

IT WAS YOU

Also by Jonelle Patrick

NIGHTSHADE

FALLEN ANGEL

IDOLMAKER

PAINTED DOLL

THE LAST TEA BOWL THIEF

Jonelle Patrick

IT WAS YOU

An Only In Tokyo Short



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IT WAS YOU

1.

THURSDAY

.

“Please go with me! Ple-e-e-e-ase!” Coco lays her palms flat on the table and bows, amping her ask with some good, old-fashioned, idol-style begging.

Yumi groans. They’re seated in their favorite corner at the Mad Hatter, next to the wall displaying the owner’s constantly growing collection of custom Alice figures. Tonight, a Spiderman in a blonde wig, flouncy blue dress and pinafore presides over their table. Like the other repurposed superheroes and anime figures, he’s wearing a perfectly-to-scale face mask, in a nod to the recent virus scare.

The lingering fallout from that is also why the Hatter is crowded tonight, but not with selfie-mad tourists. After a travel blogger named it a Tokyo Underground Must-See for cosplayer spotting, the regulars had scattered to more obscure haunts, but in the wake of the travel ban, they’ve crept back like shy woodland animals from wherever they’d been hiding.

Tonight it almost feels like old times, before Coco’s side-hustle with ex-host Hoshi turned into something that’s looking an awful lot like a real job, and before Yumi’s relationship with Kenji expanded to fill most of her evenings.

Two weeks. Has it really been two weeks since they'd last sat here, catching up on each other's lives? Not that anything has really changed—Yumi is still on the fence about looking for an apartment, because although she longs for a place where she and Kenji can be together that doesn't involve back doors and sneaking, she doesn't earn quite enough to get more than a room in a share house, or a studio so far from the nearest station that every time it rains, her shoes will be squelching miserably by the time she gets to the train.

Unless Kenji moves in with her. And she's not that keen on the idea of living together unless he proposes they get married first. But he can't even think of getting married until he knows whether the Assistant Inspector exam he just passed will land him a coveted spot in the Tokyo Metropolitan Police's First Investigative Division. Which brings them back to sneaking in and out of the back doors of the houses where they grew up and both still live with their parents.

And Coco is kind of stuck too. Life would definitely be more ideal if her oldest friend had met her shining prince at the same time Yumi got together with Kenji. Even though the goal of the socially inept (but well-salaried) men that Coco and her business partner are "coaching" is to turn a blind date into wife material, their clients aren't in the market for a girl with bleached milk-tea hair who still works a couple of nights a week at the Queen of Hearts hostess club.

And tonight, Yumi only has to take one look at Coco to know that she still hasn't decided to quit her ridiculously lucrative Q of H job and commit to LuvLuv Match full time. Her proper black "relationship coaching" wig is carefully tucked into its box at her feet, and her real bleached curls are making her navy business suit look like an Office Lady costume.

Yumi squints at the ticket Coco just pushed across the table. *New Talent Partytime Showcase*. Ugh.

She wants to spend more time with Coco, but not doing

this. Why is her best friend begging her to waste their precious free time listening to hobby musicians live the dream?

“Which uh, ‘client’ is this, again?” she asks.

“Ren Noda.” Coco sips her Lemon Jabberwock. “You know, the bank guy.”

“The one who sent you a million dozen roses?”

The message Coco had sent her about that no-hoper after their first disastrous “date” had been memorable. His idea of a romantic gesture was to have so many pink roses delivered to Coco that they couldn’t all fit in her room. She’d responded with a snapshot and NO written beneath it, then she’d added a photo of a single stem in a vase with the caption, YES.

Coco sighs. “Yeah, that one. I thought I’d convinced him that mentioning he’s a weekend headbanger belongs in the minus column, but when PandemixX made the cut for this competition . . .”

Yumi spenches her drink. “PandemixX?”

“Yeah. With two Xes. The lame, it burns.” Coco upends the last of her Jabberwock and signals to Boshi the bartender for another round. He shoots her a salute from beneath tonight’s purple velvet top hat and skull-patterned mask.

“Can’t you just say no?”

Coco grimaces. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I lost the bet.”

“What bet?”

“I’ve been trying to get him to go on a date with anybody but me for nearly a year, but he keeps making excuses. So, when he made me promise that if he could get a celebrity to go on a date with him, I’d come hear his damn band, I agreed.”

Yumi laughs. “Don’t tell me Mr. Black Hair Bankmaster actually got a date with someone famous?”

“I know, right?”

“Who? The Minister of Finance?”

“No.” Coco pulls out her phone and navigates to a message. Passes it across the table.

Yumi’s jaw drops. “No way.” In the selfie, a forgettable-looking man in glasses and the lead singer for Baby Metal tip their heads together at some restaurant table with a killer view of Tokyo.

“How did he pull that off?”

“Cheated,” Coco grouses, giving her ice a petulant poke with her straw. “How was I supposed to know he’s her private banker? I tried to argue it wasn’t a real date, but he just threw my own words back in my face.” She parrots, ““Ask a friend out. If you’re too nervous to ask someone you don’t know, practice on someone you do. As long as you do the asking and the planning, it still counts as a date.””

Yumi groans. Turns back to the photo on Coco’s phone. Zooms in. Can’t decide if Ren’s pale, square-framed glasses are cool or hopeless.

“He doesn’t look quite as lame as I expected,” she ventures.

“He’s a thousand percent better than a year ago. I mean, he *does* have a great coach, after all.”

Yumi passes back the phone. “If he’s a thousand percent better, how come he’s still coming for ‘relationship coaching’ every week? Isn’t the whole idea for these guys to land a trophy wife and get on with wedding, baby, master-the-universe?” She narrows her eyes at Coco. “Unless...he’s not in love with *you*, is he?”

Coco coughs, nearly spilling her drink. “Ugh, no. At least, I hope not.” She wrinkles her nose. “Corporate warriors. Not exactly my type, if you know what I mean.”

She does. In fact, it had taken a mammoth effort on Yumi’s part to unstick her best friend’s affections from Hoshi, back when he was the number one host at Club Nova and Coco was his number one customer. But the final nail wasn’t hammered into the coffin of her affections until he became her business

partner, and lost the bleached, glam-rock hair and shiny suit.

“Ple-e-e-e-ase?”

A pink-glittered nail pushes the ticket closer.

Yumi scowls at it. When is this damn event, anyway?

“Saturday *afternoon*?”

“Yeah.” Coco rolls her eyes. “It’s probably a lot cheaper to rent the performance space at times real bands aren’t bringing in paying fans.”

Yumi checks her calendar. Disappointingly blank. Then she remembers—Kenji has been roped into helping Aya Kurosawa demonstrate how a tiny woman can humiliate a tall man on the judo mats on Saturday afternoon.

“Okay,” she agrees with a martyred sigh, tucking it into her purse. “But you *owe* me.”

2.

SATURDAY

.

Yumi has never been to the Boom Room, and she never would have guessed there was a nightclub in the nondescript beige building that's a solid eleven-minute walk from the nearest train station. It's easy to tell where it is today, though, without even checking her GPS. A long line of fans snakes down the block from the address where she's supposed to meet Coco.

She walks right past her friend the first time, then turns and spots her, standing on the street corner, scrolling through her phone. Yumi hardly ever sees her in the black wig she uses to cover her real hair when she's meeting clients, so it's actually her clothes that Yumi recognizes. The kind of men who can afford to pay Coco and Hoshi the big bucks need to practice being comfortable with demure young women who will pass their family's scrutiny, so Coco tries to look the ingenue part while she's with them, even though she still finds it hard to walk naturally in low heels and a knee-length skirt. But even the most proper *yamato nadeshiko* wouldn't wear a blue suit to a live house, so she borrowed everything she's wearing from Yumi. The skirt's not nearly as short as Coco's usual, and she's wearing ankle boots and tights, instead of her usual micro-mini and

over-the-knee swashbucklers.

Coco looks up, relieved. “Hey. You found it.”

They take their places at the end of the line, but it moves quickly, once the doors open. They hand their tickets to the bored-looking gatekeeper and move on to the plywood podium in the foyer to pay for their mandatory drink tokens. The Boom Room’s concrete floor, walls and exposed pipes had once been painted black, but now they’re faded to gray and scuffed by the passage of time and fans. Previous paint jobs show through in a mismatched scratchboard of colors, revealing the spots that get banged up the most. Like all clubs, this one definitely wasn’t designed to be seen in daylight, and the sun streaming through the open door is revealing a thick fur of dust on everything above eye level. Yumi quickly averts her gaze from the nooks and crannies, which haven’t been cleaned since forever.

The line for the bar is making the vestibule feel cramped, and the extravagant bouquets sent by the five competing bands’ well-wishers aren’t helping. Arrangements bristling with good wishes line all four walls, displayed on the kind of tall easel that’s used for funeral wreaths, pachinko parlor openings, and the dozens of pink roses Ren had sent to Coco’s room after their first “date.”

“I can see where he got the idea,” Yumi says, eyeing the sticks poking from each arrangement, holding cards congratulating today’s bands for making the cut.

“Yeah.” Coco gives a mirthless laugh. “Only instead of being from sponsors and fans, they were all signed ‘From Ren Noda.’”

“Not creepy at all,” Yumi concurs.

They advance a step and she cranes her neck to peer at the uninspiring drink options lined up atop the scarred counter serving as a bar. Bottled water, cold green tea, plastic cups of draft beer and cans of Chu-Hi, a cheap, fruity cocktail with flavors that change with the seasons, even though the chemicals

they're made from have no relationship to anything that ever grew on a tree. Yumi is saved from the temptation to day-drink when she steps up to the counter and is told sorry, the only flavor left is grapefruit.

Bottles of green tea in hand, she and Coco drift with the crowd into a cavernous space with a velvet-curtained stage at one end, framed by a scaffold sprouting a tangle of high-powered lighting tech. The far half of the room in front of the stage has already silted up with girlfriends, sisters, and moms.

"Where do you want to stand?" Yumi asks. "If we stay near the back, we can get out faster afterwards," she adds, hopeful.

"Yeah, but if Ren doesn't see me, he won't know I came." Coco shoots her a guilty glance. "Sorry I didn't mention it before, but I think we have to stay for the meet 'n greet afterwards too."

Yumi groans. Three hours listening to amateur musicians is torture enough, but sticking around to stroke the ego of Coco's client? She might need a Chu-Hi after all.

They crack open their bottles of tea and come to a halt behind the scrum of well-wishers.

At exactly two o'clock, the lights dim, and an aging drummer from a band that peaked as one of the middle mentions on festival posters takes the stage. He welcomes everyone on behalf of his promotion company—he's now cashing in on fresh talent the way his old promoter cashed in on him—and announces that voting for their favorites will take place after the last artists perform, so hold on to your ticket stubs.

The lights dim, but the first band isn't PandemixX. Neither are the next three. They aren't quite as bad as Yumi feared, because although the performers are amateurs, they're Japanese amateurs. In a country where the only way people can bear to work from birth to death in life-sucking day jobs is to relentlessly pursue their passions on nights and weekends, if

someone mentions that they practice a little tea ceremony in their free time, you can be pretty sure they're an Urasenke master. If someone admits they do jiu jitsu "to keep in shape," they've got at least a third-degree black belt. Her own ex-fiancé's snail-like climb to the CEO suite has turned him into such an accomplished violinist that his quartet had been invited to play at a charity concert attended by the Empress.

Each band takes the stage, works up a sweat, takes their bows. Amateurs have limited time to devote to their art, so there are a lot more hit covers than original songwriting. Competent though they are, the only time Yumi is at all inspired to put her hands in the air is when the second group's slightly-too-female Flame lookalike launches into the VuDu Dolls' "Don't Need You." By the time the fourth band is wrapping up their final number with an explosion of guitar fireworks and dramatic poses, she's sneaking peeks at her phone. Only forty minutes until they can drop some congratulations on Coco's client and get out of here. That first White Rabbit is going to taste soooo good. But first, some tempura soba. Or maybe they should try that new—

The curtains close, and the lights come up. Yumi tips the last of her now-tepid tea down her throat. Does she have time to pee before PandemixX goes on? She excuses herself and hustles off in search of the grim corridor where the ladies' room is hidden, but the line is already so long, she'll never make it back before Ren's band takes the stage. She'll have to wait. Irritated, she snakes back through the milling audience to Coco, who will definitely be picking up their tab at the Hatter tonight.

"Why is this place still so crowded, anyway?" she complains.

"What?" Coco looks up from her phone.

"The bathroom line is still long. Seems like hardly anyone beelined for the exit after their band finished playing."

"Oh. Probably because of the voting," Coco says. "The

winner gets a slot at a much bigger competition in Shibuya next weekend, so—”

“What? This is just the semifinals? You’d better be hoping your guy’s band doesn’t win, because I’m definitely not up for—”

The house lights flash, then fade to black, and the crowd buzz extinguishes with them. The curtains part, revealing the silhouettes of four musicians posed like rock stars on the blue-lit stage. The audience gives a collective sigh, and Yumi is surprised to see glow sticks wink to life all over the room.

Either Ren isn’t the only band member who passed out free tickets like a tissue-pusher outside a train station, or PandemixX has some real fans.

By the time the group has powered through their opening number, Yumi grudgingly concedes it’s not totally beyond belief that a few people might be here for their music. She doesn’t recognize the song, but still catches herself nodding to the beat. At least half the crowd must have heard it before, though, because they answer the shout-out that heralds every chorus. It’s not until the vocalist gives his hardworking colleagues a breather by launching into a ballad, that she remembers to wonder which of the decidedly un-bank-ish-looking guys on stage is Coco’s client.

They’re all decked out in standard glamrock-wear—leather, boots, silver jewelry—and their tousled manes are obviously not their real hair, but it’s hard to tell which one is the painfully conventional, nearsighted man who’d posed with a real pop star at that fancy restaurant.

By process of elimination, the vocalist definitely isn’t Ren Noda. He’s wielding the mic like a pro, and has more stage presence than the rest of them put together. He must have put in serious time studying music videos, because he’s pretty deft at alternating between disappearing into his music and reaching out to fans.

So, maybe Ren is the guitarist? Head down, no eye contact. Doesn't sing, just plays. But that guy has too many earrings. Even if he takes them out for work, nobody who hopes for a career in finance would get promotion-unfriendly holes punched up the sides of both earlobes. That leaves the bass player and the drummer. They're harder to scrutinize, because they're at the back of the stage. From this angle . . . hey, didn't there used to be more fans in front of them? She turns to Coco.

Uh, oh.

Yumi has seen that look before, but now it's not directed at a host faux-flirting with them across a table at Club Nova, it's fixed on the tawny-maned singer in the skinny black jeans, a silver crucifix swinging from one ear and sweat shining from pale skin that glows in the v-neck of his black t-shirt.

Her misgivings grow as Coco inches them closer with every song, until they're well inside the zone where the performers might actually be able to see their upturned faces in the bounce from the footlights.

The final chord echoes. The crowd cheers.

"Thank you," breathes the vocalist, bowing deeply. "You've been a great audience."

But instead of reminding the crowd that their name is "PandemixX with two Xes" and to be sure to vote for them, he waves the other band members to the front of the stage. As they're introduced—all by their stage names, none as "Ren Noda"—they each bow and toss mementos into the audience. Two lucky fans get drumsticks, the bass player lobs a rolled-up t-shirt, and girls all over the house jump to intercept the guitar picks. The vocalist goes last, pulling a silvery fleur-de-lis pendant and chain over his head. He smiles as he surveys the fans stretching their hands toward the stage, yearning for him to toss it their way. But when he finally lobs it, it's Coco who snatches the prize. She squeals with delight, clutching it to her chest as the singer gives a final wave and the band steps back

behind the closing curtains.

She turns to Yumi, face shining. “Did you see that? He smiled at me, and then he tossed it. He tossed it right to me!”

“Coco, uh—”

“Where’s your ticket stub? Come on. We have to vote.”

She pulls Yumi across the room to join the scrum around the five ballot boxes sitting on a table near the exit, but by the time they drop their stubs into the one labeled PandemixX, it’s already clear that their votes won’t be needed to win. Ren’s band is at least twice as popular as their nearest competitor. Waiting for the meet ‘n greet to begin, Coco heads to the lobby, where she makes up for her pre-show indifference by buying a program and a PandemixX t-shirt that’s twice as expensive as it should have been.

Stepping aside, she tugs the black tee over her loaner blouse, then loops the vocalist’s fleur-de-lis over her head, arranging it front and center.

They return to the auditorium, where the musicians are beginning to trickle back for the meet ‘n greet, fresh t-shirts donned, water bottles in hand.

Yumi cracks a new bottle of tea and turns to Coco. “Which one was Ren Noda? I forgot to ask, and I couldn’t tell.”

“Actually,” Coco replies, “he wasn’t on stage.”

“*What?* He *lied* about being in the band?”

“No, he’s one of the founders. And he does play in the band. Or at least, he used to. I think he must play bass, because he told me a few months ago that the band’s manager wasn’t working out so he was going to take over, and the first thing he’d have to do is find them a new bass guitarist. I think he—”

“Your attention, please?” A spotlight winks onto the ex-drummer, standing center stage, microphone in hand. The room quiets.

“On behalf of Spotright Productions, thank you for supporting all the fine musicians who performed here this

afternoon.” He pauses, inviting polite applause. “We’re counting the votes right now, and the top band will advance to next weekend’s show at the O-West. I’d like to mention there’s still plenty of great merchandise for sale in the lobby. Please take a look on your way out, so when these talented artists become famous, you’ll be among the lucky fans who can say you knew them when.” A black-clad staff member walks on stage to hand the promoter a folded white note.

He flicks it open. Beams. Pauses for dramatic effect. “It looks like you’ve chosen a winner. I’m proud to announce that the band that will be joining our other four Partytime Showcase top performers at the X-treme Talent Partytime Showcase in Shibuya next Saturday night is . . . PandemixX!”

The fans clap, and a few raise phones to snap the moment as the members of Ren’s band file onto the stage to accept the promoter’s congratulations.

It’s only been a scant fifteen minutes since they exited in sweaty glory, but they’ve towed off, touched up their stage makeup, and changed into matching clean t-shirts like the ones for sale in the lobby. They bow to the promoter, put on their best moody idol faces to strike a pose with him for an official photo, then relax, bobbing bows of thanks to the staff who lead them to chairs behind a table onstage. The stonefaced guy who’d served as gatekeeper unhooks a velvet rope across the top of the stairs.

Is that long line of fans snaking down the steps and back to the exit waiting for PandemixX autographs and selfies? It must be, because Coco tries to drag Yumi over to join the queue.

She balks.

“I thought we were just here to settle a bet with your client? Can’t we skip the publicity line and just ask someone to find him backstage?”

“That’s what I plan to do,” Coco replies, with sweet deceit. “Maybe the vocalist will take us.”

“Take *you*, you mean. These shoes are killing me. I’ll wait for you over there.”

As Coco joins the line, Yumi crosses to the handful of now-deserted tables reserved for VIPs, slips her heels out of the cute—but half a size too small—footwear, and pulls out her phone. When she looks up again, Coco has advanced halfway to the stairs. The next time, her friend is stepping up to the singer, cocking her head and wagging the fleur-de-lis around her neck with sparkle-tipped nails.

Coco folds back her program—probably to the page with the band’s photo—and hands it to him. He signs with a flourish. Hands it back with a grin that’s the best fake Yumi has ever seen. He nods as she thanks him, then she says something that makes his face fall. He recovers quickly, though, re-pastes a smile, rises from his seat. She waves him back down, and tosses a final coquettish goodbye over her shoulder and lets his next fan take her place. But he continues to gaze after her as she bounces down the stairs on the other side of the stage. He’s still watching when she turns and gives him a final finger-flutter of a wave.

“We can go now,” she informs Yumi, shooting one last glance over her shoulder.

“What about your client? Don’t we have to . . .”

“I can thank Ren on Tuesday, when he comes for his coaching session,” Coco assures her, steaming toward the exit. “Hika-rin promised he’d tell him we were here.”

“*Hika-rin?*”

Coco displays her program, on which the character for “bright light” has been penned in purple calligraphy marker over the photo of the vocalist, whose name is Hikaru Tenjō.

Yumi snorts. If that’s his real name, hers is Ziggy Stardust. What worries her, though, is that Coco is already shortening “Hikaru” to the kind of fond nickname usually reserved for a boyfriend.

3.

SATURDAY, ONE WEEK LATER

.

Yumi allows the stitch in her side to slow her to a walk, breathing hard as she rounds the corner to the short street fronting the O-West nightclub. She scans the crowd that spills halfway down the block, searching for Coco. Would her friend be wearing the black wig she uses to meet Ren Noda, or would she be here in all her curled, milk tea-colored glory, hoping to impress the PandemixX vocalist along with the rest of the mostly-bleached—and occasionally pink-haired—music lovers?

Coco had promised she'd be waiting outside with the tickets, but Yumi still doesn't see her. Slightly annoyed, she turns to scan behind her, in case she walked right past her friend again. Nope. Yumi was afraid she'd be late because today's interpreting gig for a history symposium at her father's university hadn't ended until 5:10, so she'd run all the way from the station. Unless she—

“Yu-chan!”

A black-wigged Coco is frantically waving two tickets at her from a spot right up front, next to the barrier by the stairs leading up to the entrance.

“Attention, everyone!” An O-West staff member at the top

of the steps adjusts the volume on his megaphone. “The first group of ticket holders may now enter.” His assistant raises a sign stenciled “0-100.”

Coco flattens herself against the wall to let other fans past, calling “Yu-chan, come on! This is us!”

The crowd parts enviously to let Yumi join the first lucky hundred, as they begin to funnel up the steps.

“Sorry, I didn’t expect you to be so close.” Yumi pulls back to eyeball Coco’s dress. “Did you go shopping without me?”

It’s a plaid frock so expensive that she hadn’t dared try it on the last time she was in Laforet. Coco doesn’t work at the Queen of Hearts as much as she used to, but between her regulars there and her LuvLuv Match coaching, her ability to sport brand-name fashions before they get knocked off is obviously undiminished.

Coco fans the skirt. “Do you like it?”

“Duh. But since when did Liz Lisa become *your* brand?”

Coco winces.

“You’re forgiven,” Yumi relents, “as long as you let me borrow it.”

“That’ll be a first.” Coco laughs, handing their tickets to the door staff.

The only time Yumi had ever borrowed a dress from Coco was when she’d had to pose as someone who enjoyed going to host clubs. She’d spent the entire evening tugging the neckline up and the hemline down.

“How did you manage to get these primo tickets, anyway?” Yumi asks, as they join the line for drink tokens. “Don’t the first hundred usually disappear the second after reservations open?”

“Yeah, they do.”

“Don’t tell me you actually *paid* for these?”

“No!” Offended. “Of course not.”

“Well, then, thank you, Ren Noda,” Yumi says. At least Coco’s Hikaru madness hasn’t extended to spending money on

him.

“Actually, I got them from Hika-rin.”

“What?” Yumi stares. “He sent you tickets? How did he—?”

“I guess he got my note.”

“What note?”

Coco suddenly finds her manicure in need of inspection. “The one I gave to Ren, when he came for his coaching session on Tuesday. I knew they were going to see each other at practice Wednesday, so . . .”

Yumi groans.

“Come on, what’s so bad about saying ‘good luck this weekend,’ and telling him I was bringing a friend, so we could vote for them again?” She pulls something small and white from her handbag. “He sent this the next morning.”

The ticket envelope is inscribed “To Coco, Enjoy!” in purple pen, above a familiar ornate character. A slip of paper is poking from the top.

“What’s this?” Yumi plucks out the note and reads, “Check your FanFan after the show <heart emoji> Meet me backstage?”

Coco snatches it back, face burning.

“I guess we’re not going to the Hatter afterwards, like we planned?”

“I was going to tell you, but . . .” She hangs her head. “Sorry.”

“What’s ‘FanFan’?”

“Nothing. Just an app.”

“What kind of app?”

“For their fans.”

“Your client’s vanity band has a fan club app? And you *joined?*”

Yumi’s worries flood back. So much for Coco not spending money on her crush. Joining a fan club is never

cheap—it's one of the few ways musicians can pay the rent before they land a contract with a promoter. Even more worrying, though, are the two tickets Hikaru sent. The first hundred aren't the kind of leftovers they give away for free, to pack the house if the event doesn't sell out. And they're always snapped up the moment the box office opens, which suggests the vocalist pounced on them first thing Monday morning. *Before* he got Coco's note. Who had the singer actually bought them for?

"Coco, please don't fall for this guy," Yumi pleads. "Seriously. What do you know about him, anyway? Remember what you went through with Hoshi?"

Uh oh, wrong approach. Now Coco's wearing the look she used to get when her mother made her put on a decent-length skirt before leaving the house in middle school. A skirt that got rolled up into a micro-mini in the first restroom they passed.

"Hika-rin's not like Hoshi at all," Coco pouts.

But he is. If there's one thing Yumi learned from her musician friend, it's that Japanese entertainers—whether they're celebrities who can pack an arena or Kabuki-chō bar hosts—are all citizens of the "floating world." The only difference between rock stars and hosts is how much of themselves is for sale.

"Okay, convince me," she challenges. "What's his real name? And what does Hikaru do the rest of the week? When he's not singing, I mean?"

"I don't know." Sulking. "I'll ask Ren the next time I see him, okay?"

"What about asking 'Hika-rin' himself?" Yumi presses. "Like, tonight? If you're going to this meet-up after the show, promise me you'll find out where he works. And who he really is."

"I'll try," Coco mutters.

Which means she won't.

"Look," Yumi says, relenting a little. "I know I'm probably

worrying about nothing. I mean, he's friends with Ren, right? The world's most boring private bankster? Maybe you'll find out they both work at HatsuBank."

Coco's eyes widen in horror. She obviously hadn't considered that hopelessly uncool possibility.

The house lights flash, then dim. The crowd shifts expectantly toward the stage, and after a theatrical moment of blackness, the curtain swings open, revealing the four members of PandemixX, heads bowed, bathed in deep purple light. The drummer raises crossed sticks.

Tick, tick, tick, tick . . .

Spotlights blaze, and they leap into action, pounding out a song Yumi doesn't know, but has the crowd clapping and jumping by the end of the first chorus.

As they launch into the next tune without catching their breath, Coco snaps a pair of glow sticks and hands one to Yumi, who waves it reluctantly at first, then more enthusiastically as she's caught up in the music. It's not until the vocalist dials it back to a haunting solo that turns the defiant dumped-girlfriend anthem, "Was It Me?" into a plaintive lament, that she remembers to glance over at Coco.

Whose rapt face is tipped toward Hikaru, hearts for eyes.

Yumi stands to the side of the ladies' room mirror, waiting for Coco to put the finishing touches on her pre-Hikaru primping. As soon as they'd dropped their ticket stubs into PandemixX's vote jar, they'd run straight to the toilets to beat the crowd that will stream in as the lines of fans clear the autograph tables. Coco had scorned participating in any part of the post-concert meet 'n greet, since Hikaru's invite boosts her into an inner circle that she hopes will deliver a far more personal inscription before the night is over.

It looks like the afterparty will also be a victory celebration. Even Yumi has to admit, they were the best band on stage

tonight. Maybe even good enough to go pro.

“I know, right?” Coco says, test-batting her eyelashes, then layering on more mascara in a vain attempt to make her natural ones look like the fakes she’s used to wearing. “And now they’ve got a chance. Ren heard that the promoter is going to offer a contract to tonight’s top band.”

She glosses her lips once more for good measure, then zips her makeup bag and drops it into her purse.

“Come on, let’s go buy t-shirts while we’re waiting.”

Yumi trails Coco to the lobby, where her friend loads up on PandemixX merchandise—including, inexplicably, another t-shirt like the one she already owns—urging Yumi to buy something to “support the band” too.

“Come on,” she says, handing Yumi a program. “These are only ¥500. Every little bit helps.”

“Coco, I can’t,” she objects. “If translating paid as well as hostessing, maybe, but I have to save every—”

She snaps her mouth shut, quickly stepping up to the table to pay for the unwanted souvenir, to hide the fact that she was about to blunder into dangerous territory. The truth is, she’s hoarding every yen for a deposit on an apartment, in case she decides to make the leap on her own, without waiting for Kenji’s promotion. It’s going to be a sore subject when she can no longer avoid telling Coco her plans, and she definitely doesn’t want to have that discussion here.

Moving out and getting a solo apartment had never been part of their plans. Yumi and Coco and their friend Rika had made a pact in middle school that they’d all fall in love, get married and have children at the same time, but life isn’t really working out that way. Rika hadn’t lived long enough to do any of those things, and Coco is still falling for the kind of men who are highly questionable partner material. And it doesn’t help that Yumi’s best friend had never been crazy about her falling in love with someone as dreary as a policeman. Even worse, they’ve

both known Kenji since childhood, and he'd been such an ugly duckling that Yumi hadn't even recognized him when they'd met again as adults.

Yumi follows Coco back to the auditorium in time to cheer as PandemixX is crowned the winner, then they stand at the back, sipping green tea until the last fan trips down the steps, hugging her program. The PandemixX members push back their chairs from the autograph table and saunter offstage.

As the hall empties, Yumi notices a clutch of women off to the side, ignoring each other, focused on their phones. They're standing near the door marked "Backstage, Staff Only" and making no move toward the exit.

"What do you think they're waiting for?" she asks Coco.

At least four of them were among the first hundred fans. Yumi remembers them because they're wearing outfits she wishes she could afford.

The backstage door opens, and seven heads swivel toward the staff member who appears from the darkness, holding a clipboard. The closest fan steps up and shows him her phone. He checks his list and lets her through. Then the next.

Yumi glances at Coco, who is biting her lip, obviously wondering the same thing she is. How many women had Hikaru invited to meet him after the show?

4.

MONDAY

.

Coco gives Yumi the once-over as they slide into their usual booth at the Tea Four Two. The owner had taken advantage of the lull in business during the virus scare to freshen the café up a bit, deepening the pastels to appeal to the latest crop of fashion cult customers, and replacing the swags of lacy curtains around each booth with froths of tulle. They still provide the perfect amount of privacy from outsider curiosity, but are see-through enough to check out the ensembles at the next table.

Yumi's bright orange International Interpreting Company suit, however, still stands out from the regular clientele's frocks like a traffic cone in an ice cream parlor.

"Nice mask," Coco says.

Yumi glares at her from behind the newly-issued uniform addition that's a regrettably different orange than her suit. Everyone in the restaurant is sporting polite face coverings that match their outfits too, but their lacy, beribboned concoctions are on-brand for their dream persona, not polka-dotted with company logos.

Yumi is relieved to see that Coco is wearing a cute cat-nose model, though, which suggests that the "urgent" reason they

had to squeeze in a meet before Yumi's afternoon interpreting gig isn't because she's been crying her eyes out over Hikaru. In fact, Coco has a gleam in her eye that Yumi hasn't seen since, well, since Hoshi.

They order their usual, and as soon as the waitress bobs a curtsy and leaves them alone, Yumi leans in.

"So, did you find out where he works?"

Coco's face falls. That's obviously not the question she's itching to answer.

"I didn't really get a chance," she admits. "We weren't exactly alone, you know, and it would have been rude to grill him about personal stuff in front of everyone."

"Everyone? Who was there, besides you and Hikaru? Those other women he invited backstage?"

"No! I mean, they were there, but he didn't invite them. One was the bass player's sister, one was the drummer's girlfriend, and the rest were . . ." She hesitates, searching for the right word. "Friends."

Friends? Of whom? What kind of 'friends' didn't know each other and lined up to party late into the night with musicians after a show?

"And besides," Coco sips her iced oolong-*cha*. "It was too loud to really talk."

"Where did you go?"

Coco's face lights up. "This really cool basement bar called the Infirmary. It's where they always go, because—well, duh—their band is called PandemixX. All the drinks are, like, medical-themed. The beer comes in lab beakers, and there are these crazy cocktails that you mix yourself from test tubes. One even comes in a bag on an IV stand. See?"

She scrolls to a photo on her phone and passes it across the table. A rusty, antique pole is visible behind Hikaru's shoulder, as he and Coco tip their heads together, mugging for the camera. Coco's drink has an eyeball in it.

Yumi's about to ask who paid for all those fancy drinks, when her phone begins to vibrate, the alarm reminding her she has to leave in the next five minutes if she doesn't want to be late for work.

It's not until she's in the station waiting for her train, that the rest of the questions she wishes she'd asked swarm in like mosquitos. Where was Ren Noda during all this medical-themed partying? The band's founder/manager must have been invited along to celebrate their big win, but he hadn't been in any of Coco's pictures. Coco had worn her black wig, so she must have planned to keep up her "coaching" role, even though it wasn't Ren who had sent her the tickets. Had she helped him be sociable at the party? Or had she slipped into off-duty mode as the drinks flowed? Had Ren been left to fend for himself, or had he been entertained by one of the—

Reminded that she'd been meaning to check to see if "friends" means what she thinks it means, she fishes her phone from her bag and downloads the FanFan app Hikaru had used to send Coco her backstage pass. Opening the app, she chooses "PandemixX" from the rolling menu. It takes her to a screen featuring a studio shot of the band, a "Track of the Month" audio download, and buttons that link to *Band Bios*, *Live Schedule*, *Photo Gallery*, *Ticket Wallet*, *Chat* and . . . yeah, there it is. The one she was afraid she'd find. She taps *Sponsor*.

"Join the Friends of PandemixX!" reads the line at the top. "Support your favorite artist as they climb the charts with a monthly contribution. 'Friends' of all levels receive preferential ticket reservations and monthly messages from their artist. Higher levels of sponsorship become eligible for special merchandise, exclusive meet & greets, personal chat time, and more."

And *more*. Ugh. Yumi clicks on *Support*, which brings up four links. The band members are listed by name. Haru (drums), Toshi (guitar), Kiichi (bass), and Hikaru (vocals).

Clicking on the drummer's link delivers the option of donating ¥1000, ¥5000, ¥10,000 or ¥50,000 to him every month. The guitarist is asking for even more. His "sponsorships" can't be had for less than ¥10,000. But when she clicks on Hikaru's name, nothing happens.

Does that mean he doesn't need the money?

That should reassure her, but it doesn't. It could mean he's got a real job that pays a handsome wage—like Ren's—but she's watched Hikaru perform twice now, and nobody gets to be that polished by having a serious corporate job that requires lots of mandatory overtime and actual effort. It's more likely that he doesn't need sponsors because he's got all the "support" he needs.

With a sinking heart, she remembers Coco's new Liz Lisa, a brand she wouldn't have looked at twice before she learned it's a look that appeals to Hikaru Tenjō.

Maybe he doesn't need any more sponsors because he's already got a big one.

Yumi's brain is dangerously close to overheating by the time she finishes four hours of interpreting discussions on arcane internet protocols, but it's finally quitting time. She hastily bows herself out of the meeting room before her client gets the bright idea to request her attendance at the upcoming drinking party, to help his international software team communicate until they're drunk enough to laugh at each other's jokes without speaking the same language.

Breezing past the reception desk, she hands in her visitor badge without slowing and speedwalks toward the revolving door. She's meeting Kenji for dinner tonight, and that brings a smile to her face. A private booth at their favorite *izakaya*, a cold glass of white wine and skewers of her favorite yakitori chicken sound pretty good right now. Maybe she can even show him the latest apartments she's been looking at.

Stepping from the arctic-cooled highrise into the brutally steamy Japanese summer, she stops outside the door to shed her orange suit jacket before heading toward the train station. Spotting a red light ahead, she slows in front of yet another faceless, glass-clad, corporate tower, then stops, registering the name of the behemoth headquartered there.

Isn't that where Ren Noda works? And this is the time of day when office workers migrate from the cubicle part of their workday to the drinking part. It could be her big chance to waylay Coco's client and corner him for a little grilling about his friend, Hikaru.

The light turns green. Pedestrians surge into the crosswalk, leaving her behind as she hesitates. She wants to freshen up and change before meeting Kenji, but she's not going to be in this part of town again anytime soon. And talking to Ren shouldn't take too long. If she can get him to tell her Hikaru's real name, she could even ask Kenji to do a little background check when she sees him tonight.

She backtracks and enters HatsuBank's vast lobby, the sudden drop in temperature prompting her to put on her orange jacket again. The stone floor extends in honed gray perfection to all four walls, which are floor-to-ceiling glass. A pair of escalators ascend to the mezzanine and the pearly gates of HatsuBank reception.

Ignoring the free-standing café set up to snare coffee-craving employees before they leave the building, she steps onto the one going up, keeping an eye on the tired faces of the mortals returning to earth on the other side. She doesn't want Ren Noda to slip past her, going the other direction.

Even this late in the day, the bank needs no fewer than three identically-suited and conservatively coiffed women to repel unwanted visitors. Yumi waits for the middle guardian to finish directing a call. For once, her International Interpreting suit works to her advantage—it suggests a legitimate reason she

might be meeting with one of their exalted executives.

The woman behind the desk pushes a button, then looks up. "May I help you?"

"Yes. I'm Yumi Hata from the International Interpreting Company, here to see Ren Noda."

The woman taps a search into her computer, scans the screen. Her eyebrows draw together.

"I'm sorry, which department did you say he's in?"

Uhhh. She has no idea. Wait, yes she does. That photo of him with the Baby Metal star.

"Private Banking," she supplies.

The receptionist keys in another search. Frowns at the result.

"I'm sorry." She pauses, perplexed. "I'm not seeing a Ren Noda in Private Banking."

Oh," Yumi says. "I'm sorry, I just assumed, because of his job title."

More consternation. "Are you sure you have the right name? Because the only Ren Noda in our directory is a worker in the Communications Distribution department."

Yumi stands there, stunned. That can't be right. Ren Noda works in the *mail room*?

She delves into her purse, pretends to consult a slip of paper she finds there.

"I'm so sorry," she apologizes, bowing herself away from the desk. "My mistake. Right name, wrong address. Sorry to bother you."

She retreats, reeling.

Coco's client isn't a private banker. He's barely on the first rung of a career-track job. She'd hoped to expose some lies today, but she expected them to be Hikaru's, not Ren's.

What kind of game is he playing? Coco and Hoshi's entire LuvLuv Match business is built on catering to an exclusive clientele that can afford premium services and introductions,

and their sky-high “membership fee” and monthly “coaching” charges were designed to keep out the riff-raff. How had someone on the meager salary of a mail room clerk been able to pony up the ante to get into that game, never mind forking over the ongoing expense of meeting Coco every week?

And *why*? Ren Noda is paying a fortune to learn how to charm the kind of woman who would never date a mail room worker—much less marry him—even if he was the most attractive man on earth. Could he be training himself to run some kind of marriage scam? Is he *already* running some kind of scam? Now that she thinks about it, he’s the one who engineered the meeting between Coco and Hikaru. And his recent note-passing actually encouraged Coco’s infatuation with his handmate. Are Ren and Hikaru in it together?

Stopping at the lobby coffee shop to think, Yumi walks her cup of cold brew to a seat on the fringe of the café’s table corral, keeping one eye on the down escalator for Coco’s lying client. She has barely stowed her purse in the tableside basket, though, when she spots a familiar pair of square-framed glasses descending the escalator.

Unfortunately, he’s not alone. The conversation that blue-masked and black-suited Ren is carrying on with a similarly forgettable salaryman continues as they step off the moving stairway and head for the exit.

Does she have time to follow him? She checks her phone, and spots a notification from Kenji. He has to finish the paperwork on a late-breaking case and submit it before he goes home, so can they meet at seven-thirty instead of seven? She keys in a “yes,” then scoops up her purse and abandons her coffee, scurrying after Coco’s client.

Much to her dismay, Ren’s companion sticks with him as they board the train. At least the Hanzōmon Line doesn’t serve commuter burbs at the far edge of the known universe, so maybe she’ll get a chance to corner him before she’s too far away

to make it back in time for dinner.

Stubbornly refusing to allow the pressing commuters to move her too far from an exit at the other end of the car, she's just managed to maneuver herself into the coveted spot by the door when he and his companion step out onto the platform at Shibuya Station. She follows them, inching along on her tiptoes, bobbing left and right to keep their black heads in sight. They join the river of other black heads flowing up the stairs and out the Hachiko exit. Crossing the intersection, they pass the iconic 109 building without slowing, continue up the hill.

She hopes they won't stop at any of the bars or eateries beckoning in tie-loosened salarymen. If they're heading for a standard all-you-can-eat-and-drink, she'll have to admit defeat for today, because she can't afford to wait around for two hours until they emerge.

Fortunately, they don't. They continue past the Don Kihote and the tony Bunkamura department store. The neighborhood turns residential, but they angle up the hill, keep walking. Where the heck are they going?

Yumi's bright orange translating uniform is becoming more and more of a liability as she tails them into the increasingly posh neighborhood. She crosses the street and falls back a little further. It's not hard to keep them in sight, though, because the sidewalks are now nearly deserted. The only other pedestrians she encounters are children trudging home in the distinctive hats and plaid uniforms of a famous private school.

The streets narrow, and now the houses are mostly concealed behind walls and gates. The frenzied clamor of Shibuya has faded to a serene hush, broken only by the sound of an occasional waterfall splashing into a hidden pond.

What kind of business could Ren possibly have here, in a neighborhood that's too exclusive for even his boss's boss?

He and his colleague slow to a halt outside the kind of gate that announces an impressive home, inhabited by people who

value their privacy. This house isn't just big, it's surrounded by a beautiful garden, judging by the manicured greenery that peeks over the top of the tall tile-and-plaster walls that encircle it. The entrance gate's pleasing black and white architecture is clearly inspired by traditional thatch and bamboo, but it's rendered in clean lines of cedar that match the spreading eaves that can be glimpsed beyond the wall.

Yumi tucks herself behind a neighbor's car across the street. She wishes she could hear what Ren and his friend are talking about, but she dares not get any closer. Now they're loosening their ties, waiting for something.

Or someone. A shaggy-headed man wearing a faded black Gazette t-shirt comes trudging up the hill, guitar case slung over his shoulder.

Huh, that's actually the PandemixX guitarist's real hair.

They greet each other, but stand on the sidewalk, talking. Still not ringing the bell. Is Ren's fellow HatsuBank minion also in the band? He's much too tall to be Hikaru, so— The bass player? The drummer?

And what are they doing here? Playing a gig? A party? Some kind of event? No, they'd never show up to a performance dressed like that. They'd have gone somewhere to change and put on their stage personas first.

Maybe this is that promoter's house, and they're here to sign a contract. But if that's the case, why the guitar? It could be an audition, but nobody would hold an audition in a quiet residential neighborhood when there are plenty of professional sound studios right down the hill.

Another man arrives, his battered bass case looking out of place with his short black hair and suit. They sketch semi-ironic bows, then Ren rings the bell. He speaks briefly into the intercom, pushes through the gate as it buzzes open. The door clicks shut behind them.

Wait, what about Hikaru? Why didn't they wait for him?

She stays put. Ten minutes. Fifteen. Still no vocalist.

It's slowly dawning on her that he must have already been inside. But if they're here for band business, why would he go in without them?

Her thoughts are interrupted by an excited yip from an approaching Pomeranian with fur so clipped and groomed, it looks like a living stuffed animal. It's towing a stocky Asian woman wearing sensible shoes, her hair scraped into a non-nonsense bun. They angle across the street, and the dog stops before the gate the band just entered. They're buzzed in as Yumi's phone vibrates, reminding her: *Dinner Kenji*.

Time to go. But first, she dashes across the street to look for an address. Finds it on a discreet metal plate next to the mailbox, taps it into her phone, then hurries back down the hill toward the station, thinking furiously.

If Hikaru was already inside, he must have some connection to the people who live there. Unless *he* lives there.

No, Yumi used to date the son of a family that lives in that kind of neighborhood, and they don't mess around in hobby bands with weekend wannabes, hoping to win Saturday afternoon amateur competitions. Those people finagle insider introductions, and if they've got as much talent as Hikaru, they're slotted straight into a band with seasoned professionals, handed a playlist, and sent out onto the live house circuit to either make it or break it.

So, who *does* live there? The woman walking the Pomeranian? No, she seemed more like an employee. But it's certainly the home of the coiffed pet's owner, and Yumi would bet a week's paycheck that that kind of dog belongs to a woman.

A woman who Hikaru came early to meet with. Alone. What if Coco's not his big sponsor, after all? What if he's got a sugar mama who lives in upper Shibuya?

That would be bad news for Coco, and the longer it takes her to find out, the worse it's going to be.

But Yumi needs proof. It's a good thing she's seeing Kenji tonight, because he can easily find out who lives in that house. And with his access to police records, he can tell her if Ren Noda's got a history of pulling down shady sources of income.

The waiter parts the curtain at the private booth where Detective Kenji Nakamura waits, and slides a draft beer in front of him. Kenji thanks him, then gratefully unhooks one side of his mask, takes that first satisfying swig. Yumi is late, which is why he's still sitting alone at their favorite Komagome *izakaya*. He moodily studies the menu and hopes she hasn't found more apartments to show him.

He's already made excuses twice for not spending a precious Sunday looking at the ones she thinks are promising, but if he puts her off much longer, he's afraid she'll get tired of waiting and rent one on her own. None of the other Japanese women he'd dated would even think of living by themselves if they had family in Tokyo, but Yumi isn't like other Japanese women. Which is good. Usually. It's just sometimes all those years she spent living overseas make her *too* damned independent. Sometimes almost . . . American.

He has to find some way to stall her until he knows if he'll be offered a spot on the First Investigative Division's murder squad. Then they can start making real plans for the future. Move out of their childhood homes. Get a place together. But he wants to be properly engaged before they do that, and he can't move forward on that until he solves the biggest enigma of his career.

Assistant Detective Suzuki claimed to have figured it out. In fact, the All-Kanto Kanji Champion had a surprisingly detailed solution, for someone who doesn't even have a girlfriend. He'd advised Kenji to buy the ring first and surprise Yumi with it at a fancy foreign restaurant with a great view. That was the top engagement fantasy of over fifty percent of Japanese

women, according to a survey he'd read recently. When Kenji said he wasn't sure that asking someone to marry you should be done in public, Suzuki had assured him that it's the best plan strategically, because it's more awkward for her to say no.

Which didn't give him a whole lot of confidence, especially when his female colleague, Aya Kurosawa, gave him the opposite advice. Aya told him no woman wants to be stuck wearing a ring for the rest of her life that she didn't pick out. In fact, Yumi should be consulted every step of the way. Getting married should be a mutual decision, not one person getting down on one knee and asking. They should discuss their financial priorities, assign a budget, then go ring shopping together.

He'd managed to keep himself from groaning out loud at that prospect, and over the course of the next day, convinced himself it would be safe to ignore her advice. Aya's experience with getting engaged hadn't exactly been a positive one. Hers had been more like a trade negotiation, and she'd been *on* the table, not *at* it.

Finally, in desperation, he'd asked Detective Oki. Even though his advice was twenty years out of date, Oki had obviously wrestled with this issue successfully, because he was happily married with two nearly-grown kids.

But the big detective had unwrapped his *tonkatsu* sandwich and thought about it for a good three bites before telling Kenji that Aya and Suzuki were both right. He should let Yumi pick out the ring, but if he doesn't pop the question in a truly memorable way, he'll regret it the rest of his life.

"What do you mean, 'memorable'?" Kenji had asked. "How did *you* do it?"

"I didn't." Oki grimaced at his sandwich as if it had been sitting out in the sun too long. "And my wife is still making jokes about it, twenty years later. She never quite comes out and says, 'I wish I hadn't just agreed when you said that if we got

married, I could use your car instead of asking you to help me buy one,' but the fact that it still comes up makes me think it's still a bit of a sore point."

And Oki had been worse than no help at all when it came to coming up with actual ideas for "memorable" proposals. The judo instructor had wistfully admitted that his biggest regret was that he hadn't thought of challenging his fellow judo-champion wife to a bout, then pinning her and proposing she be his sparring partner for life.

So now Kenji is reduced to falling back on the internet. He takes another swig of beer and scans the search results. Hot air balloons, oysters with rings inside, Minecraft mods, dogs with rings tied to their—

"Hi, sorry I'm late."

Kenji looks up as a flustered and still orange-suited Yumi slides into the booth across from him. He quickly drops his phone into his pocket.

She orders a glass of white wine before the waiter disappears, then whips off her orange mask.

"I need your help."

Uh, oh. Please, no apartments.

"With what?" he asks, bracing himself.

"The reason I was late is that I was following this guy who's a client of Coco's, and I found out all kinds of stuff about him that doesn't add up."

"Whoa, back up," he says, relieved, but confused. "Who were you following? And why?"

"His name is Ren Noda. I'm worried he's planning to run some kind of scam. Or is already running one."

"On Coco?"

"Yeah."

"Is this one of the customers she entertains at the Queen of Hearts, or is he one of those salaryman guys she's teaching how to talk to women?"

“Salaryman. Or at least that what he told her.”

She launches into the Ren-Hikaru-Coco tale and what she discovered after work tonight. By the time she finishes, Kenji is into his second beer and their food is beginning to arrive.

“Okay,” he says. “So, this Ren Noda character lied to Coco about his job. He’s a lowly mailroom worker, but he can somehow still afford her coaching fees. And even though he’s not really a private banker, he managed to convince a pop star to go out to dinner with him.” Kenji picks up a skewer of chicken hearts. “To be honest, I still don’t understand why you think that means he’s planning to scam Coco. Or anyone else. Does he owe her money?”

“Well, no,” Yumi admits. “But why all the lies? And why is he encouraging her to fall for his band’s lead singer?”

“I don’t know, but is that so bad? You’re always moaning about how you wish she’d find someone who would make her happy.” Kenji has known Coco for nearly as long as Yumi, and as far as he can tell, a musician—or even a mail room flunky—is an improvement over the kind of guys she usually falls for. Like that gigolo Hoshi. Now *that* guy was a scammer if he ever—

“. . . basically *buying* their attention.”

“Sorry, what?”

“The band. It’s got an online sponsorship page for each member, where fans can make monthly contributions. The more money they pay, the more ‘special access’ they get to their favorite guy.”

“Okay, that’s sketchy.” He puts down his beer. “Is the singer getting money out of her that way?”

“Well, no. Not that I know of. In fact, Hikaru is the only one who’s *not* asking for money on the fan club app. But I suspect the reason he’s not trying to get ‘sponsors’ is that he already has one on the hook. A big one. If it’s not Coco, I’m thinking it might be an older woman who can afford that fancy house in Shibuya I followed Ren to tonight. The rest of the band

met outside the gate, but they didn't wait for him before going in. I stayed until quarter past six and he never arrived, so he must have already been there. Someone in the band has a relationship with the person who lives there, and since Hikaru was already there, that points to him, don't you think?"

"Could be," Kenji agrees, dropping his bare stick in the discards cup and picking up a fresh skewer. "I still don't see how I can help you, though."

"Can you find out who lives there?" She reads the look on his face. "Come on," she pleads, "it would only take you about two seconds."

"All right." It's a matter of public record, after all. A nuisance, but not unethical.

"And can you look up Ren Noda in the police database, see if he's got a criminal record?"

That's more of a gray area.

"Yu-chan, I can't just invade peoples' privacy without probable cause. All Ren Noda has really done is lie to Coco about his job."

"I know, but what if he's got a history? At least we'd have an idea what he's up to. You could be *preventing* a crime. Please?"

He makes a noncommittal sound, not promising anything. She takes that as a yes.

"Thank you!" She blows him a kiss and picks up the last minced chicken skewer. "If I come by the station and buy you lunch tomorrow, do you think—?"

He stifles a groan, but at least he'd escaped looking at any more apartments.

"I'll see what I can do."

5.

TUESDAY

.

The Komagome Police Station is unusually busy this morning, even though it's nearly lunchtime. Yumi heads for the last empty seat, which is—predictably—next to the only foreigner in the waiting area. The woman is wearing gold-rimmed glasses and has alarmingly bushy blond hair that she has tried to tame into a ponytail, with limited success in the summer humidity. She scoots over apologetically as Yumi approaches, even though she's already hanging slightly off the end of the bench. The lobby furniture is scaled for the average Japanese adult, and she probably hasn't been that size since she was about twelve.

Yumi bobs her an apologetic half-bow and sits, feeling a twinge of sympathy. She'd spent the first three years of elementary school being teased for being the smallest in her American public school class, and this Juno-esque foreigner probably got the same treatment for being the biggest.

What's she doing here? There's not much to lure foreigners to this part of Tokyo—there certainly aren't any international companies headquartered nearby—and Komagome is old-fashioned, but not in an Instagrammable way. The woman must be living in Japan, because her navy polyester suit and

unfashionable low heels are definitely not vacationing tourist-wear. No wedding ring, not young enough to be a student . . . maybe she teaches English? Which then makes Yumi wonder if there will be an issue when she discovers that nobody who works at the Komagome police station has spoken a word of English since eighth grade.

Should she offer to help? If Kenji doesn't come out before she— Where is Kenji, anyway? She'd arrived before the universal exodus at noon, but now it must be well past twelve, and he wasn't in the most recent flood of officers and clerks that gushed out of the elevator and flowed through the front door.

She checks her phone for the time, but her attention is hijacked by the most recent crop of apartments she's been considering. She clicks through them, still debating which ones to show him. None of them are perfect. Some are too small, others too far from the train station. This one looks promising, even if it's—

"Oh!" the foreign woman says. She's gazing at the residential tower on the screen.

Yumi looks up, startled.

"Sorry." The woman shrinks. "It's just...upon my arrival in the capital city of Tokyo, my humble self previously resided in that esteemed edifice."

Yumi blinks. The foreigner is speaking Japanese, but it's like something out of a samurai drama.

"Really?" Yumi replies. "You lived in this building? Where are you from?"

"Oh!" the woman blurts, embarrassed to discover that Yumi's English is better than her Japanese.

"The States," she answers, recovering. "But I've actually been in Japan for seven years. I'm working at an art auction house while I finish my dissertation."

Yumi nods. "I lived in the U.S. until third grade, then went back for college. Where did you grow up?"

The woman makes a face. “Nowhere you’ve ever heard of.” Then she laughs. “And I’m definitely not going back, if I can help it.”

Yumi angles her phone. “So, this building. Did you say you used to live there? Are the apartments as nice as in the pictures?” She scrolls down to a shot of the one she’s considering.

The woman frowns. “Which floor is it on?”

Yumi checks. “Third.” She taps a linked listing, “And it looks like 304 is available too. It’s a one-bedroom, but it’s pretty reasonable. I might look at them both.”

“Actually,” the woman hesitates, “I wouldn’t, if I were you. I mean, the apartments are perfectly nice—except for the usual colder-than-outside-in-the-winter and hotter-than-outside-in-the-summer air conditioning problems—but . . .”

“But?”

“There’s a reason the ones on the third floor are always for rent. The one closest to the elevator is, well, it’s a *gomi-yashiki*. Or whatever the apartment version of a garbage house is. The woman who lives there lost her husband years ago, and hasn’t thrown away a single thing since. It doesn’t smell until she opens the door, but . . .”

“Oh.” Yumi sighs, deletes the listings. “I wondered why apartments that close to the station were in my price range.”

“Sorry. I know how hard it is, if you don’t have anyone to share the rent.”

The elevator disgorges a new crop of lunchers, including Kenji. Yumi hoists her purse onto her shoulder as she stands.

“Ken-kun!” She waves.

He strides across the lobby in a police-issue face mask and a dark suit that screams “detective,” but he only pauses briefly to sketch a bow to Yumi before checking the pink slip in his hand and tentatively addressing the foreigner.

“Lobin-*sama*?” He holds up a memo with “Robin Swann” scrawled on it in the Japanese alphabet reserved for foreign

words.

“I am that unworthy person.” The woman rises hesitantly, straightening to her full height only after registering that Kenji is tall, so she won’t loom over him. “But I sincerely regret to inform you that Robin is the name my parents selected for me at birth. My humble family patronymic is Swann.” She bows apologetically. “I further beg your indulgence for my confusion, but my undeserving self is awaiting the attention of the esteemed Detective Oki.”

“Sorry, he’s been called out on a case,” Kenji says, managing to keep a straight face despite her strange Japanese. He bows. “I’m Detective Nakamura. The front desk asked if I could help you, instead. I understand you’re here about a missing person?”

“I am actually in this locale to ascertain how my ignoble self’s place of employment most regrettably sold a questionable artifact to a most-treasured purchaser, and the person I journeyed to Komagome to query about its provenance has apparently withdrawn to parts unknown. This person was the proprietor of the Tamura Gallery, located at the street-of-daily-shopping’s far terminus. Are you acquainted with that establishment??”

“Yes, although art crimes aren’t really our area,” Kenji replies. He hesitates, wrestling with the temptation to duck his responsibility, sighing as he decides not to. He flicks Yumi an apologetic glance, and invites the foreign woman to accompany him upstairs, where he’ll take down the details, then pass them along to the appropriate authorities.

Resigned, Yumi sits back down on the now-spacious bench to wait, flipping through today’s new apartment listings, which quickly exceed her budget.

Fortunately—or unfortunately, for whoever gets stuck hunting down the missing person—Robin Swann must not have been able to provide much information, because she and

Kenji reappear less than ten minutes later, and Kenji briskly sends her on her way. Yumi joins him at the front door, and they set out for Matsumoto's coffee shop.

"What was that all about?" she asks, hungry and slightly cranky, knowing they might not get a table at their favorite coffee shop because by now they'll be in the midst of the lunchtime rush.

"She works at an auction house, and she's looking for the guy who had her job before her, running tests to authenticate the art they sell. She apparently got hired in a pinch when he left them in the lurch, right before a big auction. He said he was quitting to run his own gallery full time, but everybody was so mad at him for leaving them in a tight spot, nobody followed up to see how he was doing until a big customer called Swann-san's boss last week. They'd commissioned an independent authentication on a piece they bought from the auction house, and it didn't match what had been claimed in the catalog. Swann-san was given the job of hunting down the guy who did the testing and asking him how he got it so wrong, but when she went to his gallery this morning, it looked like it had been closed for months. She came here to ask if the prior authenticator had been reported missing."

"And has he?"

"No. I couldn't help her, but I told her I'd pass the information on to Oki. She knows him from taking his beginning judo class at the Bunkyō Sports Center. I left my notes on his desk so he can decide whether to follow up on it or pass it on to the First Investigative Division's art squad."

Kenji hauls open the heavy glass door at Matsumoto's to let Yumi enter first, and the jangling bell brings Mrs. Matsumoto bustling out from behind the counter, one arm cradling two plastic-laminated menus.

They don't really need them—Matsumoto-san has been serving them sodas and snacks since they came there after

school as kids—but failing to offer menus would be as unacceptable to her as cutting corners at a tea ceremony.

The café never changes, except that a few more flakes of gold leaf disappear from the Matsumoto name on the front window with each passing year. The Formica counter becomes marginally less shiny from diligent scrubbing, the daily specials follow each other in a familiar and comforting rotation, and Mrs. Matsumoto can still be counted on to give advice that's even more filling than her food.

Today, however, she looks a little harried.

“Sorry, Yu-chan and Ken-kun, all I have left is counter seats. Do you want to wait for your usual table?”

Yumi glances at Kenji, but despite police business biting into his lunch hour, she knows he'll still be expected back at one.

“No, counter's fine,” she says.

Matsumoto-san seats them at the end, under the repaired sushi clock that has hung on the wall since their grandparents had been in school. Kenji orders the special lunch set—today it's a demiglace-topped *omu-raisu* with some secret Matsumoto ingredient that raises the humble omelet filled with ketchup-sauced rice to something far tastier. Yumi sticks with cold soba, topped with shreds of dried seaweed.

As Mrs. Matsumoto sets two glasses in front of them and pours water, Yumi debates whether it would be better to ask Kenji what he found out about Ren Noda first, and then broach the subject of apartments, or the other way around. Deciding they can always talk about Ren on the way back to the station, she fishes her phone from her handbag to show him the apartments and make a pitch to spend Sunday looking at them.

But just as she's pulling up the pages she flagged on the rental site, Kenji sets down his water glass and says, “I checked out your man Ren.”

She looks up. “And?”

“No arrests. He’s clean. Not in the system.”

Yumi’s not sure whether to be disappointed or relieved.

“What about the house?”

“I found out who owns it.”

“And?”

Mrs. Matsumoto arrives with Kenji’s special and Yumi’s noodles. They thank her, she tops up their water, and heads back to the cash register, where a line of regulars now waits to pay.

“If I tell you,” Kenji says, forking up a bite of his omelet, “do I get to pick a movie for us to see on Sunday?”

Yumi frowns. The last time she’d given up her negotiating rights, she’d had to sit through the third—or was it the fourth?—‘Mission Impossible.’ Still, what choice does she have? Coco is her best friend.

“All right,” she reluctantly agrees. The apartments will have to wait. “But please don’t choose one of those movies where the explosions outnumber the people, okay?”

Kenji agrees too quickly, which makes her wonder what she’d just gotten herself into.

“So?” she prompts.

“The name on the title is Ayumi Furasawa.”

Yumi looks at him, puzzled. Is that supposed to mean something to her?

He adds, “Better known as just plain ‘Ayumi.’”

“The makeup model Ayumi or the ‘Was It Me?’ Ayumi?”

“The ’90s rocker.”

“Huh. I guess she did pretty well, if she can afford a house like that.”

“I think she had a little help. Do you know who she married?”

Yumi is pretty celebrity-challenged, especially when it comes to Japanese pop stars who had been popular while she was living in America. But she seems to recall—

“Didn’t she get divorced a few years ago? Some big scandal? Her husband traded her in for someone half his age?”

“Yeah, an idol. Calls herself ‘Piko-Piko.’” Kenji says, eating another bite. “Which just proves that money *can* buy happiness. Her ex-husband is one of the founders of HatsuBank.”

“The company where Ren works?”

“Yeah.”

“Why would the chairman of the bank invite a mail room clerk and his amateur band to his ex-wife’s house?” She shakes her head. “Ren can’t be the connection.”

“I agree. That divorce was anything but amicable.”

“How do you know? Were there, like, domestic violence complaints?”

“No. But that scandal was such a train wreck, it was on the cover of *Spa!* for weeks.”

“You read *Spa!*?”

“Only the headlines. Their ads are all over the Yamanote Line.”

Yumi dips her last bite of noodles in the last sip of sauce, slurps them in. She wakes up her phone and searches “Ayumi musician” There’s no shortage of photos from the singer’s heyday, when she was a headliner on the ’90s glam rock circuit and opened for X Japan on their first world tour. Scrolling . . . scrolling . . . Yumi finally lands on a more recent snap, of the former star accepting a lifetime achievement award from some music industry hall of fame. She zooms in. In stage makeup and glitter, Ayumi still looks good, especially for a—she does the math—yikes, she must be in her forties now.

Her late forties. Ayumi is a divorced woman in her late forties who lives in a fancy house in Shibuya. Rich and famous enough to get anything she wants.

Including helping a talented young singer “climb the charts”? Which is not exactly a crime, among consenting adults, but will definitely throw a wrench into Coco’s happiness.

Despite his clean record, she still needs to have a talk with Ren. Sooner, rather than later.

6.

WEDNESDAY

.

More than one tired commuter on the crowded Toyoko Line train gives Yumi a judge-y look as she squeezes on, just before the doors close. She's been following Ren and his drumming co-worker since they left HatsuBank headquarters at the end of the workday, and when they changed trains in Shibuya, they'd made a dash for this platform, nipping onto the train just as the departure announcement finished.

She'd learned from Coco that Wednesday is the band's practice night, so she's hoping to corner Ren first, then Hikaru, to ask them a few pointed questions.

Yumi is nearly as tall as the average Japanese man, which means that on a packed train like this, she's pressed way too close to her neighbors' face masks, instead of being crushed against their wilted suits. By the time the train emerges from underground, though, she has maneuvered herself into a position where she can pretend to look at her phone while keeping an eye on Ren and company.

Shifting from one tired foot to the other, she wonders why they got on a train that's stopping at every tiresome, identical-looking station along the way. They must be going to one of the

obscure stations where the express doesn't stop. The bigger question is why Ren and the PandmixX drummer are heading out to the bland southern suburbs at all. Every station that clicks by is taking them farther from the entertainment district and deeper into baby stroller territory.

They finally get off at Toritsu-daigaku Station. Yumi follows, but the platform is so sparsely populated, she has to feign interest in a ballroom dance school billboard until Ren and the drummer have disappeared down the stairs.

From the top of the steps, she scans the exiting crowd, and catches her quarry detouring for a pit stop before exiting. Fortunately, today's interpreting job had been cancelled, so she doesn't have to worry that they'll wonder why her orangeness is lurking outside the men's room. When they emerge, they've changed out of their white shirts and ties. Suit pants and faded rock t-shirts are not a good look, but it confirms they're heading to a practice session, not to anything social.

Yumi beeps her train pass through the ticket gate and trots out the exit, just in time to catch them disappearing into a building halfway up the block.

"A-1 Rehearsal Space" reads the no-nonsense sign next to the door. Huh. Is it that much cheaper to rent studio space out here in the suburbs? She pauses to study the next-door houseware store's window display, giving Ren and his companion time to clear the reception desk, then follows them in.

The youth manning the counter is cultivating a resemblance to Dir en Grey's guitarist that looks distinctly aspirational. He's frowning at a study guide, cramming for an exam that'll land him the kind of job that will keep him in amplifiers until he achieves rock stardom.

She clears her throat. "I'm, uh, a friend of Ren Noda? Here to rehearse with PandemixX?"

He consults a clipboard. Without looking up, he tells her,

“Studio 3B,” and resumes moving a clear red sheet down the page to hide the answers printed in red ink.

Yumi moves past him to an elevator door at the rear of the lobby that looks like it’s been assaulted by many an equipment case. The car shudders arthritically to the third floor, making her wish she’d tried harder to find the stairs. It opens onto a dim, cork-tiled hallway that smells of musicians whose practice sessions are more like a gym workout than something they’d do in a concert hall. The building’s footprint is tiny, with only two rooms opening off the hallway on each floor. The small wire-gridded window in the first studio’s door is dark, but there’s light streaming from the one at the end, marked “B.”

She starts down the hall, just as the elevator dings behind her. Hastily backtracking, she slips into Studio A, pulling the door shut just before a shape briefly darkens the window, striding past. She peeks out. The long-haired PandemixX guitarist is wrestling a guitar case through Studio B’s padded door, allowing an energetic drum riff and a few warm-up notes on a bass to escape.

The guitarist makes three, plus Ren. As soon as Hikaru arrives, they’ll start rehearsing. If she wants to talk to Ren alone, she should pull him out now.

Her phone vibrates with a text. Two photos, looking down at Coco’s feet trying on some cute ankle boots. *Red or black?* she asks. Yumi replies *To go with what?* Coco shoots back *Your plaid Snidel skirt.* Then she adds, *btw, can I borrow it Friday night?* Yumi sighs, replies *ok.* Then, *red.* A heart emoji comes back. She puts her phone away and cautiously cracks the door to the hallway.

Creeping toward Studio B, she catches a faint rendition of their hard-rocking opening number leaking through the imperfect soundproofing. They started without Hikaru?

She peeks through the window. No, the vocalist must have arrived while she was giving Coco shoe advice, because he’s

standing with his back to the door, head down, mic in hand, awaiting his cue. But ha, she was right. The bleached mane that Coco went gaga over was definitely a wig. Too bad she's not here now. Seeing the object of her affection's black hair clipped to standard office length might be as crush-deflating as spotting a weary host the morning after, picking up his dry cleaning.

The rest of PandemixX are nothing special either, without their wigs and makeup. If she hadn't recognized this song as the one they'd opened with at the O-West, she'd never believe these ordinary-looking men had Cinderella-ed themselves into last Saturday's metal princes. With the exception of the guitarist—who, up close, looks closer to thirty than twenty—they all have black hair, cookie-cutter corporate.

The drummer's hands are a blur, hitting all the beats in a workmanlike way, without the flourishes he saves for an audience, and the bass player's forearms flex as he bashes out the beat. Then Hikaru's head snaps up, and he launches into the crowd pleaser they'd performed last weekend. Unlike the drummer, he's not saving his charisma for the stage. He's radiating energy like he's performing in front of an arena full of fans, not a grubby suburban practice room with a handful of wage-earners, still half-dressed in suits.

He pounds home the chorus then lets his mic hand fall to his side and spins around, walking toward the door to catch his breath, letting the band take over.

What the—?

Hikaru wears glasses?

No. Not possible.

She ducks away from the window, flattening herself against the wall.

Hikaru is Ren. Or is Ren Hikaru? Nobody could be both.

She beats a path back to the elevator, assumptions shattered. Ren is lying to Coco about much more than his job. But *why*?

Good thing she has no other plans for tonight, because this time she's not leaving until she finds out.

There are plenty of empty outdoor tables at the Excelsior Café that Ren will have to pass on his way back to the station, because even though it's summertime, it's also dinnertime, and most patrons have gone home to their families.

She settles in with a sandwich, a book, and an iced coffee, only darting inside twice—once to use the ladies' room, and once to give in to a “Montblanc” chestnut cream indulgence that she hopes will dilute the buzz from her second coldbrew.

Five minutes after nine, Ren emerges, swinging onto the street with a damp towel slung around his neck, head still in practice mode as he bops to a beat that only he can hear.

This time, he's alone. Yumi stands, abandoning her untouched third coffee and steps onto the sidewalk.

“Ren Noda?”

He looks up, puzzled.

“I'm a friend of Coco's,” she explains.

Blank look.

Oh. She'd forgotten Coco uses her real name with her LuvLuvMatch clients.

“Kokoro Yamaguchi?” she amends. “Your ‘relationship coach?’”

He breaks into an embarrassed, confused grin.

“Oh. Hi.” He looks anywhere but at her. “Sorry I, uh . . . do we . . .? I mean, have we met?”

“No. But we definitely need to talk.”

Five minutes later, he's toying nervously with his own iced coffee, and Yumi can see why he needs a relationship coach. Even though she hasn't said anything even vaguely accusatory yet, he can't meet her eyes for more than a fraction of a second—although he keeps trying, as if practicing something Coco hounded him about—and he has folded and re-folded his napkin until it's so thick, it's nearly a ball. He's so nervous

already, she can hardly make it worse by getting right to the point.

“Noda-san,” she says. “You lied to my best friend.”

He freezes. “What do you mean?”

“Let’s start with your job. You work in the mail room at HatsuBank. I know, because I followed you and asked, so don’t try to deny it.”

He flinches.

“Why did you tell her you’re a private banker?”

He stares down at his nugget of napkin, pinching it rounder. “Because you— You have to be, like, a big shot if you want to sign up. For LuvLuv Match. I read it in the brochure Misty gave me.”

“Who’s Misty?” She stops herself before asking if this is the same Misty Coco works with at the Queen of Hearts.

“She, uh, I met her when she was helping entertain guests at a party.” He unfolds the napkin ball, smooths it on the table. “Misty and some of her friends were hired to talk to people, start conversations. You know, help people get to know each other. I guess she felt sorry for me. She told me Kokoro could, uh, help me.”

“Help you what?”

His eyes dart to her face, back to his napkin. “Be more . . . I dunno, less nervous. Talking to people.”

Yumi rolls her eyes. “Look, Ren, you can cut the shy act. You may have fooled Kokoro, but I was with her at the O-West. I’ve seen you on stage. I know you’re Hikaru, and Hikaru is anything but shy.”

“I know, right?” he agrees, his voice filled with wonder, as if they were talking about someone else. “It’s crazy. It’s like I forget to be nervous when I’m performing. But being ‘Hikaru’ is like . . . it’s like acting.” He hangs his head. “I can pretend to be him on stage, but when I put down the mic, I turn back into boring old Ren.” He sighs. “Except when I’m with Kokoro. Last

weekend after the concert, when she came out with us afterwards, I just kept on being Hikaru, even though I usually get all embarrassed when I'm not on stage. She's the only woman I've ever been able to talk to. The only one I don't just, I dunno, clam up around. From the first time I went to her for coaching, I knew she was different. She gave me a hard time, but it wasn't embarrassing. It was . . . fun. I know I pay her to meet with me, but— I was beginning to think she might actually like me, at least a little, even though I was just Ren. But then she met Hikaru and I saw how different she is with someone she really—

” He gives a bitter laugh. “Is it possible to be jealous of yourself?”

Yumi sits back in her chair, digesting what she just heard. Ren Noda may be a consummate liar, but his pain feels real. He really might be in love with Coco.

But he's right to despair. Hikaru is Coco's type, but Ren most definitely is not. Even though they're the same person. She'll continue to joke around and have a good time with Ren, taking his money every week, while dreaming of Hikaru. And the longer it goes on, the bigger the heartache when she finds out the truth. Unless—

“What if you just become Hikaru? For real?” she says. “I mean, your band won that thing at the O-West, and the promoter promised to give you a contract, right? If you go pro, can't you quit your job at HatsuBank? You could even change your name. Then Hikaru wouldn't be just a stage role anymore, you could be him all the time.”

He groans. “It's not as simple as that. I can't just quit my job. It's not that I—” he breaks off. Grimaces, frustrated. “It's complicated.”

“Complicated.” She remembers the house in Shibuya with the manicured Pomeranian. “Like, Ren is free to do whatever he wants with his life, but Hikaru isn't?”

His head snaps up. “What do you mean?”

“Hikaru’s got a sponsor who lives in a fancy house in Shibuya, doesn’t he?”

“Sponsor?”

“I saw the page on FanFan.”

“I don’t ask for money on FanFan!”

“I know. That’s how I guessed you’ve already got someone on the hook. Someone rich enough to bankroll an up-and-coming pop star. Last week I saw you all waiting outside that house in the neighborhood behind Bunkamura. It’s owned by someone you have a relationship with, isn’t it?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“Don’t try to deny it. Because I know who lives there. A woman who’s better known as just plain ‘Ayumi.’ Who used to be a big pop star in the ’90s. Who’s in her forties, but still very attractive.”

He makes a face. “I guess you could say that.”

“Ren, she’s old enough to be your mother!”

“Well, yeah,” he agrees, puzzled. “Because she is.”

“She’s what?”

“My mother.”

His *mother*? Ren is Ayumi’s son? Yumi’s mouth makes an “O” but no words come out. That would explain where he got his talent. But now his story’s not adding up in a whole new way.

“I don’t understand,” she says. “If you’re the son of one of the biggest pop stars of the ’90s, how come you’re playing with amateurs and slogging your way into a contract at live house competitions? Why doesn’t she help you out?”

“She does let us practice in her home studio when she’s in town, so we don’t always have to pay for rehearsal space.”

“I meant with introductions.”

“She did. She introduced me to Toshi. But that was a favor to him, not me. He was her session guitarist on her last album, and he wanted to stop being just an axe for hire, so he asked if

she knew anyone decent who was starting a band. She got us together and we hit it off.”

“I meant promoters. Wouldn’t her old promoter take a chance on you, if he heard you sing and knew you were her son?”

“Yeah, but—” He’s shaking his head. “The last act he signed was Baby Metal, and after that, he quit working with unknowns. If he took me on as a favor to my mom, it would be about two seconds before someone figured out who I am. Then I could never be ‘Hikaru.’ I’d never be anybody but ‘Ayumi’s son.’ I know other kids whose parents are in the business, who took that shortcut. Once fans know the connection, it can never be un-known. Your successes are all ‘because of your parents,’ but your failures are all your own.”

“Okay, I get it. You don’t want your mom’s help. But what about your dad? You let him help you, right? The job at HatsuBank?”

“Yeah. Which is why I can’t just quit.”

“But doesn’t everyone at the bank know you’re his son?”

“Yeah. But in banking, that works against you, not the other way around. You have to work twice as hard to get promoted.”

“Is that why you’re still working in the mail room?”

“Yeah.” Then his eyes widen in alarm. “You won’t tell Kokoro, will you? About my job? Or my mom?”

That’s the question. And Yumi’s not sure how she’ll answer it. Now that she knows why Ren Noda has been lying, what’s she going to do about it?

“I never would have— Please. Promise,” he begs. Bowing low over the table, he adds a pitiful, “*Onegai-shimasu.*”

She sighs. She doesn’t really want to ruin the life he’s trying to build, and it feels unfair to spill Ren’s secret just because he admitted everything before making her promise not to. But she can’t let him draw Coco any deeper into his deception either.

The longer it takes for Coco to learn who Hikaru really is, the bigger her heartache when it all crashes and burns.

“Okay,” Yumi agrees. “I promise not to tell her. But you have to.”

“No. I can’t. She’ll never—” He takes a deep breath. “Just give me some time. We’re meeting with the promoter tomorrow. If he offers us enough so I can support myself without my HatsuBank job, I’ll quit. I’ll become Hikaru for real. Everyone will be happy. Just . . . just give me some time.”

“All right.” Yumi says. “You have until next week. You can tell her at your next coaching session.”

7.

FRIDAY

.

“He quit!” Coco drops into her chair at the Tea Four Two, looking shell shocked.

When her message begging for a meet-up arrived, Yumi had gratefully detoured from her shoe repair and other “day off” chores, and is already sipping her second iced tea at the Tea Four Two. Coco’s message hadn’t revealed what kind of Friend Emergency this is, but in case tears are involved, Yumi had thought it best to go straight to the café and snag the table in the corner with the most privacy.

“Who quit?”

Coco passes Yumi her phone. On the screen, there’s a photo of a single pink rose in a clear glass vase.

“This arrived at my house, with a note from Ren Noda. He says he’s ready to ‘graduate.’ That he won’t be coming on Tuesdays anymore.”

Yumi sits back in her chair. That little weasel! Did he think he could get out of telling Coco, as long as he didn’t go to any more coaching sessions?

Unless the promoter had offered PandemixX a contract last week, one that paid him enough to live on. Enough for Ren

to become Hikaru full time. In that case, he could be acting in good faith, taking steps to shed his old life. But she can't say anything to Coco, because she'd promised to give him until next Tuesday to tell her himself.

"I can't believe he's quitting," Coco is moaning.

"But," Yumi points out, "that's good isn't it? I mean, isn't the goal for your clients not to need you anymore? Doesn't this mean you did a great job?"

"Yeah, but—"

Coco sips the fizzy green beverage that has magically appeared in front of her. The waitress has worked here long enough to know that Coco plus corner booth equals therapeutic melon soda.

"He's been coming for so long," she laments.

"Are you worried it'll be hard to find someone else to coach on Tuesday nights?"

"No." Coco sighs. "That's not it. The after-work appointments are the easiest to fill, and we've got a waiting list."

"Okay, is it because he's your only connection to Hikaru?"

"Well, he was, but—" Coco shoots Yumi a quick, guilty glance. "Sorry, I didn't have a chance to tell you yet, but yesterday I got a message from Hika-rin on his private Line account, saying some people are getting together after their gig next Friday, and asking if I'd like to come."

Yikes, Ren *is* moving fast.

"I still don't understand why you're so upset," Yumi says. "I mean, the only times you've ever mentioned this Ren guy to me is when he does something hilariously lame. Why do you care if he's moving on?"

"I dunno." Now Coco is drawing small circles in the condensation pooling on the table. "Maybe because he was my first client? I guess I sort of got used to seeing him every week. I didn't realize it until now, but I kind of look forward to Tuesdays. It's not like we're friends, exactly, but . . ."

“But what? Because to tell you the truth, you’re kind of acting like you got dumped.”

“What? No!” Coco yelps. “It’s not like that. He’s just a client. It’s business.”

“You’re going to miss him, though, aren’t you?”

Coco opens her mouth. Shuts it again.

“Well, maybe,” she admits. “Kind of. A little.” Then quickly adds, “I mean he’s totally not my type—even though he’s way better than he used to be—so I’d never want to go out with him or anything like that.” She pauses. “But now that he knows how to tell a story and not get sidetracked down a rabbit hole so you have no idea what he’s talking about, he can be kind of fun. I actually laughed at one of his jokes a couple of weeks ago. Even though it was still kind of lame.” She finishes her melon soda. Frowns at the ice.

“What are you thinking?” Yumi probes.

Coco pushes aside her empty glass and slides out of the booth. “The ladies’ room. Hold that thought.”

While she’s gone, Yumi orders Coco another melon soda and stirs her iced tea.

This is exactly the outcome she should have been hoping for, right? Ren is on his way to music stardom, he’s going to grow his hair and bleach it for real. He’s going to become Hikaru and make all of Coco’s dreams come true.

So why is she feeling so uneasy?

She should be happy knowing that Coco’s soon-to-be-celebrity crush not only returns her affections, he’s actually a decent guy. Shy, awkward Ren is going to become charismatic, confident Hikaru, but he won’t stop being Ren, deep down inside.

And that’s the problem.

He won’t stop being Ren. He’ll be able to fool Coco—and himself—for a while, but if this turns into a real relationship, she’s going to find out. He’s obviously hoping that by then it

won't matter. That once they're an established couple, discovering Hikaru is actually Ren might be a surprise, but it won't be a deal breaker. He's hoping their relationship will be so solid by the time she finds out that they'll be able to laugh about it together and move on.

But it's not that simple. Yumi knows a musician who managed to live a lie for years, for the sake of his crazy successful career. In the end, he'd given up everything, so he didn't have to spend one more day pretending to be someone he's not. Coco's business partner Hoshi had also lived a lucrative lie, but in the end, he threw it all away gladly, just to have the kind of normal life most people take for granted. They had both acted their parts seamlessly for years, but in the end, they had to choose. And neither had chosen to keep wearing a mask.

Coco was on her way to being as much in love with Hikaru as Ren was with her. But what will happen when Ren can't keep up the act anymore? What if his fame and fortune and position as the son of celebrity royalty make the lies so comfortable that his crisis doesn't happen for years? What if it doesn't happen until Coco is past the age when it will be easy to find another partner to share her life? Or, even worse, what if they're married by then? Have kids?

If Coco chooses that life with her eyes wide open, it's one thing. Not seeing the "Do not back up, severe tire damage" sign until you have four flats is something else.

But Yumi has promised Ren she won't tell. She has to figure out a way for Coco to discover it herself.

8.

TUESDAY

.

Yumi checks Coco's text for the room number, as she stops before the counter in the lobby of the Big Echo karaoke center. She'd convinced Coco at the Tea Four Two that what she needed was "closure" on the Ren situation, and that the perfect way to get it was to insist on treating him to a "graduation" meet-up during their regular Tuesday night time, to sing karaoke together.

It had been a harder sell than she expected. Apparently, teaching Ren to acquit himself without embarrassment if he has to sing in a room with a date was Coco's one failure. They'd tried it once, and he didn't even know how to turn on the mic. She'd finally had to choose a song for him, but he couldn't even make eye contact with her while trying to sing. Everyone who didn't grow up on a remote desert island knows AKB48's "Heavy Rotation," but his eyes were glued to the monitor, stumbling over the words slightly too late as they scrolled across the screen. She'd poured beer down his throat until his face turned red, but even the universal performing aid didn't help.

Yumi had used that as the excuse to invite herself along, telling Coco that she had a surefire technique that had worked

on Kenji, who had also been hopeless at mandatory drunken singing. Which was true, except she planned to use a very different approach tonight.

"I'm here to meet friends," Yumi tells the uniformed counter attendant. "Kokoro Yamaguchi? In room 205?"

Order slip timestamped, she makes for the stairs. The door to 205 is closed, but when she peers through the service window, she sees Coco standing inside with Ren, showing him the switch on the mic that he's holding as awkwardly as a thirteen-year-old. A half-drunk fruity cocktail and a half-full cup of draft beer stand on the low table between the vinyl-upholstered banquettes that line three of the walls. This room's wallpaper features monkeys and elephants, but Coco and Ren must not have flipped through the thick song menu to choose their tunes yet, because they haven't dimmed the lights to reveal which of the animals glow in the dark.

Yumi knocks, then enters. Coco and Ren both look up, then his puzzled look turns to shocked recognition.

Coco misses it, because she's busy making introductions.

"Ren, this is my friend Yumi Hata. She's the surprise I promised. As our last and final lesson, she's got a surefire way to teach you how to do karaoke. It even worked with her hopeless detective boyfriend, so you know she's good." She turns to give him an encouraging dimpled smile. Which turns to a pout. "Hey, don't make that face. What did I tell you about first impressions?" She slaps him playfully on the arm. "She'll think I haven't taught you anything."

He quickly replaces the panicked look with a sickly grimace and mutters, "Nice to meet you, Hata-san."

Grim smile. "You can call me Yumi."

He reluctantly gives her permission to call him Ren.

A waiter knocks and Yumi orders another round of drinks for Ren and Coco, and a beer for herself. She doesn't like beer, which makes it the perfect drink for keeping her wits about her

and heading off any ploys Ren might use to escape what's coming.

"I see Coco has already shown you how to turn on the mic," Yumi says, nodding at the tool held limply forgotten in his hand. He glances down at it, as if it were a snake.

"Can't you go first?" he pleads, offering it to her. "Show me how it's done?"

No chance. Coco might let him escape to the bathroom, and that would be the last they saw of Ren Noda.

"Nope. The only way past this is through it, so drink up while I find a good song for you to start with. Something I know you'll know."

She scoops up the thick song menu and positions herself between him and the door, flipping through the laminated pages. She finds the song she's looking for, and punches the code into the console.

"Bottoms up!" she commands with false cheer.

Coco nudges Ren and holds up her cocktail glass, clinks it against his unresponsive beer cup as they both say, "*Kampai!*"

"Okay," Yumi says. "Ren-san, come stand over here."

"I won't be able to see the words, though, if I stand there," he objects. He gestures at the wide-screen monitor on the wall behind her, which will play the chosen music video with scrolling lyrics, but without lead vocals.

"That's why I chose 'Was It Me?' Even you know that one, right? Come on," she says. "You'll be surprised how good it feels to just cut loose. Show Kokoro your inner rock star."

Ren looks at her with despair—and a little anger, now that he sees what she's doing—but shuffles dutifully to the spot she's pointing to, in front of the TV. Stands there, mic arm limp at his side, staring at his shoes.

Yumi turns down the lights, presses Play, and holds her breath, waiting while the intro to Ayumi's "Was It Me?" builds to the vocalist's cue.

Then Ren's head snaps up, and Yumi knows her gamble paid off.

It's Hikaru who raises the mic, and despite the fact that his body still wears the square glasses and short black hair of Ren Noda, it's Hikaru who belts out the words.

Was it me in the mask?
With the little white lies?
Was it me,
Was it me,
In that brilliant disguise?"

Was it me who got careless?
Me who fell hard?
Was it me,
Was it me,
Who let down my guard?

Eyes closed in the ecstasy of performance, he paces the small room, singing like he's done it a hundred times. Because he has. Yumi glances at Coco, to see how she's taking it.

Her mouth is hanging open. She's in shock, but Yumi can't tell if it's good shock or bad shock.

Ren spins around as the instrumental takes over, just like he did in Studio 3B, but this time he whips the mic cord and moves to the control panel. Just as his cue arrives, he shuts off the karaoke accompaniment. In the sudden silence, instead of belting out the famous chorus that denounces the cheating lover, he looks at Coco and sings the final verses as a solo ballad with very different words.

It was you with that smile
It was me who got caught,
It was you

It was you
Tied my heart in a knot.

It was you who I wanted
I waited so long
It was you
It was you
It was you all along.

But as he whispers the final words, Yumi is already slipping out the door. She's no longer worried what will happen when Coco finds out that Ren is Hikaru. If the look on Coco's face as he sang that final verse is any indication, it doesn't matter at all.

9.

THURSDAY

.

Yumi scans the Mad Hatter. Dang, all the tables are already filled. It's past nine, later than she and Coco usually meet, because Yumi has been working like a dog for the past two days. She and Coco haven't seen each other face to face since the karaoke night.

They'd exchanged an avalanche of messages since then, of course. Yumi has heard all about Ren admitting that he'd fallen for Coco the first time they met, but once she started returning his affections as Hikaru, he didn't know how to tell her that her boring, shy client was also the PandemixX front man. And once Coco realized he was the same guy who sent her a room full of roses, she'd been deeply embarrassed and apologized for drunkenly telling him those fond-but-unflattering "anonymous client" stories at the Infirmary.

Yumi heads to the bar. Tonight Boshi-san is masked in a peony and tiger print designed by a famous tattoo artist, and wearing his favorite porkpie hat. He's mixing up tonight's cocktail special, something he's calling a Red MarQueeni.

"White Rabbit?" she says, catching his eye. As if he didn't already know.

"Coco-chan already got you one." He nods toward the

corner where they usually sit.

Yumi follows his gaze, and does a double take at the woman sitting under Spiderman Alice, tapping a message into her phone and sipping a Lemon Jabberwock. A White Rabbit sits before the empty chair.

She makes her way through the tables and stops in front of Coco.

“What’s with the new look? I totally didn’t recognize you.”

It’s not just that Coco is in black hair mode, she’s got a new wig that’s much thicker and glossier than her old one. It’s cut in the kind of edgy style you can only get at one of those salons where you don’t dare show the hair artist a picture of what you want.

“Do you like it?” she asks.

“It suits you, in a weird way.” Yumi eyes it critically. “Where did you get it? It’s a lot better quality than your old one—if I didn’t know better, I’d think it’s your real hair.”

“That’s because—” Coco’s cheek pinkens. “It is. I mean, it’s not a wig.”

Yumi stares.

“You cut your hair and dyed it *black*?” In all the years she’s known Coco, she’s never had black hair. “Why?”

“I dunno, ready for a change, I guess.”

Yumi’s not buying it.

“Why *now*?”

Coco doesn’t answer.

“Don’t tell me you dyed it for *him*?”

Coco sips her drink, guilty.

“Coco!” They’d had a pact since middle school never to change their looks for any boyfriend. “I’d have thought a rock star’s son would have been happy to discover that your real hair was bleached.”

“Actually, he’s more of a banker’s son when it comes to hair.” Wry smile. “So, I got it done yesterday. To surprise him.”

“And?”

“When he came out of his mom’s house to meet me last night, he almost didn’t recognize me.” Then she grins. “And I almost didn’t recognize him. Because he bleached his platinum. It’s still really short, but—”

Yumi bursts out laughing. Maybe they really are soulmates.

“We do have one big problem, though.” Coco frowns.

“What?”

“He’s moving back home, to save money.”

“To that super luxe palace in upper Shibuya? With the amazing garden? And the private recording studio?”

“And his *mom*.”

“Well, it’s not like the rest of us don’t live with our parents.”

“I know, but that’s why I’ve been thinking.” Coco stirs her Jabberwock, takes a deep breath. “I’ve been thinking about moving out. Getting an apartment. I mean, two can live almost as cheaply as one, right? So—”

“Coco!” Too soon. Way too soon. “Don’t. You can’t. Look, even though you’ve *technically* known him for a year, you really have to see each other in all kinds of situations before moving in together. You have to survive a few fights. And a few negotiations. Like, I dunno, which movie are you going to see on your one day off? And do you even know if he replaces the toilet paper the right way when it runs out? If he even *notices* when the—”

“I know!” Coco holds up both hands to stop her. “I know. I get it. Don’t worry. That’s why I’m thinking about getting a two-bedroom place.”

Yumi rolls her eyes. “That’ll last about one night.”

“Not if one’s for me, and one’s for you.”

Oh.

Oh.

Yumi sits there, stunned, then a huge smile spreads across her face.

Coco raises her drink. “To freedom, true love and being

the best roommates ever.”

Yumi raises hers too, then hesitates.

“On one condition,” she says, eyeing her friend suspiciously. “You’ll let me wear my new clothes at least once before borrowing them, right?”



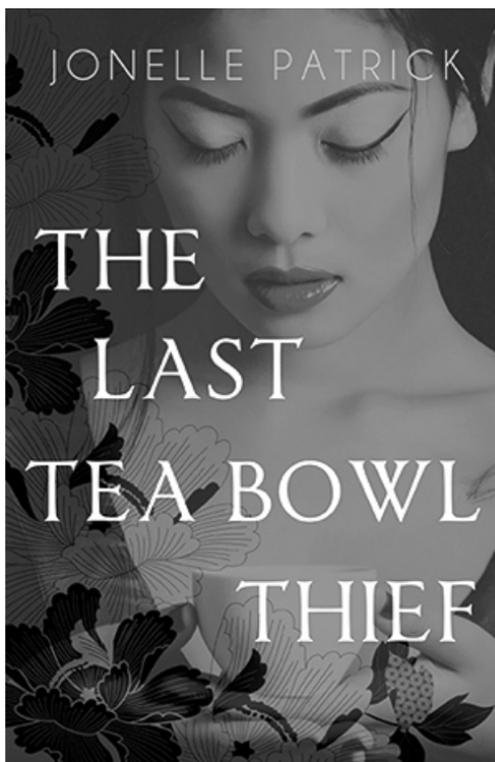
Dear Reader,

Thank you for spending some of your precious downtime with Yumi and Kenji and Coco today—I was a reader long before I was a writer, and I know how jealously I guard those escapist book hours!

If you enjoyed this short, you might enjoy the other books in the Only In Tokyo mystery series, but I'm especially hoping you might try out my new standalone mystery, *The Last Tea Bowl Thief*. It's got an all-new cast of characters, (except for the one who makes a surprise appearance in *It Was You!*) but I hope you'll come to be as fond of these new friends as your old ones.

Yours in all things mystery & Japan,
Jonelle

Don't miss Jonelle Patrick's new mystery,
The Last Tea Bowl Thief!



For three hundred years, a stolen relic passes from one fortune-seeker to the next, indelibly altering the lives of those who possess it.

In modern-day Tokyo, Robin Swann's life has sputtered to a stop. She's stuck in a dead-end job testing antiquities for an auction house, but her true love is poetry, not pottery. Her stalled dissertation sits on her laptop, unopened in months, and she has no one to confide in but her goldfish.

On the other side of town, Nori Okuda sells rice bowls and tea cups to Tokyo restaurants, as her family has done for

generations. But with her grandmother in the hospital, the family business is foundering. Nori knows if her luck doesn't change soon, she'll lose what little she has left.

With nothing in common, Nori and Robin suddenly find their futures inextricably linked to an ancient, elusive tea bowl. Glimpses of the past set the stage as they hunt for the lost masterpiece, uncovering long-buried secrets in their wake. As they get closer to the truth—and the tea bowl—the women must choose between seizing their dreams or righting the terrible wrong that has poisoned its legacy for centuries.

*The Last Tea Bowl Thief is available
in paperback from Seventh Street Books
and ebook from Simon & Schuster Digital*

Advance praise for *The Last Tea Bowl Thief*:

“A wonderful blend of history and mystery.”

—Laura Joh Rowland, author of *The Iris Fan*.

“An immersive page-turner, meticulously researched and perfectly plotted. Without question, the best book I have read all year.”

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“I don't know when I've been more caught up in a story. Jonelle Patrick handles the fascinating, centuries-old tale of the tea bowl with elegance and verve. Her descriptions are flawless and reveal her deep understanding of Japanese culture. A masterful achievement.”

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—Mandy Bartok, *Uncovering Japan*

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Discussion questions, pop-up book club, video slideshow
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lastteabowlthief.com

Books by Jonelle Patrick

NIGHTSHADE

FALLEN ANGEL

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THE LAST TEA BOWL THIEF

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonelle Patrick is the author of five novels set in Japan, and has been writing about Japanese culture and travel since she first moved to Tokyo in 2003. In addition to the Only In Tokyo mystery series and *The Last Tea Bowl Thief*, she produces the monthly newsletter *Japanagram*, and blogs at *Only In Japan* and on her travel site, *The Tokyo Guide I Wish I'd Had*. She also teaches at writing workshops, appears as a panelist at Thrillerfest, and was the keynote speaker at the Arrow Rock Writing Workshop.

A graduate of Stanford University and the Sendagaya Japanese Language Institute, she's also a member of the Mystery Writers of America, International Thriller Writers, and Sisters in Crime. She divides her time between Tokyo and San Francisco.

You can follow her at jonellepatrick.com