow."

She gave me a self-satisfied little smirk. "I am full of surprises."

Effie came over with glasses of water and menus. I introduced her and Gwyn, then Effie and I gabbed for a few seconds before she headed off. While Gwyn looked the menu over, I pointed out to her that they didn't do lattes here, but the coffee was the best anywhere and I was getting one. I also told her that they had the most fantastic cinnamon danishes. "As big as your head," I added.

Gwyn said "ooo" again, then, "Maybe we could share one?"

I agreed, and then Effie's smiley, skinny brother Peter came by to say hi, and I had to look way up to say it back to him. I made introductions again, and Peter welcomed her and extended her a handshake. She looked at his hand, then at

me, and when I nodded then she finally took it. He gave her hand one gentle shake, gently bowed toward it, and she blushed.

When he left, she said, "He's... a bit striking, isn't he."

"Peter? He's okay, I guess." I had a sip of water, then said, "He has a girlfriend, if that's what you're hinting at."

Gwyn blushed. "I only meant that he carries himself well." She pushed her glasses up and then said, "People here seem to really like you."

"Well yeah, it's a friendly place. I come here pretty often."

She glanced at her menu again. "That sounds nice." And then Effie arrived to take our order: two coffees, one danish, two plates.

Over our food, we got into serious gab mode. First off, I determined that she was doing fine, nothing new to report, just toying with new songs to choose For The Album and how to arrange them. Then I told her about my new sessions with Rhonda (which she thought sounded "exciting") and how that would interfere with our work for a while – seeing that we had been getting together for work on some Sunday afternoons. She had to blink and digest this for a moment, but eventually realized that we could make some Monday afternoons work, too, and she relaxed.

I swallowed some danish (so good!), then asked, "Has Dev been in touch with you about the band yet?"

She shook her head. "I don't know what you mean."

"Well, I figured by now, y'know, he has the songs, the arrangements – the music is all ready to work on. He should be getting a band together to learn them. I wanna get working with them soon, eh?"

Gwyn licked a crumb from her lip. "He wouldn't tell me about any of that anyway. I don't do that."

"You don't do?"

"I don't play in front of people." She shook her head. "I couldn't."

I blinked. "You played in front of *me*."

She tried to give me a scornful look but it had too much smile in it. "You know what I mean, Mari."

I felt a bit silly when I realized that I never thought about this part of it before. I just figured that Gwyn would have to be part of my musical back-up, I couldn't imagine it without her. But should I really be surprised that she would have stage fright? So many people do, after all. But with her, that was almost how she lived every day, it seemed to me.

"I admit, I was really hoping you would be there with me when I do this."

She blinked. "I'm sorry." She sipped her coffee, then looked in her cup.

Feeling a little contrary, I pushed a bit. "What if I reminded you that you'd be playing to a bunch of people you don't know, who don't matter? You told me before that they don't make you nervous."

She actually gave a short laugh. "Would you believe that I never thought about it that way before?"

My eyes got big. "Does that mean you'll do it?"

Her eyes got big, too. "No! Oh, no no. It, it, it just means I'll think about what you said." She brushed back a strand of her hair. "But before now I would never even have done *that* much. So pat yourself on the back, you made some progress." And she grinned.

"Next time I talk to Dev, I'll ask him about it. That'd be so fantastic if you would."

"The idea doesn't feel so fantastic to me. But I am really happy that you think so."

After dinner that night, Dev returned my call. "Mari. Your message said call – I'm

callin'. What's up?"

"I, uh, wanted to find out how things are coming along with the band. You know, while I'm gonna be busy training with Rhonda, the next few weeks? I guess I figured that'd be a good time to get a band ready – I got some ideas about it I wanted to tell you."

He sniffed and paused, then said, "Band?"

"Musicians for me to sing with? *That* kind of band?"

"Who said anything about a band?"

"I.... what?" My chest tightened a little – it was like I could feel another Dev-surprise coming on. "Am I, do you want me to perform without a band?"

"Well yeah – like you did yesterday."

"*What?* I'm gonna actually sing to a *tape?!'*"

"I...." I heard a sharp exhale. "Look, when can you meet me? I hate tryin' to calm you down over the phone."

"Um, uhh, The Ambassador again, half an hour."

"The Ambassador, *one* hour," he replied and hung up. I was beginning to think we'd need to rename that place "H.Q."

I got there a little early and got us a table, but exactly one hour from when he hung up, Dev strode into The Ambassador. He saw that I had a drink already, nodded, pointed to himself and then the bar, then went over to it with his kingly walk. Once he got his drink, he brought it to our table, sat down, lit up, and leaned in.

"Okay, first off, lemme just be upfront with ya here: I don't have the budget to hire and rehearse a whole band, awright? I just don't. We'll need you to start bringin' some actual money in before we get to that point – til then, just no. We gotta think long-term here.

"So. The tape. Yes, you will be singing to it. That was the idea all along – that's why I asked Gwyn to do up something nice and polished, not just a rough demo. It sounded great over a P.A., hah?"

"But, but that's so lame! It's like what *Tiffany* did!"

He smiled as if he was pleased by the comparison. "Ah, you heard about that? Yeah, great. Exactly."

I shook my head in slow disbelief. "But... I mean... well, what kind of place would book someone who performs that way? Maybe The Loft but that's – "

"As it happens," he interrupted, "I already have that in the planning stages. Something that I know will work great."

Suddenly I got a cold feeling in my stomach. "Wait. A. Minute." My mouth moved a couple of times before I could get it to say, "Are, are you gonna get me to sing *at the mall* like Tiffany did, *too?!"*

He smiled a tight, proud smile, and his eyes blazed.

"I can't *believe* this! If I had *any idea* – "

He pointed at me. "Yeah! That's it right there! This is why I *don't* give you any idea. The more you know ahead o' time, the more time you have to freak out about how it won't work – I've learned that much about you by now. What works best with you is throw you in the deep end and learn to swim. You been doin' fine so far."

"I swear, you are gonna give me a heart attack one of these days. This is just so – I mean, why not just record my *vocals*, *too*, and get me to *lip-sync* up there?"

"Hey: if I thought it'd work, I *would*. No mistakes that way, hah? But no, people won't go for it, I remember all that Milli Whatsit business. But they *will* go for *this*."

My face hurt. "Dev, that mall tape business was like the lamest, least cool thing in, in like the entire history of music! Frickin' Tiffany! I can't believe *this* was your great 'vision!'"

"No, that Tiffany thing was genius. Know why? Cuz it *worked*. That kid went from singin' at the mall to singing in stadiums – monster hits, selling zillions. I don't care how many cool points we get for doin' this – all I care is that it works. I mean, I can't believe that *everybody* isn't doin' this...."

"Well maybe doesn't that tell you that this doesn't usually work? That maybe she was just way lucky?"

He leaned in closer. "We can *make* this work. We got things goin' for us that she never did. We got *you*. An arresting presence. A better voice."

I didn't show it, but inside I was startled. He actually believed in my voice that much? Or was he just saying whatever he thought he needed to, in order to make me come around?

I ran my fingers back through my hair. "This is such, such lame bull. I can't do this."

Quieter, he said, "You *will* do this." He held up a finger before I could make a sound. "No-no wait. I could just slap you down with the contract, but I don't wanna. I...." He paused to have a swallow of his scotch, then rubbed his nose. "I'm gonna try to make you see this the way I see it, hah? Sometimes you actually listen to me, sometimes that helps."

I swallowed, blinking. "Okay, go on."

"Okay then. Part of what Tiffany's manager had in mind with the mall idea was 'take the music to the people who are gonna buy it'. I still think that sounds smart, that sounds like it works. Like, if we booked you into some metal bar, that's just beggin' to fail, hah? We already said that your material is built to skew to a younger audience, the ones who don't really have a music of their own these days. The new market we're tryin' to tap. Where do younger kids hang out nowadays?"

Rather than actually answer his rhetorical question, I just nodded slow. But I'm sure I still looked skeptical at him.

"And then this: this is a safe venue to start off in. Are you gonna be in front of a zillion people at Woodstock? No. There'll be like a dozen folks wandering by,

and if you're lucky a couple will stop and listen. If for some reason the gig doesn't go so good, hardly anyone will ever know. It's about as low pressure as you can get."

"If that's supposed to make me not worry, I don't think it's working."

"Yet. Let it sink in, hah? And one more thing: we both know that most of the things that go on in a mall are not that hot. Small-time, no big deal. No one expects anything great to happen there – I mean, if it was that good, why would it be there?"

I could feel myself giving him pleading eyes. "Yes? Exactly?"

"So we go in there and give them some music that sounds great – which we got – and a memorable singer who sounds great, it's all gonna seem so much better than they ever expected. They'll be amazed that they ever heard anything so great in a place like this. They will come away remembering that you were surprisingly good."

Once again, I found myself thinking that what he was saying made sense, at least to me, as business – no matter what it sounded like as coolness.

"You can't lose with this gig, Mari. It's perfect. It'll work."

I also found myself wondering if Tiffany felt as many misgivings about her manager, at this point, as I was feeling now.

Dev noticed that my drink was almost done. "You want another?" he asked.

I stood up, a touch unsteady, and went to get my own. "Yeah," I said, "just one isn't gonna do for me tonight."

Fifteen

I got home not all that late for bed on a work night, but I still stayed up a few minutes to tell the folks about this new mall development. Mom understood my qualms about it but could also see Dev's side of it as well. Dad's take on it was basically, "A gig's a gig, punkin."

At work the next morning, I was only half there, letting myself brood about the situation, trying to come to terms with it. But the gang at Calder's, without even really trying, were good about getting me back in the moment and having a few laughs with them. I really did like most of the people there.

But I still rarely got to the point where I was relaxed about Dev's vision – I know I was never happy about it. The only blessing was that it'd be at least a month before I might have to face it.

Late the next Friday evening, after work, I got a call from Gwyn, asking if I'd like to come over and work on Saturday night. Her parents were going out for the evening – and taking her father's car, so the Volvo would be available for her to be my ride. I thought this sounded great: it had been a while since we worked on something together, and I missed it. So the next evening she made it happen.

When she led me back to her musical sanctum, I thought I could see her moving more relaxed than usual. Made sense, I guess – I knew how much freer I felt on those rare occasions when I had the house to myself. She still shut the door behind us, though, even though there was no chance of disturbing any neighbours way out here.

First thing she wanted to do was watch me sing our set – she even set up her mike in the middle of the room for me, then sat at her keyboards with her eyes wide and bright. Then the music started and I went for it. She grinned like Christmas morning through everything, gently swaying in her seat sometimes, giving little claps at the end of each song. When "Here There" came on her tape, I stopped and said we should fast forward through that one – but no, she wanted to hear it, too, so she rewound to the beginning, then resumed her seat as I started again.

When it was over, she pressed her hands to her chest and gazed at me with a

happy gape. "Oh, Mari, you sound wonderful! Oh, I can tell you've been practising, that was so good." I blushed and shrugged a little thank-you. "And I can see what you mean about those stage moves? Those were nice."

"Heh, yeah, I thought this was a good chance to practise. I'll tell Rhonda about it tomorrow, I bet she'll be proud of me."

Quite pleased, Gwyn said, "I already am proud of you." Which made me giggle.

"So now?" I said. "We got some stuff we can do For The Album?"

"I already have something ready to show you For The Album – *two* somethings, in fact." She reached over and adjusted some things on her keyboards, and on a much smaller box perched at the corner of the L, one which I didn't recognize from last time I was here.

I pointed at it and said, "Who's that new little guy?"

She reached over to give it a gentle pat, then looked at it with a fond smile. "My drum machine. I set it up when I was recording the set list, and now I'm using it to work out arrangements for our new songs. I have one ready to go if you wanna hear."

"Definitely!"

She looked like she was trying to stifle a giggle as she pressed something on the drum machine, then quickly got her hands into position on the keys. A little drum intro rolled out, which sounded familiar.... and then she started pounding out a simple, powerful riff while the machine threw in massive handclaps. Her synth had a rich, gutsy, blaring sound that was a perfect substitute for roaring guitars....

And I screamed. And she laughed, loud and long, while she kept playing the intro to "I Love Rock 'n' Roll".

I scrambled back behind the mike in time for my cue, and I tore into that song like I never had before. I'd never had such a powerful backing for it before – this felt like singing it in concert. Gwyn reached over to the smaller keyboard for the lead guitar parts, and I could hear that she had listened to the song carefully, worked it out correctly, and nailed it better than I had ever dreamed a

synthesizer could. I could feel my chest trembling from the pounding of my heart. This is what I had wanted all along. I was almost in tears.

During the finale, I saw (and thought I could hear) Gwyn singing along with the choruses. She looked like she was having a blast. But I couldn't imagine that she was having more of one than I was. We hit the last note, I stood there glowing and taking a couple of heavy breaths, and finally said, "For. The. Album!"

She nodded and did her little fist-raise. "For The Album. I knew you would like that one."

I lowered my face and put my hand over my eyes. "Oh, Gwynnie, you, you have no idea. Oh god, thank you." Then I looked up at her again, blinking and grinning.

"Working on that was good for me, too," she said. "It's one of those simple patterns I talked about – in many ways it's one of the easiest arrangements I ever did – but it really is a lot of fun. I'm starting to understand what you see in it."

"Great," I said. "And hey, were you singing near the end there?"

She gave a little shake. "No, I don't sing. Not really."

"Mmm? You looked to me like you were into it. I wanna hear you." She just blushed and shook her head. So I went on, "You said you had two somethings?"

"Oh! Yes!" She made some adjustments to the instrument in front of her. "I don't have a full arrangement like with drums yet, but I'm still pretty excited about what I've got down so far." She played a note that sounded more like a piano now, then gave the top of the keyboard another little tweak.

Then she started playing, and it was a lot like watching her play "Misty". She had that same piano sound, she fell into that same dreamy state, and the song had the same sort of richness and surprises, maybe even more so. I walked around by her bench to watch her hands again. I didn't recognize the song, of course, but I could hear the rich, inventive harmonies, the kinds she loved, and a melody that was clear and easy to grasp. A gentle, swaying rhythm that reminded me of "You Don't Own Me". Overall, the song was so lovely that, at

times, I forgot to breathe.

She let out a soft sigh when the song ended, then turned to me and I could see the light in her eyes. "Wow," I breathed, "that was phenomenally pretty. What's that one called?"

"I don't know yet."

I just stood and looked at her for several seconds. "You wrote that."

She nodded and allowed herself a little smile. "I'm fairly happy with it so far."

I felt my shoulders fall. I turned and looked to the side, as if there were someone there being my witness to this, then back at her. Still speechless.

"We said that we were going to work on some originals. Devlin even said that might possibly happen at some point. So here we go."

Finally I murmured, "Fantastic. I love it."

"Thank you. I really hoped."

"So, so when will there be lyrics for it?"

Her smile got bigger. "You tell me."

"What?" I almost stepped back. "No, I, I never wrote lyrics."

She gave an easy shrug. "So try it now. I mean, I've done it a few times in the past, not very good. But I can do that whenever I want. This is my first chance to actually collaborate on a song with someone. This is part of what I've been looking forward to."

"Well, I...." Could I actually do this? "I can't just sit down here now and crank it out. I, I gotta think about it. A lot."

"Oh, of course. Um, I still have to finish the arrangement for it. After that, I'll tape it for you to take home and work on when you feel like."

I nodded. "I still dunno if I can do this any good."

She spread her hands toward me. "Just tell yourself it's only a pop song. Have you listened to those? They don't need to be immortal poetry. Of course, that doesn't mean we won't try our best." She reached out to give my forearm a gentle squeeze. "Look, don't worry. I mean, I'm no Burt Bacharach. So it's all right if you're no Hal David."

I grinned at her. "But you *are* a Burt Bacharach. I should start calling you Gwyn Bacharach."

She gave me a mock scowl. "Please don't."

The next afternoon I caught the bus out to Pastorage Studio and spent an hour working with Rhonda. She showed me a few more things, very simple subtle things, like how to take a few steps over to one corner of the stage for a moment. But it was how you took those steps, not a harsh clumping, not a deliberate bump-and-grind, but a barely swaying glide. Everything was understated, curved and relaxed. She also coached me in how to stand and walk straighter without looking like I had a stick up my back. I went over the new things, practised the ones from last time, tried to incorporate everything. Sometimes we ran through the actual music with a live mike, to get a feel for that. She tried to underscore the overall sense of what she was showing me.

"What we don't want," she said, "is for you to look choreographed. Cuz like we said, this isn't dancing. I don't want you to be like, you always do the overhead clap for this part of that song and so on. I want you to have more like a tool belt full of things you can use like bang as soon as you feel it. You move in the moment, but with intention."

She made me smile. "'In the moment with intention' – you really do sound like my mom."

"Heh. You should count yourself lucky I *ain't* yer mom, honey." But I had to admit to little flashes where she kinda felt like it.

After we wrapped up at the studio, we went to Tim's again and took our same

double-doubles back to our same table. But this time, just like she said, she got me to buy.

This was my chance to talk to her about the looming threat of The Mall and I did. I concluded with, "I mean, you know I thought the suit was bad enough, but then I find out about *this*?"

She nodded like she was trying to sympathize, but then said, "So are they gonna hang you up in a *cage* in this mall?"

I sputtered. "Not that I heard – but who knows? That could be the next Dev-surprise waiting for me."

Rhonda laughed. She had a hearty laugh. "Aaa honey, you're cute." She gently wiped the corner of her eye. "But, just tellin' ya how I see things here, this doesn't sound all that bad. Those things Dev said about this gig, I agree with 'im. I'd jump at it if I had the chance. But that's just me."

I slurped my coffee louder than I meant to. "So you trust him?"

"Well..." She massaged her fingers while she thought. "Honestly, I don't know him personally all that well – I mean, we don't hang out or anythin'. Mostly I know him for business... about seven, eight years now? Back then, Brant was still with the agency Dev works at, so we'd bump into him there sometimes.

"He was easy enough to get along with. Outgoing, a bit intense – same as now, really. I do remember this one time I thought he was gettin' a bit handsy when we were at some A&R cocktail do for the agency's artists, but I just snarled at 'im and he backed off ever since. Dumbass."

She chuckled, then went on. "But in business, and I hear this from everyone else that ever talks about 'im: you make a deal with him, it's solid. He says he'll pay you this much, he pays you this much. And you never hafta chase 'im down for it. He might ask for an extension the odd time, but I never once heard anyone say that he cheated them in a deal. Sometimes I wonder if that's why it's taking 'im so long to get ahead....

"Some guys, you do sumthin for 'em, they complain and nitpick, lookin' for an excuse to bring the price down. Dev appreciates your work, I always hear. You give 'im what you said you would, and it's great, it's perfect. He acts like he got

his money's worth. It's refreshing, I guess.

"So, to answer your question: I really only know him in business. And in business I trust him."

I nodded. "Well, that's good to hear."

"In fact," she added, "I dunno if he wants you to know this, but remember when you backed out of those dance lessons? Me 'n' him only had a verbal agreement for that – like we do now for this. When that fell through, he didn't owe me nuthin. But he paid me one lesson's worth to make it up to me, when he didn't have to. This is what I mean about him not gettin' ahead – he might be too nice for his own good sometimes, I think."

I drank some of my coffee. It had not occurred to me that my being stubborn might cost someone, or put other people out. I felt small. Not looking up, I said, "I'm sorry."

Rhonda chuckled. "It's all past, honey, we're doin' good now. But yeah, you are doin' not so bad with what you got. If I was still singin' and Dev wanted to sign me, I think I'd go for it."

"So yeah, why aren't you still singing? How did you end up here?"

"Pfff! You heard me!"

"Yeah, and I liked it!"

"*Just* you," she said. "Ummm.... I guess it was back around that same time that me 'n' Brant met Dev, really. By then, Brant wasn't doin' so good, struggling a bit. We'd been doin' Toronto for years and not gettin' anywhere. Then Sheila got tired of it and quit, which bumped me up to Girl Number Two. *Of* two. My voice was pretty shot by then, but Brant didn't give up on me. He started tellin' me his troubles more, after the set..."

"What the hell, we're all adults here, right? I ended up movin' in with 'im, and we kept tryin' to keep the act alive. It was rough sometimes.... I dunno, after about a year, things with him went south, because they do, and so I didn't have the heart to stay with him an' Clarice anymore. So I got out. But by now my voice wasn't good enough for anyone else."

"And then one day Sheila calls me an' says she's moved out here and started up this dance studio, and she was hiring. I dunno, I had nuthin else goin' on. So I moved outa Toronto, and it was nice workin' with Sheila again. After a few years I ended up buying in, we're partners, right? And so I am as you see me now." She sipped her coffee. "I like it out here, it's a nice, peaceful community. No regrets."

"Do you miss singing, though?"

Rhonda shrugged. "Once in a while. If I let myself. But I remind myself that what I got now is good." She sipped again, then fixed her eyes on mine. "Life throws ya curves, Miss Mariko. Ya just gotta ride 'em the best way you can. That's what we all do."

Sixteen

Weeks went by and I rarely had a day off. But the days I spent working with Gwyn and Rhonda never felt like work as such – I was energized, in my element. Gwyn finished arranging the tune which I had given a working title of "Beautiful Song", and I took home a tape of it. Many times I sat up in my room with it, trying to come up with lyrics, but so far I was a blank. No rush, though, just let it come in its time, I guess.

And then my last Sunday with Rhonda came, which was pretty much all review. She commended me for carrying myself straighter, and I had to admit to her that I found myself naturally doing more of that, even when I was at home, or out and about. I noticed when I walked through the aisles at work, or past the shops downtown, people's heads turned a bit more often than before. Sometimes I even found myself smiling more. It was unexpected but nice.

Overall, Rhonda said I was good to go, and anything beyond would come with experience. But I scrunched my nose up and said, "Are you sure? Maybe we should call Dev and see if he'll spring for some more lessons, just to be safe."

Rhonda gave me a side eye. "Like how many more?"

I shrugged and said, "...two hundred?"

She laughed. "Naw, honey, you're ready to get out there an' rip that band-aid off, so ya might as well, right? But hey: it's been fun and I wish you best of luck, I do. Buzz me sometime – we can do coffee and you can tell me how it's goin'."

"I promise," I said.

Dev called the next afternoon, sounding exhilarated. "Rhonda tells me you're all set and the timing could not be better. Book the day off a week from this Saturday – time for your launch. T minus liftoff, baby!"

"Wait wait what?"

"Saturday the 18th – you're singin' in Belvedere!"

After a couple of tries, I finally got him to slow down and give me the details.
Bear with me:

CHPY – Happy1460 – was the Top 40 AM station over in Belvedere, the biggest station in the Tri-Cities. A few times a year, they would set up a small stage in a corner of Belvedere Mall for what they called a Community Fair. (I vaguely recalled going past things like it in malls once or twice when I was little.) One or two DJ s would MC the event, where they would hold draws and contests, clothing stores in the mall might present little fashion shows, there'd be a bin to collect food bank donations, in nicer weather (like May) they might have balloons and a cotton candy machine, and so on. All to drum up goodwill for the station, basically. Off to the side, the DJ s would have equipment to send in live updates to the station's home studio. It was a pretty rinky-dink event, but an event just the same.

Dev of course Knew A Guy who worked at Happy1460. And, Dev being Dev, he had already sniffed around about the possibility of me singing at the Community Fair. The station, as it happened, thought this was a great idea if he had someone lined up. They felt like the chance to present a musical act would give the Fair a real energy boost. And being seen supporting local and regional musicians would reflect well on the local radio station – more goodwill for them.

Dev acted like he had won the lottery. He was able to ride the coattails of the radio station's stage, which would already have a live mike and sound equipment set up. This saved him time and effort – and probably money – trying to arrange with the mall for those facilities on his own. The Fair would already bring in eyes and ears. And when the station plugged the event, before and during, they would always mention the goings-on – including me, so free publicity on the big pop radio station. All this right out of the starting blocks.

Once again, even I could see the business advantages of all these things, and could understand why he was gung ho about it. Of course, the fact that the musical artist would sing for free was not even worth mentioning, and surprised no one.

But I saw a snag. "I'm not sure if I can get that day off, Dev. It's the long weekend, the store will be extra bus– "

"Have you asked yet? No. So ask."

"I will, but – "

"Ya want me to go down there an' lean on yer boss?"

"No! No. Lemme take care of it."

"Awright but make it happen." He hung up.

The next morning, I went to Fred's office and asked about the possibility of taking that day off. Since I was asking about a long weekend, an unusual request, I felt like I might need to go directly to the top first. And in all honesty, I was half-hoping he'd say no. What he said was, "Go ask Doris, Mari, she's in charge of the schedule book, eh?" So I went back out to Doris's desk, half-hoping that *she'd* say no.

She scrunched her face up for a second. "The 18th? You know that's – "

"The long weekend, yeah yeah, I know. I just..." It was tempting to just say, "Oh well, if it can't happen. At least I tried," and go back out to my till. But I also half-wanted to make it work. I did recognize that I had a rare opportunity here. Maybe a squeak-and-clatter opportunity in a sailor suit, but still.

As it happened, Doris didn't feel that the store could afford to go short-handed that day. But she had an idea, and took me over to Myrna's till for a quick conference. Myrna generally had Saturdays off and worked Sundays, including this long weekend. She was willing to trade with me – especially since it would mean Sunday and Monday off together for her, and she'd have time to go to her sister's cottage. So mission accomplished. But, Myrna being Myrna, she still made it sound like she was getting a raw deal somehow.

Next time Gwyn called, I of course told her all about it, and she was politely excited, in her way. She started talking about arranging to use the car that day to drive out, and I interrupted her.

"Actually, Gwyn, I...." I hesitated for a second. "I feel awful saying this, but I was gonna ask that you not come? At least for this first one? I'm so nervous about it

already, and if I knew that that there was anyone I know out there watching me, I think I might freeze up. Please don't be offended?" One of the advantages of this event being out of town in Belvedere is that I was that much less likely to bump into anyone who knew me.

"Aww, Mari," she said. "I'm not offended. Or anything. I get it. I mean, if there's anyone who understands things like that, right?"

I let my breath out. "Thanks, Gwynnie, you're the best."

"It's all good. This, this actually makes me feel like you understand me better. And that's nice, in its own oddball way."

She made me chuckle softly. In that moment, I felt a bit closer to her, too.

Far too soon, the big day arrived. We lucked out with bright, warm weather, just a couple steps away from summer – perfect for the long weekend. The air itself felt upbeat, and I tried to tap into that.

After an early lunch, I stood waiting by the front door for my ride. My parents sat in the living room, yet somehow still hovered over me. I chose a light gray, long-sleeved tee and navy slacks, both still newish, so that I looked sober and presentable (and dull) to whoever I might meet. At my feet slumped my old high school gym bag, in the maroon and white school colours of Westgate CVI. Stashed in there was my garment bag, hairbrush, snacks and water bottle, and a book, cuz I had been warned to expect substantial down time.

At 12:30 a white van pulled up and stopped at the house. A red Belvedere Cable logo covered much of one side. My chariot awaited. "He's here," I said.

Dev wasn't gonna be there for my debut cuz he was busy. (When I asked him what with, he said, "Manager stuff, ma.") But he Knew A Guy who worked at the cable company in Belvedere. Bill was willing to make a few bucks by coming out to Westgate to bring me to the show and take me home after. He also knew his way around AV equipment cuz he worked at the cable TV studio, so he was going to set up our tape player and act as my soundboard guy.

I watched Bill as he got out of the van and walked around it to come to our door.

A big, soft, hulking guy with dark stringy hair and an AC/DC T-shirt, he moved slow and seemed very laid-back. I didn't get any kind of bad vibe from him that made me unwilling to go with him. I had realized that this business was likely to put me in more situations where I would be alone with strange men. I tried to roll with that, but that doesn't mean I stopped thinking about it. Then I noticed mom had come to stand by me and look over my shoulder, out at him. She nodded and I relaxed a little more.

Mom and daddy gave me quick good-luck hugs, I slipped out the door, and, walking up straight, I met Bill partway on the front walk. He stopped, and blinked at me like he was sure he had seen one of these human being things before, and he guessed that I seemed to be one of those, too. "Mariko?"

"Yup. Bill?" He nodded and beckoned me back to the van.

The inside of it smelled of rubber and electronics. As he buckled up, Bill said, "Don't worry, I packed the player *and* the cables *and* the tapes *and* the banner. All good."

"Great." Then the van started up with a low roar and we headed out of town.

He immediately flicked the dashboard tape player on, and blasting guitars filled the vehicle and surrounding neighbourhood. Fantastic sound system, at least, but a bit too metal for my tastes. I thought the singer's voice was familiar, so I called out over it, "AC/DC?"

"Fuck yeah! Oh, sorry," he called back, headbanging just enough that he could still watch the road.

"Sokay," I yelled back.

After a minute, he called, "So, you're a singer, right?"

I thought that the fact he was hired to set up backing tapes and equipment for me to sing into would be a good clue. "Yes."

"What do you sing?"

I thought for a second. "Pop, I guess."

"Ah, too bad." He headbanged to the pounding roar.

"I guess you're into metal," I called back.

"Ffff – uh, yeah." Then he fell silent but the van didn't.

I took one more stab at making conversation. "Uh, this is the guy that wears his school uniform on stage, right?"

"Angus, yeah." Bill chuckled. "He's been wearing that get-up for over twenty years now, can you believe it?"

"Will wonders never cease," I called.

Soon we both fell silent. Bill Metal wasn't much of a talker – which was okay, I had Dev for that. We let AC/DC rock on for a while, and I noticed some of the simple, repeating patterns they used. And I realized that, thanks to Gwyn, I was starting to listen to everything with more attention.

He did speak up at one point when we were getting closer to Belvedere, to fill me in on our itinerary. We had both been told that I would be performing a fifteen-minute set at two, three, and four o'clock. But he wanted us to get there for one, to make sure he had more than enough time to get my equipment set up and triple-checked before I went on. He also explained loudly that he insisted on bringing more than one copy of the tape in case one got "chewed up", as he put it. And I realized that, at least when it came to his work, he was very sharp and meticulous. And I could respect that.

It was only a twenty-minute drive between towns, so the AC/DC tape hadn't even finished playing one side before we reached the confusion of Belvedere's busier streets. Finally we came to the beehive activity surrounding the low sprawl of Belvedere Mall. Bill Metal drove around to one of the loading docks and parked there. Then he got out, opened the back doors, and pulled out a large metal suitcase. He called over to me, "You got everything?"

I raised my gym bag a little. "Yep."

He gave me a decisive nod that shook hair into his eyes, slammed the doors shut, then led me over to the iron staircase of the loading dock. It looked to me like he was hefting the weight of that case without any trouble. He buzzed us

inside, our footsteps clacked through the echoey stuffiness and oily smell of the dock, and we came into one of the dim back corridors of the mall. A quiet, bald man in a dark suit greeted us there and directed me to a small meeting room which he told me had been reserved for me as my dressing room. Then he led Bill Metal deeper into the maw of the mall.

There was a piece of Happy1460 stationery taped to the meeting room door. On it, someone had taken a pen and printed MARIKO – DRESSING ROOM. I slipped inside and closed the door.

Elvis had entered the building.

Seventeen

The ceiling light glared and hummed. A laminated table in the middle of the room was surrounded by plastic chairs. Some metal cases for AV equipment were piled in one corner. That was it. No one had provided any actual dressing room facilities as such here. It was just a private cubicle for me to change, roomier than using one of the stalls in the bathroom – but the bathroom would at least have a mirror. I tried not to let the glamour go to my head.

I decided to get changed right away, get settled and comfy in the clothes before going out to work in them. If the door had a lock, I couldn't figure out how to make it work. So I stood right by the door: in case someone decided to come in for some wonky reason, I'd be in position to just slam them back out. I felt weirdest in that brief moment when I was down to just panties in this corporate little room, so I slipped the sailor suit on in a hurry, brushed my hair the best I could, and let out a breath.

The sounds of many footsteps and voices were very far-off and muffled, barely heard over the hum of the light. I knew I had a long wait til it was time for me to go on, so I sat down and ate a sandwich and some cookies, then had some of my water, giving my teeth a good swish just to make sure. I pulled out my book – a Jack Vance anthology I'd found in my fave used-book store – and tried to read. It was a bit hard to focus. The lack of a clock in here was making me antsy.

No idea how much time had passed (I hadn't even finished one story) when I was startled by a knock on the door and a rich, smooth, man's voice saying, "Mariko? May we come in?"

I put the book down and tried to slow my heart. "Yes?"

The door eased open and in came a short guy in a mauve polo shirt, with a lean, tanned brunette behind him. The man had curly sandy hair, a snub nose, and he was desperately trying to grow a beard. He said, "Hi, I'm Keith Tur– "

Turner. Keith *Turner* – *that* was his name. Oh. My. God.

He interrupted himself and with a surprised smile said, "Mari?! Mari Takamura! Wow, hello!" He came over, eager to shake hands. "Well, I had no idea! What a terrific surprise!" The brunette smiled at him, then at me. I could feel myself

blushing furiously. Why couldn't I be in the Yukon now? He gave me a quick up-and-down and said, "Wow, you look just amazing!"

I cringed inside and said, "Ah, thank you? You, ah, you're holding up well."

Except for the quasi-beard, Keith looked basically the same as back at Westgate CVI. But someone had trained him to speak from his diaphragm or something, cuz this guy sounded way more professional and mandroid than the anime geek I remembered.

"Oh – Lisa Michaels, Mari Takamura." We shook ladylike hands. "Mari and I were in high school together!"

Lisa gave a mild smile and said, "I gathered – something like."

He looked back at me with his toothy grin. "Yep, Westgate CVI! Go Gators, right?"

"Heh, yeah, go Gators," I murmured. Would this blush never stop?

"But I guess for today you're Mariko, huh?" I just nodded weakly. "Lisa and I do the morning show at Happy1460 – we're MC-ing the Community Fair this time, so one of us will be introducing you when you go on. Are you ready? You're on in like ten."

I picked up my water bottle – it felt like a good idea to have it with me. "I'm as... ready as I'll ever be."

"Terrific. Right this way." And the three of us went down the dim hallway into the brighter, busier main body of Belvedere Mall.

I noticed people turning their heads as we went down the short concourse to the stage set-up. Keith kept talking, way more than I really wanted him to in that moment – I guess that was his job.

"So it's just 'Mariko' now, huh? You're one of those Madonna – Cher superstars, I guess."

"Ahh, yep, I'm right up there with them, heh."

"Well, that's terrific. I'm glad you're still into music. This is so great running into you again like this!" I just nodded and swallowed.

I could smell cotton candy up ahead, and then we came to the stage. Not huge, not high – there was like one step at the back corner, between the stage level and the floor. A mike was already in its stand near the front, a couple of small speakers spread out to either side of it. I noticed my Mariko banner up on the back wall. Above that was a big foamboard sign reading "Happy1460 Community Fair". Between those signs was a small hasty one that said "presents". At least somebody was making something of an effort.

Keith and Lisa sat at an electronic-looking console by the side and did things. Bill Metal came over to me and nodded. The schoolgirl outfit didn't seem to faze him. "Yeah, so, I'll be controlling the tape, right? After your song is over, I'll stop it in case you wanna gab to the crowd or whatnot." I couldn't help glancing over then, to see maybe three little girls milling around near the stage, with a few other people looking over at us once while they walked by. The crowd. "You give me the nod when you want the next song to start. Got it?"

I nodded up at him. "I think I got it, Bill." My face was starting to cool down, but the inside of my chest and stomach were trembling. I drank a bit of my water, then licked my lips.

I startled a little when Lisa touched my elbow and murmured "Here we go" near my ear. Then she went up to the mike and the three girls paid more attention to the stage. Her clear, elegant voice began to attract a few more people who slowly wandered over. "And now, Happy1460 is pleased to introduce today's musical feature: Mariko!" She turned and left the stage to no sound other than the murmur of the crowds moving through the concourse. She gave me a little smile and nod, and I made my glossy black shoes move.

I walked, up straight and shoulders back, to the mike stand, to no sound other than the murmur of the crowds moving through the concourse. I crouched down to set my water bottle at the foot of the mike stand, straightened, and gave a little head bow to whoever might be out there. I swallowed – way back from the mike so no one would hear. For what could only have been a second I stood,

with nothing happening, waiting for the music, and I had a flash of panic. Then I thought to look over at Bill Metal and nod. At once, the drum intro to "You Were On My Mind" started up. I can be such a dolt.

For a few seconds, I tried to pretend I was back in Rhonda's studio. I tried to pretend I was in my room. I felt like my chest would never relax again. Then my cue:

*When I woke up this morning
You were on my mind*

and I sounded actually not too bad. A little flat in the first line or two but I corrected it quickly and told myself no one noticed. I felt like doing the gentle shoulder sway Rhonda taught me, so I did, just for a few seconds. And then, like at The Loft, I was in the zone. I was so afraid that wasn't gonna happen here, but it did.

I didn't think about my clothes. I didn't think about what sort of faces people were wearing while they watched. I didn't even think about Keith Turner looking at me. I just felt good about singing. I smiled a natural smile, cuz I liked this song and I liked singing it. And I felt a bit of a rush when I made it to the end, and smiled bigger. I heard like maybe three people clap like maybe four or five claps. Better than throwing things, at least. I remembered to say "thank you" into the mike.

I pulled the mike out of the stand and nodded at Bill Metal. My electro-punk "Little Red Book" came on, and I remembered not to get tangled in the mike cord and not to hit the mike when I clapped, and my head nodded. I glanced out and saw a couple of teenage girls nodding. And what looked like a dad. I was doing okay. After that song was done, the applause was a smidge louder, and I even heard what sounded like a teenage boy's voice call out "Yeah!" (Well of course – that song rocks.)

As I went through the set, a few more people came over to see what was going on. Some of them just looked at me blankly for a few seconds and left. A couple snickered and left. But a few of them were staying longer. After each song, there were maybe a couple more people who felt like making polite little applause, and I just said "thank you" after each one. There was one girl who looked about ten who I realized had been right there at the front ever since I started, and she still was. I felt encouraged.

But then I felt a soft thump against my hip and heard a nasty cackle off to the side. I glanced down and saw a white Timbit on the stage, which I guessed someone had thrown at me. I blushed, but just kicked my instep against it and brushed it off the stage out of my way. I felt proud that I didn't even let it throw off my beat while I took care of it.

And then the set finished off with "The Kids Are Alright", I made a little bow, and maybe twelve or fifteen people gave polite applause. This time I said, "Thank you very much. I'll be back at three o'clock." Then I stepped down from the stage and didn't look back. I walked quickly back to the dressing room, not looking at anyone, not giving anyone time to say a word to me.

I closed the door of the room a bit louder than I meant to, then sat at the table, laid my hands flat on it, and forced myself to deep-breathe. I had survived my baptism by fire, but right at that moment I had no idea how I felt about it. Right now I was just every feeling at once. Slowly my breathing got gentler, and I realized that I was going to be back at three o'clock. I had made it. I had done this. And I could do it again.

There was a knock at the door – startling me again. "Mariko? Are you okay?" It was Lisa.

I called over, "I think so?"

She kept talking through the door. "I'm really sorry if I'm disturbing you, but you left your water on the stage, I thought you might want it."

"Oh gosh, thank you!" I got up and opened the door. She handed me the bottle with a soft nod, and I drank some right there. I swallowed and said "Sorry."

She gave an easy little chuckle. "No worries. Um, Keith wanted to bring it to you, but I had a feeling that maybe things'd be a bit more chill if *I* did."

I actually laughed. "You are smart!"

She laughed, then, and said, "Say listen, you did really well there. *Really* well. A lot of the time when we do these events, we feel like we're talking to the wall. If you can get more than two people paying attention to you at once, you're doing great. Seriously."

I smiled and said, "Thanks, that helps to know." She didn't say if she liked my music, and I was afraid to ask. But I know what Dev would say. Given that she looked to be in her late twenties, she wasn't part of the market we were aiming at. So if she didn't like it, so what? I just let that remain a mystery.

Lisa said, "Is five minutes enough heads-up time for you?"

I nodded. "I think so – now that I know the drill."

"All right then, I will come back and get you at 2:55. Til then, you just relax." Then she glanced down, and reached out to gently tap my upper arm. Low and quiet, she said, "Oh, you might want to take care of that as much as you can." And she gestured down at my skirt. I looked: there was a smudge of white powdered sugar and a little dot of red jam. "The bathroom is right across the hall here."

I sighed and thanked her, and she headed back out to the fair. I went across to the bathroom sink and got the smudge out the best that I could. And yes, people looked at my clothes as they went in and out behind me, but I was learning not to mind so much.

The three-o'clock show was very similar to the last one, except that I was more relaxed and did a better job. I spoke a bit more between songs, announcing the names of one or two of them – once I even tried asking "How is everybody?" but only crickets replied. That ten-year-old girl was back, and this time it looked like she had a friend: another girl about her age stood beside her and stayed through the whole set.

After I was done, and thanked everyone, and announced the four-o'clock show, a couple of grunge girls who looked maybe fifteen slunk over to the stage. One of them said, "Hey, can we get your autograph?"

I'm sure my expression looked as puzzled as I felt. "Really?"

Then they burst into a nasty cackle, turned, and walked off, still laughing. I felt the corners of my mouth tighten, but tried to shrug it off. Was that the same nasty cackle as The Timbit Incident? I couldn't be sure.

This time I didn't rush back to the dressing room immediately: I gave Keith and Lisa a second to tell me I did good, and Bill Metal a chance to blink blankly at me. Then I went back to the room for more food and a chance to read my good-smelling old book. I was glad that Bill Metal didn't seem to feel that this was *his* dressing room, too – sharing it with him would've been a bit more awkward than I could handle today.

The four-o'clock show was the best one of all – I was happy to wrap up the event on an up note. No mean laughs, no thrown food. I was actually relaxed and comfortable, or at least comparatively, through that set. I moved around the stage a bit more, I smiled out at people and sometimes saw them smile back. That young girl and her friend came back for the whole set – that part was great.

This time I saw a guy with a camera, though, weaving between the few people gathered at the stage, trying to get shots from different angles and distances. I wasn't sure what he was about, but there was a moment when I glanced off to one side and noticed him close by the stage, his camera pointed right at me. And I burst into a grin – not because I wanted to "smile for the camera", but because his attention made me feel like a self-conscious dolt. And suddenly the whole event felt a bit silly, but in a way that made it feel okay. And I really didn't mind being there at all. A year from now this would be gone, but I would be here.

And then I said my final, "Thank you for listening" and the small gathering dispersed.

Mostly.

That girl and her friend were still at the foot of the stage, and as I turned to head off, she called out, "Mariko?"

I stopped, turned back, walked over to the lip of the stage. I crouched down to her and made sure to smile. "Hi."

She looked a little bit like a tiny Gwyn, long hair and glasses, but she had freckles. "Hi. Can I have your autograph?"

I thought about the grunge girls. "Really?" She nodded, and got a pen and folded paper out of her pocket. Her friend said, "Remember my mom wants that pen back," and she said "I know I know!"

I eased my backside down onto the stage, then slid off to stand beside her. She handed me the paper and pen, and I used the stage floor to write on. "What's your name?"

"Jennie." She was kinda bouncing where she stood. I thought I saw her friend roll her eyes, as if Jennie asking for my autograph was pretty lame.

I stopped to think for a second. I had never planned on doing anything like this, at least not yet. "How do you spell that? I wanna make sure I get it right." And we smiled at each other.

"J-E-N-N-I-E," she said, almost proudly.

"All right, I got it." Finally I wrote:

*for Jennie,
Always be you!
– Mariko*

and then scribbled a little underline so it would look more autography. She took it from me, grinned at it, and said, "Thank you!"

"You're welcome," I said. A bit quieter, I added, "I'll tell you a secret, Jennie: that's the first autograph I ever did."

"Then it's special!" She grinned bigger. "Do you have a CD? You're real good!"

My turn to grin bigger. "I, uh, I hope to have one soon."

"Okay good! Gotta go thanks bye!" And the two of them scampered off into the crowds.

It felt like I had my first fan. I had not seen that coming.

Eighteen

By the time I walked around the stage to the back, Bill Metal was already up there taking my banner down. Keith walked over to me, all teeth. From the corner of my eye, I could see Lisa working at the console, slowly shaking her head and trying not to smile.

"So Mari! You made it! Man, yeah, you were terrific, you really were. Just terrific."

I said "Thank you" as he looked down me, then up again.

"Hey, I'll be finished here about five, are you still going to be around? I thought maybe we could go for a coffee and catch up on old times." His gently hopeful expression brought back a couple of memories.

I just said, "Mmm-I don't think so, Keith."

He blushed, and tried to chuckle, and said, "I remember you saying that exact same thing to me, back in Grade Thirteen." (Which for me was in Grade Ten.)

I gave him a little smile that I hoped wasn't mean. "Guess it's nice to know that some things never change."

After I got my real clothes back on and my things packed, I barely had time to find my place in my book before Bill Metal stuck his head in the door – not thinking to knock – and said he was ready to go. So I grabbed my gym bag, we bundled into the cable van, the AC/DC tape got flipped over, and then we were on the highway back into Westgate, the windows open and warm sun at our backs.

He had even less to say on the way home, not needing to give me instructions or itinerary. At one point, out of nowhere, not even interrupting his headbanging, he suddenly called out, "You could busk."

I looked over at him. " 'Busk'?"

"Be a busker. Like on a sidewalk downtown somewhere. Make some money."

Well, he wasn't wrong, I guess.

After a couple of blinks, I said, "I work full-time, Bill, I'm kinda busy for that."

"Oh." And that was pretty much it until he pulled up the van up to my house. I thanked him as I got out, he nodded, and I walked up to our front door, feeling tall and tired.

As soon as I got in, I told mom and daddy all about it, and they were very supportive and excited for me. After dinner, Gwyn called, and I got to tell her about it all over again, and she was very supportive and excited for me. Then she asked if she could bring me over Monday afternoon, since I was working the Sunday in place of Myrna. I told her sure, I was looking forward to it.

Then shortly before bed, Dev called, sounding extremely enthused, like he was having trouble keeping up with his own mouth. He wasn't so much interested in hearing my report on the afternoon as telling me about what he found out when he asked Bill Metal about it.

"This is unbelievable," he said. "Bill says there were like *two dozen people* there! He says he saw someone ask for your *autograph!*" Dev was almost panting with excitement.

"Well yeah, I thought that was pretty good – "

" 'Pretty good'?! No, it's incredible! I still need to call my guy at the radio station and find out what they got, but still! I'll do that Monday – no I mean Tuesday. Baby, if I heard you had *one person* still standing there when you were done, I woulda been happy, awright? C'man! This is great, it's perfect. I, we gotta start thinkin' about puttin' out a single – you just watch, they'll be askin' about one in like a month, you'll see. Wow, I never expected this!"

"No?"

"No-no wait – I mean, yeah *of course* I expected it *sometime*, you're great, just not this *soon*, I'm not ready! Anyway, I wanted to call and tell ya that ya did amazing, you're perfect, good goin', I'll call ya." And he hung up on himself in the middle of saying "oh man". Which finally gave me an opening to breathe.

The next day, Gwyn and I were working in her studio (her folks were away enjoying the holiday) and I felt happy – energized and at peace at the same time. She was trying to work up "Close to You" into an arrangement that would work for us, cuz she was keen to get more Bacharach into our repertoire.

During a break, I clicked the mike off and told her, "I so wish you coulda been up there with me. That woulda looked so much cooler and sounded so much better. And been way more fun." Somehow the thought of her watching me from the floor still embarrassed me, but having her at my side, performing with me, felt comfortable.

She blushed and looked down at the keyboard. "I knew you were going to keep trying to talk me into this."

I went and sat on the bench beside her. "It really wasn't so bad. I mean, I was nervous to start off, but there was no need to be. By the end it was kinda fun. And there was hardly anyone there – not a big thing, nothing to be scared of."

She smiled a little. "Easy for you to say. Do you know when your next show is?"

I shook my head. "No idea. I can't imagine that a mall gig is something that you can book all that often. And I have no idea what other sorts of places Dev might be thinking of – you know how he never tells me anything. It could be weeks, months even." There were not a lot of venues for any kind of live music in the Tri-Cities, and none of the regional artists played regularly. You really needed to play Toronto to get steady gigs, and who knew if that would ever happen? Even Vog only got out there once, and they were so much better than me.

Gwyn glanced over at me. "Well, for your sake, I'll say that I'm not ruling it out. You ready to try again?"

I got up and headed for the mike stand. "Ready, sarge."

On Saturday I got a surprise.

At six I said good night to the part-timers on the evening shift and walked out of Calder's, heading for the bus stop. Then I was interrupted by a honk. I looked over, and mom and daddy were parked near the door, waiting for me. Getting a lift is great, but I wasn't expecting it.

Daddy leaned out the passenger window and called out, "Punkin! Go back in and get the *T.C. Shopper!*"

I squinted. "What?"

He held out a little newspaper which I sorta recognized and he waved it. Mom leaned out the driver window and called, "As many as you can!"

A bit puzzled, I went back into the store.

T.C. Shopper was one of those little free newspapers they give away in racks near the doors of stores, and sometimes drop in your mailbox. The kind that you never notice the name of, the kind that you ignore unless you want the ads. That's all it is, is just ads, except for a few "news" items scattered inside that are all just human interest fluff.

Our *T.C. Shopper* rack still looked really full so I bet we could spare a dozen copies. And yes, the front of it looked like it was the same issue that daddy waved at me, so I grabbed a little pile and went back out.

I got in the back seat behind mom, dropped the pile of small papers beside me, and buckled up. "So what's the story?" I said.

While mom started the car and headed across the lot, daddy squirmed around to hand me his copy of the paper – he already had it opened up to somewhere in the middle. "Check it."

The *Shopper* had recently started printing in colour, so the page daddy showed me was covered in colour photos. The paper had decided to devote a page to the Happy1460 Community Fair. I saw a picture of Lisa standing beside the food donation bin, one of Keith handing out cotton candy to some kids....

And a close-up of me, grinning my I-am-such-a-dolt grin. There was a caption below that said: "Westgate singing discovery Mariko is all smiles as she provides the Fair's musical entertainment". I had become human interest fluff.

And I was okay with it. I could feel my smile squinching my eyes up, and I said, "I have got to admit, this is pretty cool, in its own tiny way."

"It's a beautiful picture of you, dear," said mom as she turned out into the street.

"No! I still look like a dolt!"

"Your smile is gorgeous" she insisted. "I've always told you you have the most beautiful smile."

"She gets that from you, Grace," daddy said.

"Aww, Kenny."

It was a few evenings later that I finally heard from Dev about my fluff piece. He sounded maybe a bit less hyper but still smugly pleased. "So how about that, hah? Yer in the paper awready!"

"I would hardly call that 'the paper', Dev."

"C'man, *you* know what I mean, quit givin' me grief about it, ma! It's more free publicity, that's never a bad thing."

"I guess."

"You guess. *I know*. Anyway, good goin', ya look really great. That is a photo of arresting presence. That's an image people will buy."

"Maybe? Anyway, when can I sing again?"

"Already workin' on it. Shouldn't take too long, I'll call ya. Relax and practise. But hey, what'd I tell ya, hah? It's already happenin', ki – madam." And he hung up.

Nineteen

Ikiru were playing the King Eddie the next Thursday night, last week of May, and I already had my ticket. (I'd offered to pick one up for Gwyn, too, but she passed, no great surprise.) *Friends* was in reruns by then, so no worries there – but I woulda gone regardless, Ikiru was worth it. By bolting my dinner down, I was able to make it to Eddie's door by 7:30 and be among the first fifty to shove my way in and try to grab a good table.

I was in my black jacket and tight jeans, bopping my head to the grunge on the P.A., and nursing my first Moosehead; I had a strange feeling like I had returned to my ancestral homeland. I nodded to acquaintances passing by and had some friends stop and try to exchange a few words over the roar. Been a while since I'd seen some of them.

The first set was due to start in an hour, and I wasn't planning to stay for the second, unfortunately – not with work the next morning. Still worth it for these guys. The clock over the bar said it was just past eight when I finished my first beer and decided on one more. I left my empty on the table and hoped that would be enough to discourage anyone from jumping my claim on it, then swerved my way through the crowd toward the bar.

But just before I reached it, I felt a sharp blow between my shoulder blades that staggered me forward a step or two, and a raucous voice behind yelling, "Hey Tiffany!"

Shaken and muttering, I turned to see AliCat glowering at me. They both looked like they'd had a few before they came here. Cat's ratty T-shirt was damp and stuck to her. "What're *you* doing here?" she sneered. "Didn't think you can handle this any more!" Ali chimed in "Yeah!", because she does.

"What the hell, Cat," I said, not enjoying the attention at all.

"Yeah, what the hell, Tiffany! We heard! Lip-syncing vacuous pop crap in a stupid *mall* to dumb little kids!" Word can get around fast in a small town.

For some crazy reason, I found myself arguing, "I don't lip-s– "

"Sell-out! Goddamn sell-out! We are so better off without you! I never thought you'd be as bad as *this!*"

I tried to turn away and just muttered, "Go to hell, Cat."

But she lunged toward me and shoved me in the chest, yelling "*You're already there!*" I staggered back, bounced and rolled off someone trying to approach the bar behind me, and my back crashed into a nearby table. I could hear the thunk and scrape as it slid back, glass sounds, guys jumping up and cursing. I fell on my ass and felt the cold of something spilling off the table, over my hair and down the neck of my shirt. For a second I couldn't move, there was just pain and vague noise and a crazy nightmare feeling.

A deep voice called "Heyheyhey!" and then strong arms helped me to my feet. The voice said, "You all right?" I just mumbled, "I need to get out" and I stumbled over to the bathrooms and the back exit. Behind me I could hear the voice go, "You. You. Out." but I didn't look back. I just bounced off the wall of the dim corridor and slammed at the back door to let me out.

The air was cool out here and, with the sun just going down, the back alley was dim. I took a couple of unsteady steps from the door and crouched in the gravel near a dumpster. A couple of shaky gasps, and then I just started sobbing and covered my face with my hands. I could feel my shoulders heave. I dunno how long. Felt like hours.

I heard the door open. Tried to stop my tears. I sniffed and swallowed and wiped my eyes. I saw a large young man step out and look around at me, and then I recognized the deep voice. Kwesi, Esi's older brother. He moved a cinder block lying nearby into the door frame so the door wouldn't lock him out, then he came over and crouched beside me. His bright yellow staff T-shirt strained over his powerful chest and arms.

"Mari, right?" I nodded and looked at his face. I had always noticed that he had the same eyes as his sister – gorgeous, deep brown eyes that looked like the moon on Royal Lake. Soft and wise. "You all right?"

I started to say "Yeah" but my voice cracked, and I suddenly realized that the tears weren't finished. Feeling ridiculous, I couldn't keep them back – and he reached an arm around my shoulders and rested my head on his chest. His body felt very solid, warm and reassuring. And we just stayed there for a minute or so, me sobbing softer now and getting his shirt wet, him sometimes giving me a soft shhh to calm me down. And before too long it worked.

I wiped my eyes again and thanked him. He said, almost more to himself than to me, "Sometimes I wish Esi didn't go with those two." Then to me he said, "Do you want me to get a ride home for you?"

"No," I croaked, "no. Thank you. I just want to get some air out here for a while."

He nodded and stood up, went to the door, and said, "I will leave the door open for you to come in." And then I was alone.

But not for long. After a few minutes, I heard someone call my name. I looked over at the door and, to my surprise, there was Frank. I mean, I wasn't surprised that he was here at the King Eddie to see Mitch's band – I was surprised that he was here in the back alley with me.

I stood up, now feeling curious more than anything else. "Uh, hey, Frank. What's up?"

He approached me slowly. "I was witness to your altercation with the riot grrrls. That was egregiously remiss of them, I'd say. I saw that Kwesi came back to tend to you, but also realized that he's on duty and can only stay back here so long. I wanted to ensure that no further attentions were required here."

I managed a wavery smile. "So you wanted to check that I was okay."

He nodded. "As I said."

My smile got a bit stronger. "Well, that's awful sweet of you, Frank – I didn't know you cared."

He made a small head bow. "There are many things that many people don't know about me."

For a moment, we stood quiet in the shadows. Then I said, "Actually, can I ask you something?"

"Certainly," he said. "But first may I suggest we make our way out to the sidewalk? There's a bench just around the corner." And that's where we went.

A streetlight over the bench came on, making us cast long shadows down. "So

what was your question?"

I rubbed the back of my neck, still damp. "A few questions, really, I guess. Um, have you heard anything about the show I did in Belvedere a couple weeks ago?"

He gave me a slow nod and a soft smile. "I did. Congratulations and brava."

"And... anything about the music I was singing?"

"Only in a roundabout, game-of-telephone fashion. People here in Westgate who have friends in Belvedere who have friends who saw your performance, and the like. But I believe I have the gist." And then he just waited patiently for me to go on.

"Frank, do you think I'm a sell-out?"

He sat for a few seconds. "That is not a simple or shallow question," he finally said. "Perhaps it might help if I attempt to shed light on it from my own experiences." He looked up for a second, then back at me. "There are those who decry The Doughty Swains as sell-outs, as you say, because according to them we have gone soft. There are also those who deride us as foolishly misguided, because we have chosen to pursue a musical direction which they feel no one will buy.

"We are caught between the rock of trying to make money and the hard place of *not* trying to make money. As in the days of yore, the solution is to sail between Scylla and Charybdis. Set your course and hold fast to it." He held up a finger. "Follow your heart."

He gave me a second to digest this. Then he looked at me, in a way he had done other times over the years, a way that made me feel he was looking *into* me. He said, "Answer me this: do you like the songs you sing?"

"Yes. There was a while at first where I needed to learn to appreciate them, but now: yes. I do."

"And do you like singing them?"

I smiled. "Yes."

"And do you sing them?"

"Yes."

He gently spread his hands. "Then you need no further advice, from me or anyone."

I grinned, and then for a moment we sat quietly, while I crushed on him some more and wondered if he knew. Then I finally said, "While I've got you here and it's quiet, there's something else I've been wondering about for a long time." I pointed at his arm. "The armband – you've worn it so long now, do you think that you're always going to?"

He glanced down at the armband and stroked it. " 'Always'? That's not something I actually need to decide. It's simply a choice which renews itself every morning. But I will say this about it:

"To begin with, it was for Kurt, which is no secret to anyone. Since then, though, it has taken on a larger and deeper meaning for me, which is why I hold to it. Now, this serves as my reminder that we have no promise of any days beyond this one. Hence, it behooves us to spend today mindfully."

I chuckled. "You sound like my mom."

He lifted a corner of his mouth. "I have oftentimes been mistaken for a mom, as it happens. The long flowing locks and earrings, perhaps."

The thumping of music from inside the King Eddie kicked up several notches. Frank stood. "Sounds like the show has begun," he said. "Would you care to share my table for it?"

I had been planning to skip the show, go home, and sulk. But now, it seemed to me that shaking off the AliCat Incident and holding fast to my course was a more mindful way to spend the evening.

So I accepted Frank's offer. And, of course, Ikiru rocked.

Twenty

Naturally, when I came home that night looking and smelling like a brewery accident, my folks had questions. I told them that I bashed into the table because I tripped. It certainly wasn't because I wanted to spare Cat's good name – I just couldn't face any more drama about it, I just wanted it all to go away and forget it. But my back was feeling it even more the next morning, and I found myself stretching and rolling my shoulders a lot throughout the day.

Sunday afternoon found me working at Gwyn's. On that particular day, we were polishing up our rendition of "You Don't Own Me", For The Album. During a break, she asked me if anything was happening with the lyrics for "Beautiful Song".

I gave a little grimace. "Still nothing so far, sorry."

"No, *I'm* sorry – I guess it's my turn to be impatient." She smiled soft and kind at me. "No rush."

I sat for a moment, feeling awkward, then decided to tell her about the AliCat Incident, even if I hadn't told my folks. She was distressed and appalled and fluttered over me like a mom making sure I was all right. And eventually I got to the point about why I had brought it up.

"The trouble is," I told her, "that ever since then, in the back of my mind I've been second-guessing myself. I keep wondering if she might be right, if I'm just kidding myself about this. Am I really just singing vacuous pop songs for dumb little kids?"

Gwyn took her glasses off and looked at them for a few seconds, then rested them on her synthesizer and rubbed the bridge of her nose. Finally she said, "Well... speaking for my side of this, I know how much effort and thought I put into what I do. I think that anyone who dismisses my work as 'vacuous' isn't really paying attention."

I nodded. "I know how hard you work better than anyone – other than you."

She blushed a little. "But I, I think there's a more important point here." She

touched her chin for a second, then looked right in my eyes. "I remember you telling me about 'I Love Rock 'n' Roll' – your favourite song. How you heard it when you were six. The first record you ever wanted to own. It sounded to me like you loved that song with all your heart, and you loved Joan."

I couldn't help smiling. "Still do. I dunno if I woulda gotten into singing if not for her. Really, she changed my life."

"So how would you have felt if you found out that Joan Jett thought you were a 'dumb little kid'?"

For a long moment I just sat, and blinked, and took that as a rhetorical question.

"You're lucky," Gwyn said. "You still remember how it feels to be young and love something. So you know how to respect that. You... you told me there were younger people at your show in Belvedere, right? Did you think they were dumb?"

I remembered Jennie, my "first fan". "No. I think they're sweet."

"So then what does it matter if someone else calls them dumb? You know they're not."

I sat quiet, feeling warm.

Gwyn went on. "I don't agree with this business of judging music by who likes it. In a different time and place, there was music that was dismissed as 'trash' or 'sinful' because black people liked it. That isn't right."

I glanced over for a second. "Yeah, I get that."

"Remember: Devlin told us at the beginning that we were trying to reach younger listeners. I've kept that in mind with everything I've done here. I try not to dumb my arrangements down for them, but also not to write ideas that are over people's heads. I try to choose songs that I feel are genuinely good ones. I...."

She paused, and the light in her eyes seemed to grow stronger. "Children's hearts are so tender, and... pure. They need to be treated with care, and respect. I feel that we do that. And I'm as proud of my work with you as anything

I've ever done."

For a while, all I could do was gaze at her. I could feel my chest welling up, and in that moment I realized that Gwyneth Jones had the most beautiful soul I had ever known.

She gave me one gentle nod and said, "So does any of that help you feel better about it?"

I couldn't help smiling at her. "So much."

When she dropped me off at home, just in time for dinner, I noticed her gazing around at the trees in people's yards. "I like your neighbourhood. Always have," she said. "Especially with the trees grown in and green now, it looks so cozy." Then she looked at me. "Do you like your neighbours?"

The question caught me a bit off guard. I just said, "Yeah, they're fine."

She sighed, but it didn't sound all that happy. "That must be nice," she said.

Up in my room after dinner that evening, I had a moment of what mom might call enlightenment – if I would let her. Things from my day with Gwyn were starting to pull together in my head. I realized that I had been stuck on trying to write lyrics that were literature, that would look good on paper and impress people, and it intimidated me – bad. But now, I was thinking about Joan and how grateful I was for the guidance she had given me, even though she didn't and couldn't know. About how, when I was eleven, the lyrics of "You Don't Own Me" had spoken to me, even though there was nothing especially profound or Ph.D. about them. And I realized that what I really wanted was to make something that might speak to someone else eleven out there, pure and simple and heartfelt. If I could give someone else an experience like mine, I would call it a roaring success.

So I got my notebook, put my headphones on, played "Beautiful Song", and finally words started to come. Before too long, I had something that I felt swayed along with the gorgeous melody of Gwyn's chorus:

*You, you showed me the way
To be myself and always seize the day
Thank you for showing me the way*

Like I said: not profound, not great on paper, not impressive, not literature. But it said what I felt, and someone young could grasp it.

A couple hours later, I had lyrics for the verses and the bridge that I felt were of course not great, but good enough. You reach a point where you have to be satisfied. And "Beautiful Song" was now called "You Showed Me". Subtitled "To J.J."

I hoped Gwyn thought it was good enough.

As luck would have it, I didn't need to wait long for my next singing appearance – mid-June, just a couple of weeks away. Another mall appearance, by which I was kinda disappointed but not at all surprised. (Dev called it "sticking with what works".) MIX1380 in Royal Falls was owned by the same parent company as the radio station in Belvedere. And therefore, on occasion, they were encouraged to present similar fairs at Royal Estates Mall and were planning one at that time. When Dev contacted them about getting me on their schedule, they checked with their sister station and were given encouraging feedback about me, so they agreed to try it. Once more into the breach.

Much of that engagement went the same as last time. Once again, the gig was on a Saturday afternoon, as these things are. Once again, I asked Myrna to trade with me. Once again, she did it but complained.

But this time, Dev offered to drive me. He said Royal Falls "didn't put him out so much" cuz it wasn't as far, plus he had business down there that afternoon anyway – but he promised me that he'd be there for the four-o'clock show. He said he really wanted to see for himself how I went over.

And Royal Estates, being a smaller mall in a smaller town, had fewer facilities to offer me. This time I actually did have to change in the bathroom, and I spent my breaks between sets at the food court. You can bet I was starstruck. And yes, I had to endure many looks, with maybe not quite that many laughs. I just tried to

hide in my book.

And this time the stage was smaller, and my MC was a graying, stern-looking but mellow-sounding man named Todd who wasn't curious about me – he simply did his job, and did it smoothly. And I had to leave my gym bag beside Todd's radio console. But my banner was there on the wall, and I recognized the tape machine, and I was surprisingly relieved to see that Bill Metal was there operating it. When I said hi to him, he just nodded.

Gwyn didn't make it to this show, either. Her mother was out with her car for the afternoon, and, even though Gwyn could theoretically afford to call a cab to the GO bus terminal and make it down to Royal Falls, she was having a day where that much public transit was simply too much for her to face calmly. I hated to admit it, but part of me was relieved: I still wasn't sure how comfortable I was just yet with her in the audience, watching me perform in the costume. Similar to how I had long ago made it clear to my parents that I was too embarrassed to have *them* in particular come see me at *any* show I ever did, *ever*. Just not happening. The things that bother us don't always make a lot of sense.

The first two sets went about as well as my final set in Belvedere: I felt comfortable and confident now, and I could feel some of that coming back from the smaller audience. Very few people laughed, no one threw anything. At one point I saw a photographer again, taking shots around the venue – and every time I noticed him noticing me, I burst into that embarrassed grin. That was something I might be stuck with.

When I came out for the four-o'clock show, I wasn't sure if Dev had made it back – an audience had this way of turning into a bit of a blur for me, the first minute or two I was on stage, until I got settled in. But then I noticed him at the back of a clump of maybe fifteen people, standing with his arms folded, looking all lean and mean in his black suit, but with a quietly satisfied smile.

I took my final bow to applause that was enthusiastic enough to make up for the smaller number of hands. No autograph hounds today, but I felt like I did okay. Dev came over to me while I was picking up my bag.

"Great, perfect! That was a good-size crowd for this thing, and they were listening, they were with you. I saw head nods, you got some of 'em to clap with you, I'm impressed! So c'man, go get changed, I'm takin' you out to celebrate. Chop-chop."

"Mmm-I dunno, Dev, I'm kinda beat – "

"C'man. One drink. I know a place near here. We've never had a chance to properly celebrate any of this, and you are doing so phenomenally great. You deserve it."

I sighed, "All right," and headed off to the bathroom.

"Attagirl," he called after me. "Meet me at the car."

The place Dev knew was a nondescript sports bar that wasn't quite as loud as those establishments can be. Although there was a group of guys in a booth in the back corner who would roar out "Whoa!" and then laugh, now and then. But, for the most part, I could hear myself think. We were shown to a booth in the smoking section, where Dev hung up his suit jacket and went looking for the bathroom. I just tossed my black jacket in a heap beside me. It was kinda too warm for us to be dressed this way, but here we were. Suffering for fashion.

Dev came back, lit up, and drummed his fingers waiting for us to be served. "Maybe we shoulda sat at the bar," he muttered.

I just said, "I like booths, relax."

He held out a flat hand and said, "So. Mari. I'm startin' ta think we should be lookin' into booking you into more like regular music venues. I mean, you have done so well at these mall gigs, everyone I talk to says so, you are like already ready for real stages, right? And besides, even *I* realize you can only play the malls around here so many times – "

"Brian, our server" interrupted us briefly to take our order for a Moosehead and a scotch. Dev suggested I get something harder and "celebrate properly", but I like what I like. When Brian left, I turned back to Dev and said, "I already *have* played real stages, remember?"

"*You* have – *Mariko* hasn't. But it'll happen. Sooner than I thought. Geez I got so much to do, this all really caught me off guard. But hey, it's great – every manager should have such problems, hah?" He ran a hand through his hair,

puffed harder on his cigarette, and looked around for Brian. Who showed up very shortly thereafter – while I thanked him for my beer, Dev asked him to bring another scotch. That earned a side eye from me, but hey, he's an adult. As long as he cooled it enough to drive me home. Two wasn't so bad.

I guess he was really happy with my performance, because he kept praising it and telling me how wonderful I was, and that doesn't hurt. But almost at the same time he was worrying about the best way to capitalize on this early good fortune – I don't think I had appreciated the pressures he might be under. He carried on a running monologue through his first drink, then excused himself partway through his second.

By this time I had finished my beer and debated ordering another. After the excitement of the performance, my stomach didn't really want more. I figured I'd wait for Dev to finish his and then we could go. Then he came back, sniffled and cleared his throat, and downed his scotch faster than I expected.

"We should go now, eh?" I said. "My folks are waiting dinner for me."

"Nuh-uh. Gonna get another – you should, too." He raised a hand to try and flag down service.

I frowned. "Hey, I need you to drive."

And he glared at me, not very friendly. "I will, ma. When it's time." Then his eyes softened. "This is supposed to be a celebration, I said. So let's do it right. A bit longer. I insist." And his eyes, shiny and steady on me, suggested that they expected no further argument.

I just stared at him and said nothing. If he noticed that I wasn't enjoying myself, he gave no indication of it. He managed to get Brian to come back, and ordered another round for us both, even though I said I didn't want it. Then he started babbling about how lucky it was that he met me, how I was gonna be his star, and what a wonderful girl I was. He reached forward like he was trying to touch my hand or my arm. I shrank back into the corner of the booth, but not so suddenly as to draw his attention.

Then Brian brought our drinks and Dev sat back. He took a swallow, then excused himself again. My stomach felt cold. I just wanted to go. Anywhere. I tugged my jacket on. My gym bag was still in his car. I didn't wanna leave it but I

might have to. But then I took a chance and lucked out – I checked his jacket pockets and his keys were there. I took them, went out to the car and got my bag, then came back in.

He was coming back to the booth just as I slipped his keys back into his jacket. "Hey!" he barked. "Hey hey! Whatcha doin'?"

I glared at him. "Leaving."

He brushed past me and flumped into his seat. "C'man. It's a celebration. Sit."

I just turned to go. His hand flashed out and clutched my forearm hard. If not for my jacket sleeve, it might've hurt. His mouth pinched down to almost nothing and his glassy eyes blazed up at mine. Then he said, very quiet and very clear, "I said sit."

I wrenched my arm hard enough that I pulled it free. "And I said I'm leaving."

And I left. I heard a rattling bang behind me, like someone slamming a table that had glassware on it. But I didn't look back.

I brushed away tears a few times as I trudged down the road with my bag. I couldn't exactly remember where the nearest bus stop was, but I had been in Royal Falls with my friends often enough that I knew how to get a bus to downtown where the main transit terminal was. When I got there, I took the next GO bus up to Westgate.

I was not looking forward to having to tell my folks why I was late for dinner.

Twenty-One

I made myself go in to work for Myrna the next day, but I was distracted and everyone noticed. I was thinking hard, contemplating my options.

I could get out. It'd cost me a thousand dollars to break my contract, but I could. In that respect, I was blessed, because I could come up with that thousand without too much trouble. Mom and daddy offered to lend it to me, but I told them that wasn't necessary. If they had any idea how much I had in the bank, daddy would be on me that much harder to go back to school, and I didn't need that. But I'd been working full-time for a couple years now, and the rent my folks charged wasn't all that steep, and I had no expensive hobbies or vices – it adds up. Mom said that my money was my business and we all left it at that.

But if I was brutally honest with myself, I didn't want to lose this deal. I didn't want to stop being Mariko. It felt promising to me, and I resented Dev for putting me in this situation where I had to consider giving up that future. I didn't know anyone else who could make things happen for me like he had. Or would want to. But could I keep working with him the way things were now? Could I live with myself? The answers were not as simple as I expected they should be.

I needed more time to think, and I took it. When Gwyn phoned me on Monday, I asked daddy to tell her I wasn't feeling well, which was basically true. I didn't think I could tell her about this. I didn't want to upset her, and I was afraid that if she knew what he did, she might refuse to work for him anymore. Which would mean no longer being Mariko's musical director, and again I couldn't imagine doing this without her. So for the time being I put it off, and put it off.

On Tuesday afternoon, Doris got on the store P.A. and called me to the office. I stepped into the doorway and stopped, feeling like I'd been bumped in the chest. Dev was standing in front of her, his arms hanging loose in front of him, hands folded. He looked at me with a quiet, solemn expression which made him almost unrecognizable. I expected to feel a spark of fear but there was only soft anger.

Doris said, "Mr. Knight says he needs to speak with you for a few minutes on urgent business. What do *you* say, Mari?"

"Is it okay if I take my break now, Doris? Sharra's covering my till."

Doris nodded. "Go ahead – I'll go tell Sharra to expect to be just a little longer.

Call me if you need me."

I glared at Dev for a second, then led him without a word, outside by the carts. My voice was tight from trying to keep my volume down. "What are you doing here, Dev? Stalking me?"

He glanced aside for a second and sniffled. "Look, I am trying to apologize here. How can I unless I talk to you, hah?"

"Why d- ?"

"I phoned a bunch o' times, your folks wouldn't put you on. Yesterday I went to your house. I went to your *door*. Your mom just told me not to come back."

"I didn't know."

"Now you do. So what's left? I come here."

I nodded. "Go on."

"Now, like I said before, I could just slap you down with the contract, but I don't wann- "

"I could break the contract. I have the money."

"Ah." He stopped and blinked, as if that possibility had never crossed his mind. "I want you to keep working with me because it's what you want to do."

"So?"

He looked down and rubbed the back of his neck. "Look, Mari, I.... I admit, I was awful to you that day. I don't blame you for how you feel. I just.... Look, I was stupid and skipped lunch, and all that liquor on an empty stomach hit me harder than I was ready for. Yeah, it was careless of me, I know. And then I got all.... I'm sorry. I really, truly am sorry. It will never happen again. I...."

I watched him closely. There was no sign of the wild energy that fueled his vision. No sign of the world-is-mine swagger that gave him his kingly walk. He looked and sounded humbled. I tried not to let it touch me.

He went on. "I still believe in you. I want this to happen for you. And I can still help *make* it happen for you. I want to, and I will. If you'll still let me."

I looked at him for what felt like a long time. "I probably shouldn't tell you this, but *I* still want this to happen for me, too. All right, here's how it is: no more going for a drink. No more meetings in bars. In fact, no more meetings – you phone me. If there's ever some situation where we can't avoid being in the same place, then if I catch a hint of even one drink in you, I turn around and walk. Understood?"

He held up his hand in a pledge. "I promise, I will never again have one drink in me when I am anywhere near you. I give you my word as a businessman."

Rhonda told me that that word was good enough for her, and it was probably as good as I could get. I nodded. "Then I'll explain to my parents that I'm taking your calls. Let me know when you have something. But now my break's over." And without looking back or giving him a chance to say another word, I walked, standing up straight, back into the store.

It was a while before I realized that I now had the same phone-only arrangement with Dev that Gwyn did. I wondered what might have happened between the two of them. And if I'd ever have the courage to ask her.

Gwyn called me the next night and asked if I was feeling better. I told her I was, and then gave her all the good details about the Royal Falls appearance. Then I let her know I had lyrics for our song which was now titled "You Showed Me" – and she actually squealed. She said she'd try to arrange for us to meet on Sunday afternoon to work on it. I looked forward to it – a chance to immerse myself in the things I loved about this business and forget other things.

A couple of nights later, Dev called. Somehow I was expecting him to remain in hiding a while longer. But I'd said to call when he had something, and he already did.

Happy1460 hosted a weekly half-hour TV show, *Belvedere Beat*, on Belvedere Cable where they played music videos – not that MuchMusic paid them any

mind – and tried to promote regional artists, inviting them in for interviews and brief performances from time to time. So Dev had called both the radio station and the cable studio in Belvedere, trying to get me booked for an appearance – at first with no luck. But after Royal Falls, the parent company got further word about how I went over, and both radio stations reported that people had been phoning in asking to hear me. From what I understood it was literally two people – but the stations normally received so few calls that any call was an indication of enough interest to pay attention to. So now Happy1460 was interested in booking me for their cable access show.

"They want you to do a short Q&A and two songs. This is a perfect chance to promote your single."

"I don't *have* a single."

"But we can act like you do, and then if there's enough interest, we can actually produce it. And finally *finally* I figured out which two songs. The A side, the radio side, is 'You Were On My Mind'."

"Yeah, Gwyn said you'd pick that one."

"Uh-huh, and she told me why I'd pick it, and she was right. CanCon – genius, couldn't be better. That kid's sharp. And for the flipside we go with 'Waterloo Sunset'."

"Really? That's like the slowest song in the set. I thought you'd go more upbeat and bouncy, like 'Kids Are Alright' or 'Little Red Book'." I was hoping for "Little Red Book" but never told him that.

"Yeah, well, we're goin' with 'Waterloo Sunset' cuz it's the only other song in your set that isn't dykey."

" 'Dykey'??" I'm sure I blinked loud enough for him to hear. "Whaddaya mean, 'dykey'??"

"I mean as in 'pertaining unto a dyke', *that's* what I mean. Do you never listen to the words in those songs? 'I took out every pretty girl in town'? 'Does she wanna be my steady chick'? 'I don't mind other guys dancing with my girl'? Did you pick all those out on purpose? A girl singin' all those, geez!"

"We like those songs and that's how they go – I just sing 'em. I never thought that stuff mattered." Back when I was little, I heard Joan Jett sing "I Love Rock 'n' Roll" about a boy, and "Crimson and Clover" about a girl. I always felt like you could sing about a boy or about a girl, it didn't make any difference. I always felt like you could *like* a boy or a girl, it didn't make any difference.

"Well, when ya sing it on stage and it just goes by in a rush, maybe it doesn't. But you put it on a record that little Sally brings home and plays over and over, eventually mom and dad are gonna notice, and are they gonna like that? We can't take that chance – we play it safe. So 'Waterloo Sunset'."

I sighed. "Yeah okay."

"Oh, one more thing: their TV studio isn't set up for live music, so they do lip-sync. I'll hire Gwyn to put your vocals on and do up a two-song tape for the show."

"She can do it."

"Good. I'll get back to you when I have more details about when they wanna shoot the show. Keep practisin'." He hung up.

He sounded like he had a bit more of his energy back since the store on Tuesday, but previously a strange sort of camaraderie had grown between us, and now that felt completely gone. I felt like I had lost some of the carefree joy about being Mariko, and suspected I would never get that back.

Twenty-Two

Here's how silly I can be: when the new issue of *T.C. Shopper* came out on Saturday, I checked it. But either they didn't feel that the Royal City fair was newsworthy, or they had fewer pages desperate for filler that week. In any case, I wasn't in it. So apparently my every move was not front page news after all – even though I only had one name, like Madonna and Cher.

When Gwyn and I were talking about the upcoming TV appearance face to face on Sunday afternoon, I finally got to see her squeal as well as hear it. There was a lot of vivacity in that girl that usually stayed hidden. At once she said that getting those vocals recorded was high priority for us. "But first I want to hear you sing your lyrics!" she almost gasped. "Oh gosh, I can't believe so many exciting things are coming together all at once like this! It feels like this is really happening for us!"

"Well, nothing's guaranteed yet," I said, and immediately realized I sounded like daddy. "But yeah, it is looking really promising, Gwyn."

She walked over to her stereo. "The mike and tape are both ready – get over there and show me what you got!" Once she pressed Play, she hurried back to her bench and watched me, leaning forward. And I finally sang "You Showed Me" without holding it back for the sake of my parents' ears. And at the end, I noticed Gwyn was gently wiping her eye.

"Was it okay?" I finally said.

"Oh, Mari...." She sniffed and slipped her glasses back on. "It was.... Well look: on the one hand, I said that it didn't need to be immortal poetry, and we both know that it's not." I snorted. "But you were sensitive to the music and wrote something that fits. I mean, this is a lilting, six-eight piano ballad – you don't want to call it 'Lemme Bang You, Baby', right?"

At that I just roared laughing, and she even let herself join in for a bit. She was full of surprises. When we settled, she went on. "And those words are simple and modest, but when you sing them... when you sing them, they speak from the heart. There's so much love in them. I... you did really good. That one is For The Album."

I let out a breath I wasn't aware I'd been holding. "Thank you." Then something on one of her CD shelves caught my eye, and I stopped, thinking it looked familiar. I went closer, and could see: it was my smiling picture from the shopping paper, cut out and mounted in a little stand-up frame.

A huge wash of feelings passed through me, amused and warm and soppy. I just turned to look at Gwyn.

"It took a while for me to find that article," she said. (I never thought to get a copy for her – somehow it had just never occurred to me that she might want it.) "And then a while longer to get a frame."

I tried to say something but couldn't get my voice to work.

She looked at me with a warm, steady gaze. "I really am so very proud of you, Mari," she said. "I don't tell you enough."

Now it was my turn to wipe my eye. Finally I just said, "Aw, Gwynnie."

She tried to chuckle. "We really are having a sappy day here today, aren't we? Now c'mon: do you want to get started on recording your vocals for the show? I can finish setting up my equipment for it in about fifteen minutes."

"Yeah okay. While you do that, I can tell you about some ideas I have for them...."

On Wednesday night, Dev called with an update. "So listen: *Belvedere Beat* tapes in advance and runs the show later a few times during the week, so they can be flexible about when they record it. I thought about your work schedule and let them know – they said they can do a taping at two o'clock this coming Monday the 24th. That good for you?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Good. I booked Bill to take you again – he said he wants to pick you up at one. Now make notes, I want you to remember three things for during the interview. One: be sure to mention DevilKnight Productions."

"Uh-huh."

"Two: if you get a chance, name-drop your old high school."

"Uh, howcum?"

"Cuz it makes you sound relatable, down to earth. Plus if any of the kids going there now find out about it, you might pick up a few fans."

"Yeah okay."

"And three: mention that 'You Were On My Mind' is your upcoming single, if they don't do that for ya. I told 'em, but they might forget."

"Got it."

"Awright, then yer all set. Oh yeah, remember to bring the tape." He hung up.

With summer just under way, the weather was pretty hot on Monday, so no black jacket. I was wearing only sandals, cut-offs, shades, and my bright pink Hello Kitty T-shirt as I carried my gym bag out to Bill Metal's white van at one o'clock exactly.

He nodded as I got in the shotgun seat and handed him the two-song lip-sync tape. (Today's T-shirt was Motörhead.) Then he looked at me again and said, "Hey: Hello Kitty."

I couldn't hold back a short laugh as I turned my face to him. "What, you like Hello Kitty?"

"Well yeah," he said, as if it was self-evident. And we hit the road.

The breeze from our wide-open windows whipped our hair. I noticed that the metal blasting from his player was also filled with vocal harmonies and musical twists that Gwyn might appreciate. "So who's this playing today?"

"King's X."

"Ah cool."

After several minutes of not talking, I said, "So we're gonna get there early, eh?"

"You want time to get changed. And meet people. And learn the drill so you know what you're doing."

"Knowing what you're doing is important to you, isn't it, Bill."

"Well yeah." And then more minutes of not talking.

Finally I said, "I hope you aren't getting sick of being my chauffeur."

He shrugged. "It's easy money." Then after a pause he added, "Plus you don't suck."

"Awww." I let him off the hook after that.

By around 1:30 we had arrived at the Belvedere Cable TV studio, and Bill Metal went off to help set up equipment for the taping. It was a pleasant surprise and relief to find that Lisa Michaels was the host of this episode and would be conducting my interview. We made friendly greetings, and she told me Keith said to say hi, to which I just nodded. Then she introduced me to her cameraman, George, a striking, dark-haired guy with a sweet smile and killer jawline. Lisa explained that I'd be working closely with George during the lip-syncing segments. I felt confident I could handle that.

"Are you nervous about being in front of cameras?" Lisa asked me.

"Well, I've never done it before – I think I might be a little."

"First off, we don't broadcast live, but we don't have the time or budget to re-shoot, so we basically shoot live anyway. We just start and keep going til we're done, so be ready for that.

"If it helps any, the first-run viewership of this show is usually around a hundred, so it's not like you're in front of a stadium crowd. Gosh, it seems like I'm always

telling you how small-time my job is, doesn't it." And we both made a polite little laugh. "But just relax, don't ever worry about things like looking into the cameras or anything, just look at me. You're just going to be sitting in a little room, just chatting with me. Sound all right?"

"I guess, thanks." I held up my bag. "Is there someplace I can change?"

Lisa held her fingertips up to her lip. "Oh yes, that's right. Ummmm... I'm sorry, Mariko, I think you're gonna need to use our bathroom for that." Her mouth made a wry twist.

"Just point me," I said. "I've got experience with this."

When I came back out in my stage costume, I was sent over to George, who was waiting, with headphones on and a portable TV camera on his shoulder, near a tiny nook with a mike stand.

"Here's how we do it," he said with a cordial grin. "Your mike isn't live, but you can just treat it normally. You can actually sing instead of just mouthing silently if you like – it doesn't matter cuz none of it will get picked up on our audio. Those two big cameras there will be running throughout your song, and I'll be using this to move around and get close up and take those arty shots that we all adore." He winked and, I admit it, I giggled shamelessly. "Then after, we cross-fade all those shots together in the edit and make you look all music-video-ey. So just pretend I'm not here and be a singer."

I looked over and saw Lisa giving me a little nod from a small room off to the side, barely big enough for two chairs, where two other cameras waited. Everything here was so much smaller than things look on TV. "I'll give it my best shot," I said, willing my stomach to stay still.

"Okay, you get in position, give us the nod when you're ready, and we'll go."

I only needed a few seconds to breathe and lick my lips before I nodded. Then coloured lights came on from above in places I hadn't noticed, and "You Were On My Mind" started playing from speakers in places I hadn't noticed, and I quickly got hot, and I started. I found that I felt better if I didn't sing out loud, so that I could hear my backing track better and do a better job of matching it.

Plus it gave me a better chance to hear the extra touches Gwyn and I had put into the song. Besides recording my vocals for this session, we added in a couple of layers of backing vocals as well, because this song made great use of those.

One of those backing voices was Gwyn's.

I had managed to talk her into doing that small step out of her comfort zone. To me, it sounded like she mixed her voice down a bit too quiet, but that was the only way she was willing to let it stay on the tape. As I figured, her singing voice was not strong but very sweet – not powerful enough to lead a song, but it added depth and prettiness to the overall sound. Together, we sounded plenty good enough.

I remembered to throw in a few of the smaller Rhonda moves but not too many. After a couple of lines, I was in the zone again, and smiled because I liked this song and I liked performing it.

A few times I couldn't help glancing over at George, or down at him, and whenever I did I burst into my I'm-a-dolt smile, and tried not to think about it being preserved for posterity. Maybe he'd edit those shots out.

When I was done, I didn't have a chance to breathe. George just said I did fine and then hustled me over to the chair beside Lisa. The white lights in Lisa's area were also hot. She handed me one of the glasses of water on a tiny table between us and said, "Take a second to get settled and we'll go." I had a sip, set the glass down, smoothed my hair back, then nodded.

Lisa looked at one of the cameras and spoke with smooth, familiar confidence. "Taking us into our Tri-Cities segment this week was Westgate vocalist Mariko, singing 'You Were On My Mind'?" She turned to face me as she gave the title, as if asking me to confirm.

So I nodded and said, "Yes. Oh, that's my new single, too."

Lisa nodded. "I believe some of our older viewers may recognize that song."

"Yes, it – ahem – it's an oldie, but one that I like very much." *Oh god, why did I have to ahem? Oh god, don't blush.*

"Many other people like it, too. I hope it's a great success for you."

"Thank you." *Oh god, I'm grinning cuz I feel like a dolt.*

"You currently live in Westgate. Are you from there originally?"

"Oh! Yes. Born and raised there. I'm a townie, heh. Went to Westgate CVI – go Gators!" *Oh god, I did **not** just say "go Gators" on TV!*

Lisa grinned. "Now, I hear some elements of dance-pop in your sound here. Our viewers know that there's been something of a resurgence of dance music in the Tri-City area recently, with new clubs starting to open. Do you think that had any bearing on your musical direction?"

Suddenly I felt like she had sprung a pop quiz on me. What would Gwyn say?
"Uhhh... I... I know that we were trying to bring in some... contemporary sounds in our arrangement to, to help bring this song to a new audience. I would say."

She gave me a small slow nod as if to say, *Hey, you did okay there.* Then she said, "So far, you've been exposed to audiences by appearing in malls in the Tri-Cities, and comparisons to Tiffany have been unavoidable. What made you decide on this approach?"

I swallowed. "My... manager, Mr. Knight, wanted to bring my music directly to an audience that he, we, felt didn't have a music of their own, yet."

Lisa nodded. "Well, thank you, Mariko, for your thoughtful answers today. Do you have any parting words for our viewers?"

"I... Oh, I'd like to thank Mr. Knight and DevilKnight Productions for giving me the opportunity to reach out to people.... Um, that's all." *Oh god I am beyond lame.*

Lisa looked at the camera. "That's *Belvedere Beat* for this week. Thank you all for watching, and please join us next time. We're going to ask Mariko to sing us out to the break." She turned to me again. "What song will this be, Mariko?"

I could feel myself smile a little more. "This is an original composition by my musical director, Gwynnie Jones, called 'You Showed Me'."

She looked at the camera again. "Once again: Mariko, with 'You Showed Me'. Good night, everyone." Then she relaxed a little and said, "Okay, back over to George one more time. You did great."

I grinned and thanked her. And George and I repeated our earlier routine – including the big smile every time I noticed him filming me. After we finished, he said we were all done and I thought to ask him. "Is there any way I can get a tape of the show? We don't get this channel out in Westgate."

"Sure, I'd love to," George said, oozing charm. "I know Bill drives out to Westgate often enough – I'll send it out with him once the final edit is done."

"Thanks, I really appreciate it."

He nodded and then hustled off to a control room. And boom, just like that, I had survived another baptism by fire. I wondered how many of those there could be.

Twenty-Three

Gwyn phoned me that night to see how the TV taping went. It chafed me a bit that I still didn't have a number where I was free to call her, but I understood that her parents were particular about some things, and this was her environment at this time. Still, I wasn't fond of that restriction.

She expressed some regret that we couldn't watch the show out here in Westgate, but then consoled herself by sharing what seemed to her like a wonderful idea. Her parents were going away for the upcoming Canada Day weekend, to their cottage in the Muskokas. She turned down their invitation to go along – and hearing this made me aware that I had built up a very harsh picture of them in my mind, because I wasn't assuming that they would ever take her anywhere, or even ask. Then again, I had very little to go on: I had seen her mother maybe twice, just in passing through the house. I had never seen or heard her father – but she assured me he existed.

Her wonderful idea was that I come to her house after work on Saturday and stay for the rest of the long weekend. We'd have so much time to work on songs and record, without having to watch the clock and without fear of getting in her parents' way. It sounded like an extra-long slumber party, but with musicians. I really liked the sound of this, too – I was up for it. I got her to hang on for a sec while I checked with my folks that I wasn't forgetting any prior commitments. They gave me the all-clear – I didn't really expect them to have any objections. So I got back on the line and confirmed with Gwyn that we were go for the weekend.

This felt like an upbeat conclusion to an upbeat day. And those were always welcome.

At work on Wednesday, Myrna came to me and asked if I'd be willing to trade her again, Saturday for Sunday, so she could have two days off in a row for the long weekend. Normally I would say yes, especially because I owed her after those last couple of times, but I had to tell her I already had plans to be away Sunday. (Not *that far* away, true, but still.) She seemed disgruntled but not surprised. Feeling a little guilty, I volunteered to trade her for the August holiday weekend instead. She said she'd let me know, and went off to try and make a deal with someone else. I hoped she managed to – for my sake as much as

hers.

When I got home after work, I noticed a package stuffed into the mailbox, carelessly so that the lid didn't close. I knew that daddy would've brought the mail in by now, so this must've been put there after Canada Post delivered. I took hold of it and found that it was something soft, wrapped in newspaper ads and clear tape. No postage or address on it. Someone had taken a red marker and scrawled "Mariko" on it – with a little heart over the "i".

It wasn't immediately obvious to me where this might've come from. Curious and a little suspicious, I brought the package inside and tore the paper off. Inside was a tiny pair of short-shorts, about preschooler size, covered in cheap pink sequins – it looked like the sort of thing you could pick up in a dollar store. Then I found that, across the backside, someone had crudely stuck down strips of black hockey tape to spell out the words BUY ME.

My best guess was that this was another AliCat Incident. I figured that word had gotten around town about the Royal Falls gig by now, and that had put me fresh into their minds again. I just shook my head, sighed, and dumped the whole thing into the garbage bin out back. Part of me was saying that this showed more creative effort than they ever put into their music. I chided myself for being catty.

But didn't feel all that guilty about that.

As I was coming downstairs for dinner, there was a knock at the front door. Since I was right there, I got stuck answering it. And just as well, since it was for me: it was Bill Metal, holding a VHS tape. (For those of you keeping score, today's T-shirt was Judas Priest.) He handed the tape to me and said, "George told me to bring you this."

"Thank you, Bill," I said. "I take it this is the show I was on?"

"Well yeah."

"Well, I appreciate you going out of your way for me like this."

He shrugged. "I was coming into town anyway." Then he turned and trudged out to his white van.

I set the tape down next to the TV, then went into the kitchen where mom and daddy were just starting to eat. When I told them who and what that was at the door, they perked up. "Ooo when can we see it?" mom said.

"Never?" I said. "*I'm* not even gonna look at it until neither of you guys is home!" With that, I turned and left the table even before I sat down.

As I returned to the living room, mom called out after me, "Oh, honey, don't be like that! Where are you going?"

"Just a minute," I called back. I picked the tape back up and went upstairs to hide it in my room. I wasn't gonna leave it lying around and possibly give them any clever ideas. As I came back downstairs, it occurred to me that, given how seldom they were both out at the same time, I might not see my appearance on TV for months. No one appreciates how tough it is, being a rock star.

Just after I finished eating, Dev called. Mom looked mildly displeased as she handed me the phone. The folks weren't overjoyed that I had chosen to continue working with him, but I explained my reasoning and they respected my wishes. They are okay, really, when it comes right down to it.

"What's going on, Mari," he said, then he snorflled horribly.

"Geez, Dev, have you got another cold already? How many is that this year?"

He cleared his throat. "Forget that, it's just my allergies, they're really bad this year, quit changin' the subject. What happened to the song?"

"What?"

" 'Waterloo Sunset'. I said you were doing 'You Were On My Mind' and 'Waterloo Sunset' – to promote the single. Sound familiar?"

"Yeah. I had a better idea."

"You what you – hey-hey listen. *I'm* the one who has ideas, *you're* the one who *does* them. That's how this works. Where you been all this time, hah?"

"Dev, look, I thought this might be my only chance to push Gwyn's song, it's so good – "

"And yeah hey-hey! What's up with that? I never hired her to write that!" He sniffed sharply, then said, "Are you guys still workin' together?"

"Yeah, we have been – "

I heard a little choke, then he said, "I ain't payin' for that! Don't you go get– "

"No one asked you to, Dev. We're just doing this because we both want to." Then I sighed.

"Nnnn... awright then – just so's we're clear, hah? Geez, now I gotta go around worryin' about you guys goin' behind my back..." More sniffs. Those allergies sounded rough.

"Look," I said, " 'Waterloo Sunset' is just gonna be the flipside of the single, you said. The side no one listens to, it's not the side that sells it or gets on the radio. Gwyn's song is soft and pretty, just like it – hers fits in just as well. And *it's* not dykey *either*."

"Well yeah thank god for that, at least."

"So no harm done," I said, trying to close what I saw as a non-issue.

"No-no, the harm is that I told you what to do. You knew what to do. And you didn't do it. I can't have you goin' around commando on me like this."

Earlier in the year, I might have been upset to know he was ticked at me, but now it mostly rolled off. "This one time, I did something for me, something that didn't do any harm. That doesn't really make any difference, if you'd just admit it. Something for me. You owe me that much."

This time I hung up on him.

When I got ready for work on Saturday morning, I packed a small bag for a couple nights' stay to take with me. Gwyn wanted to pick me up from the store after my shift so we could get started as soon as possible. I couldn't blame her for feeling keen about this weekend, because I was, too.

While I ate breakfast, mom said, "Now don't you girls go working too hard and forget to sleep. You still need your rest. And remember to stop and eat. And drink lots of water."

Daddy's eyes watched something on a different plane from us. "Man, when you're that age and you get busy with music, you have all the energy in the world – what a rush. You can get by with like two hours sleep and not even notice – " Then he blinked and actually saw me, and added, "Not that I'm saying you should! Listen to your mother!"

They saw me off at the front door, gave me good-luck hugs, told me to have a good time. Mom said to tell Gwyn that they said hi. She didn't need to remind me that they were hoping to meet her someday. But I knew by now that, in some things, you just had to be patient with Gwyn. She knew her own mind and her own heart. Better than I knew mine, sometimes.

I didn't quite miss my bus.

Twenty-Four

When I got into Gwyn's car after work, the first thing I noticed was that she was wearing a sundress, a pale blue floral print. It was certainly hot enough for one – I was only in T-shirt and cut-offs myself, after changing out of my work uniform. I guess, for me, it stood out because it was a much more relaxed way of dressing than I usually saw with her. I suspected this had something to do with *The Folks Are Away*. But I didn't want to mention anything about it and make her self-conscious. I was just happy to see her breathing a bit easier.

As she got onto the road and headed north, she said, "Have you given any thought to what you wanted to get done with all this time we're going to have?" She glanced over at me. "Knowing you, I'd be very surprised if you haven't."

I decided to get right to my point. "Yes – I want us to practise playing our material together live." Most of our time previous to this, we had spent putting new arrangements together and recording them for me to sing over. Therefore she was playing and overdubbing separately from my singing. "I want you to get ready to go on stage with me."

"Oh." She chuckled softly, without taking her eyes off the road. "That wasn't my first guess for what you'd say. And yet, it doesn't surprise me as much I'd expect, either." I watched her blink a few times. "Annnnd... it's something I don't want to talk about or think about while I'm trying to drive." She glanced at me and grinned. "So I'm declaring a change of subject."

"Change of subject." I nodded. "So! How 'bout them Jays, huh?"

I loved when I could make her laugh.

The first thing I said, once we took our customary seats in Gwyn's music studio, was "I love that you have central air!" And I sprawled wide in my soft chair to emphasize my comfort.

She looked honestly surprised. "Don't *you*?"

"Nope – our house is pretty old."

"Oh." She thought for a second, then added, "I still think your place looks cozy, though."

"I guess it is, enough. Most of the year." I took a sip from my bottled water. "But, now that you're not driving, what do you think?"

She took her glasses off and set them on top of her keyboard. "Well.... I really have been thinking about what you said before. About not needing to worry about the people who'd be watching. And I understand what you mean when you tell me about it being worse for you, when someone who matters is out there. I get all that... and it makes me feel like you get me, at least some. Like I said."

"I try to, yeah."

"But lately, there's been something else, too. When you come back after a show, and you tell me about it... I can see the energy in you, just from remembering it. It's like an uplifting experience for you. That makes it seem attractive to me. And I.... I'm not sure how to put this, let me think." She thought. "I'm starting to realize that you're actually in a position of power when you're up there. You have something they want. You don't really have anything to be afraid of when you're there.... Well, except maybe for flying Timbits, I guess."

I giggled. "Actually, yeah, that's not a bad way of looking at it, really. I guess I *am* feeling a bit more of that as I go along."

"So when I think of doing that, when I think about being in front of people in a position of power – then it doesn't seem so bad."

I sat up straighter. "You mean it's a yes?"

"It's a maybe. I'm starting to think I'd like to try it. For you. I'd never do it alone, and I can't imagine doing it with anyone else. But I might like to, for you." She reached for her glasses and put them back on.

"Oh Gwyn, that would be so fantastic! But only if you're sure, okay?"

She smiled and blushed a little. "I'll never be sure, so don't go asking that. But... I *want* to say yes, Mari. Finally. But a part of me is saying, what happens if I get there and it turns out I just can't? Sometimes that happens. I mean, I'm used to

dealing with that when it comes up, but what do *you* do?"

I looked down and drummed my fingers on my knee while I thought. Then I looked up at her. "How about this? We do up a tape for the set, just like you would do anyway, and we bring the tape machine as back-up. Then if you find you can't go on, you don't have to – we just slap that on and I do the show the same way I've been doing. Does that help?"

She raised her eyebrows a bit. "Some, yes. Thank you. But I still want to think about it a while – is that all right?"

"Yes, of course it is, Gwynnie. But, uh, how about we work on some live playing anyway, just for fun? Can we start with "I Love Rock 'n' Roll"? We've already done that one, I know you got it down – and you have fun with it, don'tcha?"

She giggled. "Yeah, I do." She got busy turning on and adjusting her instruments while I set the mike up. And then we rocked.

And look at me, Rhonda, I'm doin' the overhead clap.

We played a couple more songs before taking a break to go into the kitchen and get some dinner. Just sandwiches, with melon for dessert, cuz we were both lazy. While we ate, I tried again to get her to see how cool and legit it would be for us to both be up there, giving the people some live music. How she didn't have to worry about being up front and the centre of attention, how much fun it would be, how once you get up there and doing it you don't worry about anything –

"Maybe that's how it works for *you*," she said around a piece of melon. "What if it's not like that for me?"

"Only way to know is try it and find out," I said, trying to look sly.

She swallowed, then looked at me and said, "You can be a real pest." But the way she looked when she said it made it feel like a pest was the best thing a person could be.

We spent a few more hours doing songs together. Gwyn's biggest challenge was that she had three instruments to tend to. The drum tracks for our songs were already programmed in, back when she recorded my backing music, but she needed to remember which program, and then call it up. And then both synthesizers needed to have their presets adjusted to produce the sounds she wanted. She'd have to do this for each song, and on stage she'd need to be able to change those settings between songs fairly quickly. But she figured that she could get it down with a little practice. Of course I had no doubt of that at all. As far as I was concerned, she was a genius.

She kept emphasizing that we were just doing this for fun and she hadn't said yes yet.

It was finally dark when we stopped for another break and headed for the kitchen. It was easy to forget just *how* dark til I looked out her living room window as we walked past. Out here in the boonies, there were almost no lights but the stars. One streetlight down the county road. I could maybe see one lit window from another house, but it looked miles away. So different from what I was used to.

We sliced off some banana bread – which she had baked herself and it was great – and settled for instant coffee. Still lazy. At one point I noticed she had fallen quiet and was just looking into her cup – she seemed a bit subdued.

"Hey," I said, "are you okay? I've noticed you getting a bit quiet and far away a few times tonight."

She looked up at me with a gentle start. "Oh! Sorry. I.... I got a bit distracted, yes."

"Yeah?" And I just waited.

She sighed, and took her glasses off and set them beside her plate. "I sort of didn't want to tell you about this, I didn't want to concern you, but.... yeah. I, I got my final grades a few days ago. I failed the semester." She rubbed between her eyebrows with a fingertip.

"Oh." This genuinely surprised me. I had just always felt that she would have to be a brilliant student, somehow. "This is for paralegal, right?" She nodded. "I'm

sorry, Gwyn."

She swallowed. "I, I wouldn't mind so much, really, if I thought that was going to be the end of it? But I know what's going to happen – it happened before. Father will go down there to the program office and the academic office and ask for special consideration for me and get me reinstated." She looked down and talked to her cup. "I don't know what he does – does he pay them? I don't want to know. Just thinking about it makes me cringe. And then it starts all over again."

"Is this stuff too hard for you?" I asked – but I think she could tell by my tone that I expected the answer to be "no".

She shook her head but kept talking to her coffee. "I could do it if I tried, but I don't – I just can't make myself."

"Well yeah, I got the impression that you weren't really into it – "

She whispered to her cup, "I hate it."

For a second my chest tightened. "And you've told him this."

She nodded, and then finally looked at me again, her eyes bright. "I am either going to be seen being a legal secretary in his firm, or I will be seen trying to become one. Just so long as I am making something of myself. Presentable to his friends and colleagues."

I slowly shook my head. "Gwynnie, I am so sorry. I feel like *I'm* getting hassled when daddy bugs me about going back to school, but nothing like *this*."

"It's different for you, I know." She swallowed again. "Every time I see you talk about your father, I always get the feeling that you're close to him."

"Well yeah. I love him. And my mom."

Gwyn's voice broke as she said, "That must be nice." And then she let out a soft little wail, and her eyes overflowed, and she lowered her head.

"Oh Gwynnie." I stood up quick and in a step I was standing by her side. My arm went around her shoulders and I cradled her head to me. I could feel her

shoulder shaking in my hand – it felt as wide as it looked the first day I saw her. She let her sobs get louder, muffled a bit by my shirt. "Gwynnie, please, it's okay."

She was tall enough that, even when she was seated, I still had to lift my chin a little to rest it on her head. I was whispering now. "Shhhh... please don't cry, Gwynnie.... shh, shh..."

I stroked her hair, as gently as I could, and then I snuggled my cheek on top of her head. Her hair smelled so gentle and sweet. "Shhhh... please, Gwynnie...." Her arm reached out around me to hold me. It felt firmer and stronger than I would have expected.

I turned my face and kissed the top of her head and then I knew. Still whispering. "Shh, shh... don't cry, baby... oh my Gwynnie, please...."

I could feel her settling, sniffing quiet now, not trembling anymore. And I moved the hand that was on her hair, and just nudged a fingertip under her chin – her face lifted itself up toward mine.

And I leaned down and kissed her. Not long, but so soft and so sweet, and I felt like my heart had never pounded so hard. For only a second she looked at me with her brilliant pale eyes, but it felt longer. I carefully brushed away one of her tears. And then her arm slipped from around me and her fingers reached up to my cheek, and she lifted her face up to mine for another kiss. A longer one.

Twenty-Five

When I woke up, the blackout curtains in Gwyn's room gave me no clue what time it might be. She was already up. Her clock said it was just before eight. Normally I would want to sleep a bit later on Sunday morning, but not today. This morning already had a glow about it, and I didn't want to miss any of that.

Eventually I found my panties and T-shirt, slipped them on, and timidly stepped out onto the glossy floor of the hallway. I was sure I caught the smell of bacon, faint and far off. I padded along to the kitchen quickly, hopefully.

When I reached the kitchen entrance, Gwyn was standing at the stove, her back to me. She wore a thin, mint-green robe that almost touched the floor – sometimes I caught a hint of her hips moving under it, when she shifted. A very soft sizzle came from where she worked. I saw two places set at the table, close together, with a small glass of OJ at each one. Then she reached out to the side, a spatula in her hand, and set a fresh pancake onto a small stack of them, on a plate on the counter.

I heard her, very softly, to herself, singing "You Showed Me".

And I quickly cupped my hands over my nose and mouth, and let out a sudden, loud sob. She turned quickly when she heard it, and walked fast over to me, while I felt my eyes spill over. "Mari?" And then it was her turn to cradle my head to her. "Mari, what's wrong?"

I shook my head. "Nothing," I croaked into her robe. I sniffed and pulled back a little to wipe my eyes, feeling the outburst already starting to pass. "Nothing, I... " I looked up at her and made myself smile. More tears tried to come but I blinked them back. "This... this is the first time anyone ever did something like this for me. It's just so wonderful, I...."

She gave me a gentle smile of relief and kissed the top of my head. "It's just pancakes – "

"It's *not* just pancakes! I smell *bacon!*"

That made her giggle. "I'm keeping it warm in the oven. I was going to come get you in just a minute. Just need to make a couple more. Come sit." She stroked my cheek. "Mari. You gave me so many firsts, I'm really happy I was able to give

you one."

For a few seconds we just smiled and gazed into each other's eyes. Then my sweet, romantic moment popped – I really, really needed to pee.

Over breakfast, our conversation was soft and slow, murmuring. Sometimes we talked about music, sometimes we talked about the night, sometimes we didn't talk much. The food was of course wonderful. When I found out the OJ was fresh-squeezed, I almost teared up again. I can be such a dolt.

I finished eating last, and took my dishes to the sink. I came back behind Gwyn, still sitting with her coffee, and started rubbing her shoulders, then just caressing them. She let her head gently rest back against me.

"You really do have such broad shoulders," I said, still murmuring low.

"Uh-huh." She tipped her head back to look up at me. "Is that all right?"

"Uh-huh." I kissed the tip of her nose, and kept rubbing her shoulders.

"It's from swimming."

"Really?"

"Uh-huh. The doctor says I should, so I do. Quite a bit, really."

"I did not know that."

"It is true. We have a pool down in the basement."

"Really?"

"Uh-huh." She glanced aside, then back up at me. "Wanna go for a swim? After we digest, I mean."

I shrugged. "I don't have a bathing suit."

She smiled. "Well... you don't have to have one."

I hadn't been to a pool in years, but the warm humid air, the bright echoes, the chlorine smell, were all vividly familiar. We dropped our towels at the side and lowered ourselves down the little metal ladder. "I have never been skinny-dipping before," I called to her.

"I haven't, either," she said, treading water for a moment. "Another first for both of us."

"But you have all this opportunity!"

She shook her head. "I never come down here when I'm in the house alone – it doesn't feel safe. And I wouldn't do this if my parents were home. I just wouldn't dare." I guessed I could understand that.

She glided off smooth and quiet to swim some lengths. I stayed in the four-foot end, floating and paddling around a little. I wasn't much of a swimmer, but to me Gwyn looked quite accomplished and confident.

Sometimes I watched her, sometimes I just watched the ceiling and the lights. The warm water on my skin was a dreamy, delicious sensation. At one point, when she was coming closer, I ducked under for a second just to watch her. Her body floating in the unearthly light looked like magic – it was as beautiful as her soul.

I could feel my hair plastered to my head when I came back up. Gwyn called over to me, "You're just staying in the shallow end?"

I treaded the water awkwardly. "I don't really swim. I just like the water."

She swam over close to me. "Maybe I could teach you."

"Maybe. Not today, but maybe someday."

She drifted back a little ways, looking at me, then stood and stepped toward me. So I stood, too. We were almost touching. She looked down at me, her hair slicked down and glossy, water streaming off her shiny shoulders. And she said, "Yes."

I blinked. "What yes?"

"Yes, I will play with you. On stage."

I could feel my biggest grin. "Oh, Gwynnie! This will be so fantastic, you'll see!"

"When I look at you, I really feel like it will be."

And, after another first for both of us, we got out, got our towels, went to shower and dress, and then we spent hours working on our live show. The music still meant so much, to both of us. I was so glad that hadn't changed.

I remember going out to the kitchen that afternoon to get another water, and when I was heading back, I saw Gwyn with my travel bag. Last night we had dropped it in one of the guest rooms when we first got in. Now she was taking it to *her* room.

She paused, looked at me, and said, "Right?"

I nodded. "Right."

That evening, we lay together in the dark, and she held me while I got my breath back. I ran feather-soft fingers down her arm and said, very low and quiet, "I wish I could stay here."

She kissed my hair. "I wish that, too."

"It's going by so fast."

"It is," she said.

"But at least we made use of every minute – we got so much done."

I could feel her nod. "Yes, we did. And we still have some time to do more."

"How much, again?"

"I ought to have you on your way home by noon tomorrow. My parents will be back sometime in the afternoon, they said."

"Coming back from up north on the holiday weekend? I don't think they have a chance," I said with a grin.

"Never underestimate my father." She kissed my hair again. "When he says he will be home in the afternoon, then he is home in the afternoon. He will leave before dawn if he has to, to make that happen."

I just lay there, then, to listen to a few of her breaths. Then I made a soft giggle and said, "You said yes."

"M-hm. I did." I lifted my head to turn and watch her face while she spoke. "Something about you makes it easy for me to say yes to you."

I gave her a short kiss, then said, "Y'know, I really am very proud of you. I don't tell you that enough."

She gave me a mock scowl. "Didn't *I* say that to *you* before? Are you taking my lines?"

"But it's a good line – it works. I thought maybe we could share."

She nodded. "We can share." And then she hugged me closer, with her surprising strength, and we kissed. After a moment, my lips found their way to her neck.

We woke earlier on Monday morning, eager – if not desperate – to squeeze the most rehearsal and life into our last few hours here that we could. But the time came, sooner than we wished, when I was packing my bag, double-checking that I didn't leave anything behind, and our talk grew tired-sounding, with longer silences. I had this strange feeling like I had been wearing a new life, an away-on-vacation life, the last two days, and now it was time to put my old life back on. And somehow that life now felt too small, as if it had shrunk, or I had grown.

We stopped at the door into the garage for a long hug. Then, a bit solemn, we got into the car, pulled out, and headed south. The drive home felt strange, as if the fields we passed didn't look the same as before. For a while neither of us spoke.

Finally I dared. "Gwyn... what happens if you don't go back?"

"What?"

"To school. What happens if you tell your dad that you aren't gonna do it?"

"I have to. He'll insist."

"Sweetie, you don't have to do anything just because a man insists."

"Well, I...." She just trailed off.

"So if he insists and you still don't do it. You dig your heels in."

"I don't know. I've always been afraid to try."

"Well, now you're learning to do things you were afraid to try. So what can he do about it?"

"I don't know."

She was starting to sound a bit upset, and I thought I might be pushing too hard. Then I had a thought I didn't like. "Gwynnie, has he ever hurt you?"

She glanced over at me and I could see she was blinking fast. "Never physically, if that's what you mean." Then she watched the road again.

"Okay, never mind," I said, backing off for now. "I'm just thinking out loud here. Maybe tucking some ideas into the back of your head for later."

She nodded. "All right." She took a breath, then added, "I recognize that you're trying to help me. Thank you."

"You're welcome." And then we fell silent for a while and let the fields flow by us and gradually grow into neighbourhoods.

Finally she said, "Mari?" Then she paused long enough that I wondered if that was all. "Do you think we've made things weird between us? Are, are we going to be all right?"

I gave that a moment of serious thought, to be sure that I knew what I felt before I answered. And then I smiled. "I don't feel anything weird about us, Gwynnie. We are gonna be fantastic."

Gwyn blushed and said, "I think so, too."

"And I'll tell you this, too," I added. "That is another first for me."

She smiled and I could see her beautiful teeth. "I am getting good at that!"

"The best," I said.

Twenty-Six

I was pretty distracted at work the next day. I kept thinking about being with Gwyn, and wanting to be again. And trying to tell myself that something like this happening didn't actually mean that my whole world was changed. That I needed to be cool, not get crazy. All the other stuff in my life still needed to get done. I tried to focus on doing it.

At home after work, I realized that I spent the whole evening wishing that she'd call. I watched TV, and practised our songs, to take my mind off it. She didn't call. She normally wouldn't, so soon after seeing me. Back when we first started working and talking together, I told her that we didn't need to live in each other's pockets. Now I was telling that to myself.

Wednesday was basically a repeat of Tuesday. Same racing thoughts, same quiet phone. But I was starting to settle, and actually starting to believe that life was returning to normal, and it was okay that it did that.

But when daddy called me to the phone on Thursday night and told me it was Gwyn, my heart made a little jump before I went downstairs. When I got on the phone, I limited myself to just saying a warm friendly "hi".

"Hi," she said. "Um, I hope you aren't upset that I didn't call before now. I wondered if I was supposed to."

"You, uh, you just do what you want, Gwyn."

I heard her take a breath. "What I want... is for us to keep being us. I... I know some things have changed now, but I don't want everything to."

"I get that," I said. "I want that, too."

"That helps," she said. "I... I need to go very slow. I don't want things to get scary. I still need my space. I'm still me."

"That's good. That's exactly what I want."

I heard a little chuckle. "Are you sweet-talking me?"

I chuckled back. "Trying. Just a little. Is that okay?"

"Now and then, yeah. I do kind of like it. But... but I'm not ready to be in each other's pocket every day or anything like that, like you said before. We should just keep living our lives. I need that."

"I understand." Hearing that she was okay with doing things that way made it easier for me to do it.

"But that doesn't mean I don't think of you. Or that I'm forgetting about the weekend, because I'm not. I won't ever. And I don't have any regrets. And the next time a chance like that comes along, we take it."

"Any chance your folks are going to the cottage for the *August* long weekend?"

She gently laughed. "They haven't mentioned anything about that so far."

"Dang," I said. For all this time, living at home hadn't really interfered with my life all that much, but this week I felt it. "But, we're good, right?"

"We are very good, Mari."

After I got home from my late shift on Friday, I was near the phone when it rang. When Dev heard it was me who picked up, he launched right in with no preamble. "How long will it take you to put together a forty-five minute set?"

"A what?"

"You got fifteen now, add thirty more to that, how long?"

"Wh— I don't know! What's the — "

"Three weeks? That should be lots, hah?"

"Slow down, Dev! Is there some rush here?"

"Aw man, you don't know what's been happenin' since that cable show!"

"Well how about you tell me, then?"

And, a bit scattershot and babbly and snuffling through his allergies, he did tell me. The interview segment ran shortly after we taped it, and it picked up normal ratings for that show, about as expected. Then, they re-ran it several times through the week – again, standard procedure for this show and this station.

The ratings for the first rerun went up. Not fantastically, not even big enough to sound noticeable, just a handful – but for the ratings on the rerun to do anything but fall was almost unheard of. This made the cable company, and their parent company, pay attention. The ratings for further reruns of my segment fell, but not quite as far as usual. They noticed this, too.

Then the station decided to try pulling the song sections out separately, to create their own Mariko music videos, and added them to their music video library. They got played a few times during music video shows, because CanCon. Once or twice, when "You Were On My Mind" got played, someone phoned the station. Not overnight stardom, but small indicators of a bit more interest than an unknown usually received.

So now the station wanted to run with this a little, just to see what would happen – and also help meet their CanCon quota at the same time. They were talking about shooting a forty-five-minute concert for *Belvedere Beat*, which could then be edited and rerun at will as a one-hour special. They wanted me to sing at Belvedere Mall again – sticking with what works – and they'd promote it as them also supporting our cause of "taking the music to the people".

"They said the 27th would work for them to set this up," Dev went on. "That's three weeks. Tell me you can do it. You 'n' Gwyn have been working on new stuff already, you said, right?"

"Wait-wait," I said. "The 27th is Saturday, isn't it?"

"Yeah?"

Not Saturday again – I wasn't sure if my luck at work would hold. "Can't they make it Sunday?"

"Saturday is mall day, Mari, everyone knows that. They want a crowd for this thing."

Live concert on TV. Just cable access, just twenty people would watch it, but it was still a live concert on TV. "Tell them yes."

"Great! I'll pay Gwyn to do up the extra songs – "

"Wait Dev wait!"

"Wha-what?"

I took a deep breath. "Gwyn's gonna play on stage with me for this. I want the music to be live."

He huffed and snorted. "What part of this don't you get? Do we have a budget for musicians? Told'ja before – no. So no live music. What's so hard?"

"Not even – " I stopped myself. "What if it doesn't cost you anything?"

"What, *you* gonna pay her?"

"If I need to." And I could.

"Pfff! Then in that case you can do what ya want. Seems like you're doin' more o' that lately anyhow – guess I'm lucky ya didn't just spring it on me this time, hah?"

I swallowed. "The station will need to know so they know how to set up the stage and the sound. So tell them."

"Awright, I will. Sometimes, sometimes I think you forget who's drivin' this car." He hung up.

When I went to Gwyn's to rehearse on that Sunday afternoon, I knew that she would flutter for a while when I ran the idea by her about playing her first gig in front of TV cameras. What I didn't know was that she would be able to reason herself back down to cautiously accepting it, as fast as she did. She could reframe the situation in her mind as her, in a position of power, in front of a small group of people she didn't worry about, but now with a few pieces of electronic equipment thrown in. It wasn't always easy to predict what would bother her – or

not. (I like to think that part of what convinced her was me pointing out a hidden advantage to the presence of TV cameras: in this case, the fact that George might be operating one of them. "I think you'll like George," I told her. "He carries himself well.")

We took stock of our situation. Any song that we had backing tracks down for, Gwyn already knew how to play – for her, it was just a question of getting them down in a live-performance environment. We already had over a dozen, so filling the timeslot would not be a problem. But she felt that our repertoire so far was a bit heavy on ballads for a live set – ideally, she wanted us to learn a new, upbeat number for it. We decided on "Accidents Will Happen," and she promised she'd have an arrangement down for it by the next time we got together. "Practise it at home this week," she said. I was gonna practise *everything* at home this week.

Counting today and the next two Sundays, we'd have from ten to twelve solid hours to work on all this. She felt that we could manage it easily in that time – I decided to trust her judgment. And if we could squeeze in an extra session on a Monday to run through the set a few times, all the better. If, on any of those days, Gwyn couldn't borrow her mother's car, I was sure I could wheedle some transportation out of my folks, for something this important.

So, reassured that we could be ready, that we could do this, we got down to serious work becoming a band. During breaks, though, when we stopped for rest and water, I spent less time in the big soft chair and more sharing the piano bench.

On Tuesday morning I went into the office at Calder's to talk about booking the 27th off. I didn't feel right about bothering Myrna again, especially so soon after me telling her no when she asked. I figured I should just try to use one of my vacation days if they'd let me. With this much advance warning, they might not mind. But I was prepared to call in sick that day if I needed to. I hoped it wouldn't come to that – I'd never done that to them before, in all this time, except when I honestly *was* sick. But this was really important to me. Crucial.

Doris hemmed and hawed. We all knew that Saturday was always our busiest day of the week, and she never liked to authorize time off on Saturdays. When I told her why I needed it, she sat there, saying nothing, tapping her pen on her desk for a moment.

Then she opened up her schedule binder to record the day. "Okay, Mari, this once. I can see that this is a big deal. At least it's not a long weekend. And maybe I can call someone in to cover, with a little luck, I dunno." Then she looked up at me and grinned. "Gonna be on TV again, huh? Gosh, Mariko, can I have your autograph?"

I laughed. "C'mon, Doris, you get it every week on my timesheet." That made her cackle. But she had a *happy* cackle – I liked it.

I heard from Dev a couple of times during the next few weeks as he worked out more details about our itinerary and logistics, arranging transportation for me and Gwyn and her equipment, how much set-up time the cable people told us to allow, who we should expect to see there, etc. He didn't sound well – I felt like the pressure of this gig had him on edge.

He soon revealed that it wasn't just the gig. The pop stations in the Tri-Cities had called him, asking if maybe we had the single for them to play. The parent company wasn't ready to add me to the official playlist, but the stations had the odd local-events timeslot they could squeeze me into now and then. And a few people had called.

And so he spent a while flitting around different subjects with me: what formats to release the single in, and how many to press, and who could do it, and who was cheaper, and who did a good job, and he knew a guy at a label who might help him with info about this, and oh yeah maybe we should be sending demos to the labels, but which ones, or maybe just all of them, or hey maybe just create our own indie label and release it ourselves, save us some time, oh and publication rights and SOCAN.... it made me dizzy to listen to him.

And finally he took a breath, and a moment to show that he was making an attempt to be considerate. "In the interest of full disclosure and fair play," he announced, "I'm givin' you the heads-up that I will be there on the 27th."

I just gave him a flat "Okay".

"Yeah, the producer said sumthin about maybe wanting to interview me for a little clip for the show. I mean, we can just keep our distance if ya want."

"I might want, yeah," I said. After a second, I added, "Just remember our deal, Dev. If you don't want me to walk. Cuz I will."

"Oh, I remember. I'll even let ya sniff me if ya want, ma." And guess what he did then.

Twenty-Seven

When the big day came, I woke up before my alarm. Mom seemed kinda surprised to see me already up and eating when she came into the kitchen, but daddy just gave me a nod and a little smile.

The day promised to be another scorcher, but mom insisted I wear something fancier than my cut-offs for this appearance, so that offstage I'd appear "halfway presentable" if I met "somebody important" from the TV station. I went with my light gray palazzo pants and a way-too-big white T-shirt with black block lettering on it that read CHOOSE FREEDOM. A bit too edgy for daddy still, but the air would circulate around me, so I stuck with it.

Bill Metal called me around ten to confirm. With my permission, Dev had given him my number to make it easier for us to finalize our last-minute timetable for the day. We'd already discussed it a couple of times. He would pick me up, then Gwyn and her equipment, then drive us out to Belvedere Mall for the show – he'd already arranged to bring a friend to help with moving and loading the gear. The show was scheduled to start at three – for Bill, this meant we would be there at one, so he would be at my door at noon. I found his careful attention to his work really reassuring – surprisingly so, even.

I ate a small early lunch, then just before noon said my goodbyes to the folks, grabbed my gym bag and shades, and waited out on the front step. Figured I'd save Bill Metal needing to turn the engine off. Right on time, he pulled to a stop by our sidewalk. Over the metal sounds coming from the van windows, I heard Bill say "Let Mariko have the good seat" and his friend scrambled between the front seats into the back of the van.

I got in, buckled up, and said, "Heya, Bill". (Today's T-shirt was Iron Maiden.) He nodded, shifted gears, and headed north. "Who's your friend?" I called over the music.

"Ward. We work together at the station. And we roddie together sometimes. So don't worry, he knows how to handle instruments and everything."

"I'm glad to hear that." I turned in my seat as best I could to glance back at a lean, shaggy young guy with wide eyes, sitting on one of the bench seats along the side. "Hi, Ward, I'm Mariko," I called back to him. He nodded back.

After a few seconds, Bill Metal and Ward started up an almost continuous stream of happy chatter, punctuated by hearty laughs, calling to each other across the seats. Most of the conversation was about metal, with a bit about the TV studio. I guess they got comfortable with each other after working together a while. Once or twice I tried to throw in my own two cents, but I seemed to change everything back into monosyllables and nods – soon I just sat back and let them fly.

Bill Metal had made sure to get Gwyn's address from me during one of our earlier phone calls, and now he had written directions with him, so he drove like he knew where he was going. Gwyn expected us around 12:20, and that's when the white van pulled up to her house. She opened the door for us before we could even ring the bell. By default, it fell to me to make quick introductions; then she showed the men to her studio and her equipment. I noticed she was dressed – too warm for this weather – in her navy blazer and white blouse, from my first day here.

Rock 'n' roll, Gwynnie.

She fluttered nervously around them as they made several trips out to the van and back, watching how they loaded it, absently fingering her lapel. I asked her if she wanted me to go find her some pearls to clutch. She punched my shoulder, just a play tap. (Lucky for me: that woman could give me a major bruise if she put her mind to it.) But eventually she was satisfied that these guys really did know how to take good care of her babies.

It was only as she was locking up her front door behind us that I realized that her parents weren't there to wish her luck. Were they home? Did they even know that she was playing this concert? If they did know, did it matter to them? I couldn't tell. And I counted my blessings.

We sat together on a bench seat in the back, so that the guys could talk metal up front. And so that Gwyn could keep an eye on the kids. It was cramped and bumpy but at least some breeze got through to us. And we talked about the show, nervous and excited, raising our voices above the music, all the way to Belvedere. We arrived at the mall at one o'clock.

Bill Metal directed us to go ahead to the stage area and ask for Brooke. Then he

and Ward started to unload. I led Gwyn, confident in my familiarity with this part of the building. I pointed out our dressing room – again with its ballpoint-on-letterhead signage – and we went on into the main part of the building. When we reached the stage area, I found a much greater commotion than for my last show.

The stage was larger, with a more elaborate sound system and lighting. TV cameras were mounted around the stage, surrounded by low barriers. Off to one side was an elaborate soundboard. Some curious onlookers had already gathered a little ways off, to watch the crew setting up. It all looked and felt a lot more like a Real Concert – I could feel myself buzzing inside. Even though it was still just a mall.

I spotted George the cameraman and asked him to direct us to Brooke. He brought us to a wiry, strong-jawed woman dressed much like Gwyn. We made introductions – she was the show's producer and wanted to meet us before we shot the show. She explained the schedule and process to make sure we understood what was expected of us. Since it was basically confirming what Bill Metal had already told us, we got on board with her pretty quick.

Gwyn and I wandered around the area, taking in details, watching people fuss with cords and cables and sound cabinets. Bill Metal and Ward arrived, taking the steps up to the stage and carrying the first of Gwyn's instruments. She rushed to the lip of the stage to watch them closely as they set her equipment up, then went back for more.

I heard a familiar voice off to the side, drawing closer. I looked and found Brooke approaching the stage with Dev. They were talking quietly together, looking up at the signage behind the stage, pointing at it. There were logo signs for Belvedere Cable and *Belvedere Beat*. One that said DevilKnight Productions. My Mariko banner wasn't hung yet, but I knew Bill Metal would take care of that.

Dev's face was calm, but sometimes he would roll his shoulders or stretch his neck – he seemed agitated. I knew he wanted this show to go well, as much as I did. Couldn't blame him for being nervous.

As the two of them came up beside me, he noticed me looking at him, and I realized I had been scrutinizing him, looking for telltale clues. He gave me a cool glare and muttered, "My word as a businessman." I felt a little guilty, but, when he faced away and couldn't see me, I did actually lean closer to see if I could

pick up any whiff of alcohol on him. If I smelled anything besides cigarettes, it was maybe a hint of something like nail polish remover, but no scotch that I could tell. I tried to relax.

When our guys came back with the rest of Gwyn's equipment, Bill Metal came over to Gwyn and summoned her up onto the stage to help with her set-up and sound check. She glanced at me for a second, and I said, "Go ahead, Gwyn, you're in good hands."

I could see something in her eyes click, like she suddenly realized that she was about to play in a situation where she would sound massive and impressive – from a position of power – and she was now looking forward to hearing herself roar. She went around to the stage steps to climb up and get to work.

I still had my bag in my hand, but found myself in no hurry to go back to the dressing room yet. I wanted to look around and take it all in. The sound and light systems here were even bigger and more impressive than the time Pink Rage opened for Ikiru, which was the biggest stage I ever played on. Until this.

George came over to me, now wearing his headphones and shoulder camera, to let me know that we were on in thirty. The time had flown – I didn't realize I had been browsing the area for so long. I called over to Gwyn to let her know I was going back to the dressing room to get changed.

The pile of metal AV cases had for some reason been crowded close behind the door, so I didn't have room to stand comfortably behind it and change like I did last time. I was just gonna have to trust to luck. I got the garment bag out of my gym bag, laid out the sailor costume, then took off my street clothes.

Luck was not with me. The moment I was down to just panties, I could hear the door. If that was Bill Metal barging in again without knocking –

I whipped my head around to see Dev standing just inside the door. He sighed. His eyes had an odd glaze in them – I could see that in this light – and his allergies sounded terrible. There was a strange, strained look on his face, somehow happy and not happy at the same time. Without thinking I stepped back and crossed my arm over my chest.

He muttered, "What do I get, hah? What?" I kept backing up. My throat was too tight to make a sound. "I bought that suit. I called people. I called people. I made

everything happen. I *drove* this car." He shook his head, more like twitching. "I put you up there. And I'm just..."

He took a step forward, snuffled. I moved back and found I was in the corner.

He was a bit louder now. "Wanted to wish you luck. Break a leg, hah?" His shoulder twitched. "You're my star."

Everything went all slow-motion for me. I felt quivering shock. And fear, icy, drooling terror – but I was surprised to find that, most of all, I was furious. Enraged that here was my big show and this guy was wrecking it. I just wanted to smash him down but I couldn't make myself move forward. And now I had no more room to move back.

He snorted and blinked, took another step into the room. "You're my star," he said again. "After the show, we can finally celebrate. Properly." He started to move his arm – I didn't know if he was trying to reach for me.

A sudden blur behind him and a dull hollow whunk and I watched him fall to his hands and knees in front of me, and a low, bestial voice bellowing, "*Back off, Dev!!*"

I looked up – and Gwyn stood there, holding up a metal case in both hands, glaring down at Dev. Her eyes were lasers behind her glasses, her face red, snarling like a tiger, and again she made that deep, feral roar: "Back off *nowwww!!!*"

Dev held the back of his head, swore, tried to squirm around to look behind him. I kicked out at him in a reflex, caught him in the shoulder. Barefoot – I think I hurt my toes more than I did him. I saw blood on his hand when he reached up for the edge of the table and tried to get up. She shook the case and took a step toward him. "*Get out!! Get offa her!!*"

He scrambled and staggered around the far side of the table, muttering a stream of "ow" and "jeezis", blood starting to trickle down his face. Gwyn flung the case in his general direction and took a chip out of the wall, then she snatched my giant shirt off the table, draped it across my torso, and hugged me so that I almost couldn't breathe.

There was a loud tumble as Dev flung away the cases near the door and

scrambled out. Gwyn kept kissing my hair and asking me if I was all right and calling me her baby. Then she let go and tried to help me get my shirt back on, using her body to shield me from anyone's view. I could feel myself tremble.

She helped me over to a chair, then kneeled beside me, petting me. She got my water bottle out of my bag for me, and finally I had words again. I looked at her and felt a few tears. "Thank you, Gwynnie. Oh god, thank you. I, I just froze."

She stroked my hair and spoke very low. "I know how that is, baby. You're okay now. It's okay."

I tried to say more. "I.... I...." I looked over to the door. Far away, I could hear a confusion of raised voices. I looked back at her. My voice was hardly more than a whisper. "It's so weird, Gwynnie, I.... I never woulda thought, but... but really, all I feel right now is so, so mad."

She hugged an arm around my shoulders. "That's kind of good," she said. "There are so many worse things to feel. I love how strong you are."

I almost chuckled. The tremors already felt smaller. "I don't feel strong at all, sweetie. But I just wanna – I am furious. Just furious."

"He didn't touch you, did he, Mari? Did he hurt you?"

"No no, baby, no, nothing. Just... " I pressed my hand to my chest. "Just scared me. What the hell was he thinking?"

"I knew something was wrong." She snuggled her chin on top of my head. "I've been watching him. A while back when I saw him leaving the bathroom, I dunno, I got a bad feeling. He didn't seem right. And then, a bit later, when you said you were going to change, then not longer after you, I saw him go that way, too. I, I just felt like I should check on you."

I reached out to hug her and whispered, "So glad you did, Gwynnie."

I heard a group of footsteps and voices coming into the back corridor. Gwyn lifted her chin away from my head as we turned to look at the door. But she kept her arm around me and mostly shielded me from view. Then Brooke was there, with people behind her. She looked wary and concerned. "Mariko, are you all right?"

"I – " My voice cracked and I tried again. "I will be in a while."

Brooke massaged her knuckles like she was nervous. "Your, your manager is back there at the stage. He came up to me and said that the show is cancelled and you're finished."

"I – what?!"

"Then he started trying to get the crew to dismantle the stage. One of our sound men is actually sitting on him now to keep him out of the way. I have no idea what is going on, I've never seen such a thing."

"No," I said. "No, this is not...." I had to stop and grope for words.

"I just want to get this straightened out now," Brooke went on. "He seems to think that we have an agreement with him and he's cancelling it. But as far as I'm concerned, we booked *you*. I want *you* to tell me."

"What time is it now?" I said.

Brooke glanced at her watch. "2:44." So like fifteen minutes til showtime.

Gwyn spoke up. "Can we get ten extra minutes?"

Brooke blinked and thought for a few seconds. "You can get five. And it'll have to come out of your set. We can't extend your finish time – the mall has given us a deadline to get cleared out. And if you cut your set any shorter, there won't be enough music to build our show."

I could still feel quivers in my chest. "The show is on. We'll try to still make it for three if we can." I turned to look at Gwyn. "I am not letting him take this away from us. I will not let him."

Gwyn said "Wait" to me. Then to Brooke she said. "We'll do it if he's not there."

Brooke actually smiled a little. "Very happy to oblige. We'll call mall security to remove him. Good luck, ladies." Then she took her entourage back to the stage area, closing the door behind her.

I took a tight grip on Gwyn's hand. "Gwyn, are you sure you wanna do this? Do you want me to use the tape?"

She took an unsteady breath. "I told you before, I'll never be sure. But... but I understand you, maybe better than you think. I am furious, too. I don't want him to take this away from you – or from me. I want to be there for you. Even more than I want to hide somewhere."

We both drank some water. And I felt like, if we could harness this raw emotional energy into the show, we were gonna blow those mall kids away.

A few minutes before three, Gwyn and I stepped into the main concourse and headed toward the stage. I was back in my street clothes – I was leaving Dev's vision behind. Gwyn reached over to give my hand a strong squeeze. I squeezed back and glanced over at her. She was just looking straight ahead, her mouth a bit tight, but she wasn't afraid to be tall.

Brooke saw us coming, then started waving signals to people and speaking into a headset. Lights came on, in racks above the stage, on cameras. Lisa Michaels stepped quickly up onto the stage and over to the mike stand. "And now, once again *Belvedere Beat* and Belvedere Cable are proud to present: Mariko." At the mention of my name I heard a thick clatter of applause and even a few cheers.

I gaped a little as the cheers lingered. Lisa stepped away and the two of us climbed the stairs into hot, coloured lights. The applause and cheers got a little louder when we appeared. Not a roaring crowd, just a handful of voices, but enthusiastic ones. Gwyn walked briskly over to her synthesizers and kept her head down while she fussed with them. I stood up straight, and walked with curved relaxed steps, up to the microphone, ready to begin Mariko's last show.

Twenty-Eight

Under the greater number of brighter lights, I saw the audience as even more of a blur than usual, at least at first. But I could still get a rough sense of the overall size of it, and I swallowed when I realized that it looked like it could be as many as a hundred people. But I sang for a bigger crowd opening for Ikiru – I knew I could do this.

"Hello, everybody!" I said. I heard Gwyn start the drum intro for our opening number. "I'm Mariko." I remembered to let myself smile. "But you guys can call me Mari." And then it was my cue.

We decided to keep "You Were On My Mind" as our first song. When I was talking with daddy about the set, he said that an established act will save their biggest song for an encore, to make sure people ask for one. But when you're just starting out, you open with it, so that as many people as possible recognize who you are. I saw no reason to doubt him.

I glanced back at Gwyn between lines. She still wasn't willing to chance looking up at the audience and she just watched her hands. But she was playing as smooth and confident as she did at home, with the same dreamy half-smile. So far, so good. And the speaker system here made her sound epic.

We finished the song to reasonably healthy applause and then went straight into "I Love Rock 'n' Roll". It sounded to me like a couple of high school boys out there recognized Gwyn's opening riff and called out "Yeah!" And there was no way I wouldn't do the overhead clap for this one.

Finally, after so many years, my dream was realized: to sing this song loud, over loud music, in a real concert situation. I cut loose and felt fantastic. After the first time I screamed "Ow!", there were people out there who did it with me the next time it came up. And it was during that song that I saw the best thing that happened during the whole show: I looked over at the soundboard and saw Bill Metal and Ward headbanging without shame. There were hearty cheers at the end of that one.

The set progressed well enough. I muffed a lyric in "Accidents Will Happen" and just pushed onward, because you do. Once, Gwyn started up the wrong drum pattern for the next song, quickly stopped it, and dithered for a second trying to pull up the correct one. No one booed or laughed; nothing awful happened. I

tried to deflect attention from her while she worked by putting my lips too close to the mike, and intoning in my deepest voice, "We are experiencing technical difficulties: please stand by." Which made a couple of people giggle. When the song got properly under way, I nodded to Gwyn to reassure her that we had weathered that little bump and we were doing fine. I was glad to see her nod back.

When my eyes adjusted, I was able to make out a cluster of about six preteen girls at the very front who never took their eyes off me. The lights were still too bright for me to be able to make out unfamiliar faces clearly, so I couldn't be sure if one of them was Jennie – I just hoped. Off and on I noticed George slinking around, getting his arty shots. Once he pressed up close against the lip of the stage and mouthed up at me, "Smile!" Just cuz he knew I wouldn't be able to help it. That guy could make me feel like a dolt without even trying.

The end of the set came up much too fast. Normally I'd want to end with an upbeat bounce, but Gwyn and I decided to close with something that spoke to us and for us, a chance to give something meaningful – however modestly – to whoever was out there. Now, knowing that this was our farewell message, I was even more glad that we had chosen to close this way.

Gwyn adjusted her keyboard settings to an acoustic piano sound and started into a swaying ballad. I introduced it to the crowd as our original composition, "You Showed Me". That brought a few claps from someone out there – and that made me feel vindicated, somehow.

While I sang it, the six young girls at the front swayed in time to it, and possibly a few others farther back. My chest felt full as I realized I had a chance to sing my own words to people. Did Frank, or Mitch, ever feel this way when they sang?

For this performance, we had arranged to segue this song into the following one, rather than end it cold. Just as Gwyn was playing the transition chords to lead us into the next number, George pressed in close and held up his hand, fingers spread wide. That was our signal that we had five more minutes. Enough time to do this last song.

And then the familiar three piano notes descending, the six-eight chords, and then repeat. I heard what sounded like a mom call out "Yes!" from the back – I guess she recognized it. And I started singing "You Don't Own Me" as our last

song.

I really did love this song. As I said, it spoke to me at a tender age. And I hoped to give it a chance to speak to someone else young out there, even just one person. To reach anyone, in any way, is an achievement.

Then we reached the part with that beautiful key change and I sang:

*I'm young and I love to be young
I'm free and I love to be free*

And suddenly the audience and lights all went wavy and blurry – and I realized that my eyes had spilled over. My voice cracked during the next line but I pushed harder and sang the next line stronger.

Immediately it was time for the brief strings instrumental, which gave me a few seconds to turn away from the audience, blink hard and fast, breathe, settle. Just the outro still to do – we were almost finished. I could do this.

I put my smile on and turned back to our audience to hit my cue. As we made it to the end without any further problems, and with generous applause, George gave me a peace-sign finger-V. Two minutes: wrap it up.

"Thank you, everyone," I said. "A handsome guy has just told me that's all we have time for" – that got a couple of giggles – "but before we go, I want to introduce you to someone special." And I walked with mike in hand over to the keyboards and held my free hand to Gwyn, beckoning her to stand. She blushed, but she did it. For me. And she stood tall and looked regal.

"This is my musical director, Gwynnie Jones," I said. "If you heard anything here today that sounded good, it's all because of her. Gwynnie Jones!" As people applauded and gently cheered, I threw my arms around her in a quick hug. The mike was still close enough to pick up a little of my voice, so I heard myself sounding far away in the speakers when I said, "I love you, Gwynnie!"

I let go, turned to the people, brought the mike back to my mouth and said, "And I love all of you!" While they applauded, and I walked back to replace the mike in the stand, I kept talking. "Thank you all for coming, and everyone go home safe! Bye-bye!" Then I gave a little bow and wave, turned to Gwyn to catch her eye, and we walked off and down the steps.

And I kept walking, down the concourse leading to the dressing room. Not stopping to see anyone. Back by the stage, I could hear what sounded like six preteen girls going "*Mar-i-ko!*" Clap, clap. "*Mar-i-ko!*" Clap, clap. Chanting for an encore that I knew I wasn't allowed to give them anyway – the TV people needed to pack up. But those girls and their cheering made my tears start up again as I walked away – I knew it was the last time I would ever hear that.

When Gwyn and I got into the dressing room, I flopped into the nearest chair, put my head in my arms on the table, and shook with sobs. I didn't even know if I could tell anyone why. It was just everything. I felt everything. I was overwhelmed. Gwyn sat beside me and put her arm around my shoulders. Now and then she kissed the top of my head, but otherwise just sat quiet with me. When a knock came on the door, she called back over her shoulder that we still needed a few minutes.

Once Gwyn's equipment was loaded back into the van, Ward climbed into the shotgun seat and Bill Metal held the back doors to allow us to climb in. As Gwyn stepped up into the rear of the van, he got her attention by saying, "Hey."

She blinked at him. "Yes?"

"Keyboards usually suck, but sometimes yours didn't."

Gwyn burst out laughing at that, but at least remembered to thank him.

We didn't say much on the way home – we were both pretty tired and burnt out. We mostly just let the metal blast and the guys gab. We definitely never mentioned Dev – I could feel both of us just trying to wipe that incident, and him, out of our minds. But I did make a point of thanking and commending her for daring to play the show and pulling it off. She said that she'd be willing to do it again someday, but hoped that someday was far off – for the time being, she'd had enough.

She added, "I will say that you were definitely right about one part of it, though."

"What was that?"

With a prim little nod, she said, "George does carry himself well."

The sun was still fairly high and fairly hot on Gwyn's front door as the van pulled up in front of it. She oversaw Bill Metal and Ward returning her instruments to her studio, and thanked them graciously when they were done. Then they went out and started the van, preparing to take me home. I stayed just inside the door while we hugged and said our goodbyes. As she reached for the door handle to let me out, she simply said, "I love you, too," and leaned down to kiss my cheek. Then she opened it for me to slip out and rejoin the guys, then closed it quietly behind me.

Ward had already learned the drill: he was sitting in the back, leaving shotgun for me. They laughed and chatted across the back of the driver's seat all the way to my house.

As I got out of the van, so did Bill Metal. He went around to the back to get my gym bag. At first I wasn't clear on why he didn't just get Ward to hand it across to me. But then he joined me on our front walk, and instead of handing my bag to me, he carried it for me to our front door first, and then let me take it. He stood by our door for a second, looking at me, and then said, "Hey."

I just waited a moment to see where he was going with this.

"I drive in to Westgate sometimes. Kinda often, really."

I nodded. "I think I remember that, yes."

After a second, he said, "Maybe you and me could go for a coffee sometime."

I tried not to smile. "I'm sorta seeing someone, Bill, if that's what you're asking."

"Oh. I guess that figures."

"But if you really just meant us going for a coffee and having one of our epic gabs, then you have my number."

"Yeah, I do." He nodded, then said, "Well then, rock on."

"Rock on, Bill."

And he returned to the van without looking back.

There was so much to tell mom and daddy about the show when I got in. I tried to emphasize all the good things about the day. There was no way I could avoid saying something about Dev, though. They had to know that things were over with him, and Mariko was finished. But I didn't feel like I could tell them the gruesome details about what he did. I could see them pushing for me to do something like press charges, and when I thought about doing that, and how much of a case I would actually have, and how it would consume my life, I freaked. I just couldn't face any more drama about it, I just wanted it all to go away and forget it.

So what I ended up telling them is that Dev cancelled our contract because he was no longer satisfied with how well I took direction from him in the course of our business together. That, over time, I had been pushing for more control over my material and musical direction, and he was unhappy with that. So he felt that we had reached the point where we were no longer working well as a team. All of which was basically true.

"That sounds very strange to me," mom said. "I can't imagine anyone finding you unreasonable or difficult to work with. I wonder what he must be thinking."

"I'm just as happy not knowing that," I said.

Twenty-Nine

August was not so much an unusually busy month as a quietly eventful one.

Some of those events took place in the Jones household, so I have to relate them second-hand. Going by what Gwyn told me when she called, the gist of it was this:

Gwyn's father told her – no, actually he had mother tell her – that things had been cleared up at North Regal and classes would begin again in September. Gwyn said she wasn't going back. Which led mother to convene a Family Meeting. Her father pushed, and for the first time she pushed back – or at least stood her ground. After a few rounds of jousting, and a long silence, father finally told her to look into some other respectable course of studies that might suit her better. (She mentioned in passing that she was starting to think about accounting. Better you than me, Gwynnie.)

And while she had both of them there, she told them – she didn't ask them – that she was giving me their phone number. She said it was not just inconvenient, but nonsense, that her writing partner wasn't able to reach her when she needed to. Mother expressed concern about me calling at odd hours. Father said he'd just as soon pay for a separate line in her room, just so he wouldn't have to hear anything. She came away from the meeting wishing that she had thought to say something sooner.

"Baby steps, Gwynnie," I told her. "Everything in its time." And I caught a glance of mom going past me as I said it – she overheard me and smiled.

Yeah yeah, mom, I know. That's you.

A day came early on when I received a letter in the mail, with a return address of DevilKnight Productions in Toronto. It was a bit unsettling, the falling feeling in my stomach when first I saw it, and how long I had to just sit and breathe before I finally opened it.

The letter was on DevilKnight letterhead, dated July 27th, typed, all very official. It basically said that, in accordance with Section 14 of our management agreement of November 28th, 1995, this would serve as written notice of the

termination of said agreement. At the bottom was a familiar scribbly signature with the name Devlin Knight typed below it.

I called to talk things over with Gwyn, then borrowed mom's typewriter to draw up a reply which mirrored the format and tone of his letter. My letter acknowledged receipt of his letter dated July 27th and mentioned that, according to the manual revisions to Section 14, initialed and authorized by both parties, a termination fee of one thousand dollars was still outstanding – please remit at your earliest opportunity. Then I scribble-signed it above my typed name at the bottom. Back atcha, scumbag.

When I put it in the mail, I was thinking about the possibility of running into him again. Our paths had never really crossed before, until that night at The Loft. We didn't seem to frequent the same places around town. But I was a little uneasy about some sort of Baader-Meinhof effect or whatever, that now I'd keep bumping into him in public just because I didn't want to. I still had no idea just what I'd say or do if that ever happened.

I was beginning to check the want ads for places available to rent in Westgate. When I thought about it, there were some houses out around Larkin Ave that rented out apartments, and that location would be ideal. A decent neighbourhood, easy walking distance to work, and not too far to walk to downtown in the nice weather, too. I wondered if I should hold out and wait for an opening in that area, or look around more.

Not that there was any need to rush. But the more I thought about the idea, the more it felt like its time had come. But I'd go slow and careful, the way daddy – and Gwyn – would want me to. Baby steps.

About two weeks after I mailed my letter to Dev's office, another DevilKnight envelope appeared in our mailbox. Inside it was a cheque, payable to M. Takamura, in the amount of one thousand and XX/100 dollars. There was a familiar scribbly signature at the bottom right.

I was torn about what to do with my stage costume. I knew I never wanted to be Mariko again. That was someone Dev had created, and he could keep her. Sometimes when I looked at the suit, I remembered him telling me that he had paid for it, as if it gave him some sort of claim on me. On the other hand, it was a spectacular souvenir of some sweet memories. The sort of thing I could tell someone else's grandkids about.

Mom came to my rescue. She took the garment bag from me and said she'd store it someplace where I'd never see it – until the day came when I decided I wanted to. Or the day when I knew that I wanted it gone. In either case, it wasn't a decision I needed to make now. I could sit with it first – and did it really matter how long I sat? I still had a lot of life ahead of me.

It took about a week for the cheque from Toronto to clear.

Gwyn and I talked long about our music. There was no question that we wanted to keep working on it together. But what we would work on was now opened up wider. There was no longer anyone pressuring us to do covers that sounded electro-bouncy. But no rule that prevented us from doing that if we felt like it.

No one from radio or TV contacted me to ask when that single might be coming out. I figured that, if anything, they were calling Dev. And he certainly wasn't gonna give them my number. Maybe he was telling them all I was dead – who knew? But as far as reaching the public with our songs, we were basically starting from scratch.

We still had options open to us. We could keep working on songs For The Album – it just wouldn't be a Mariko album now. We could explore any musical direction we wanted. Gwyn had lots of ideas there. And there were informal venues around town, where we could ask about performing without the need for a manager or agent. Like The Loft. Or maybe my alma mater (go Gators!). Gwyn was actually starting to feel like playing live again might be a bit fun. Just a bit.

She also said we could release our own indie recordings if and when we wanted – maybe sell them at gigs, or through the mail. She had the equipment to record cassette singles or albums. She had a home computer with a CD burner, even,

so we could release things in that format as well.

"Total D.I.Y.!" I said. "You probably don't know how punk rock you really are, Gwynnie!"

She half-raised a fist and said, "I am anarchy!"

I was still waiting for Bill Metal to phone. But not on tenterhooks, though.

A stand-up chalkboard rested under the glare of a streetlight in front of Vito's Restaurant. Mid-November flurries blew against it. The multicoloured scrawl on it read:

Tonight at The Loft

—

Takamura-Jones

present

An Evening

With Bacharach

and David

Upstairs, we played a set of covers that Gwyn loved. (I still had too much trouble with "Walk On By" so it wasn't included, but I was practising.) And I couldn't help thinking that, a year ago, I would never have guessed I'd be doing this now.

It was a humble set-up: only her one smaller keyboard and small amp, something that we could move and transport on our own. The whole event was so much smaller and quieter than the last time we performed in public together — there were maybe six other people sitting there, including Vito. But at least he looked like he liked us. As for me, I was still happy to be singing for people; it honestly did not matter how many.

After our set, Vito switched on the boombox, playing something appropriately genteel, and we sat at a nearby table to take a breather before packing up. Gwynnie was actually debating whether or not she was thirsty enough to try having a Blue. Then a voice behind us said, "Hail and well met, fair musicians."

We turned to see Frank ambling to our table. Not a surprise – I had spotted him sitting in the back as soon as we had come in. You can't help but be seen, in a place as small as The Loft. "Congratulations on a sterling set," he said.

I made introductions for him and Gwyn, who received one of his firm confident handshakes. Then he said, "So now you are billed as Takamura-Jones. Yet another name, yet another musical direction. Your versatility continues to astound." I gave him what I hoped was a gracious nod.

Then I felt him taking a second to look into me. His eyes softened even more, and he said, "You seem to be content."