

“So,” Michiko said, breaking into my thoughts. “I’m always glad to meet another schollie.”

“Another *what?*”

“Schollie. You know, a student here on scholarship.”

“Oh.” So she wasn’t rich. “And if you’re *not* on a scholarship? What do they call you then?” I asked.

“A dollie.”

Michiko rubbed her thumb against her fingers. “You know, for dollars. Most people around here have loads of it.”

“Yeah. So I hear.”

Michiko shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. Dollies may have money, but schollies have something that most dollies don’t.”

“What’s that?”

“Talent,” she said smugly. “That’s why dollies hate us. Our mommies and daddies don’t need to throw money at the school just to get us in.”

I was sure some of the rich kids must have *some* talent at least, but I was too distracted by my surroundings to say anything. I had never been to a school that had a crystal chandelier in its lobby before. And walking around, it was easy to imagine society ladies coming to the balls that must have

been held in what was now the auditorium as well as to the formal dinners that must have been held in what was now the cafeteria. Now, with students swarming everywhere, the only thing hard to imagine was that it had once been the private home of one single millionaire.

Practically every wall had some kind of display of amazing artwork on it. There were still-life paintings, abstract works, fashion illustrations, landscapes . . . *Maybe*, I thought, *studying art here won't be so bad after all*. Aloud, I said, "They really do have a lot of gorgeous art here."

"Yeah." Michiko swept a glance over an arrangement of oil paintings. "These were all done by students, you know, using live models,"

We had just come to a display of nudes. I paused. "All of these?"

Michiko nodded.

*If my mother only knew*. I thought, trying not to giggle. There was *no way* she was going to let me draw a naked man. Nah-uh. She could be . . . very Puerto Rican, let's say, about my associating with the opposite sex. She didn't want me hanging out with boys that weren't my cousin Manny, or men that aren't my uncle, Tio Padre, and I was sure she wouldn't want me sketching any man without his

clothes on. Even though she was an artist herself, she could be very old-fashioned about things.

“You have to be sixteen or older to take an anatomy class, though,” Michiko said, as though reading my mind. “And have your parents’ permission.”

I nodded. *At least that gives me a few years to convince my mother.* I watched as a boy carrying a tuba rushed past us. “Hey, Michiko? Where are the music studios?”

“They’re down in the lower levels, in what used to be the maid’s quarters and the wine cellar.”

“Can you show me?”

“I don’t think we have time to go there right now.” Michiko said. “How come?”

“No reason,” I muttered. But my disappointment quickly flitted away when I noticed a bulletin board wall near the theater entrance. “Whoa! Hold on!” I ran over to them. “Get a load of these!” Flyers advertising shows, concerts and events covered it like wallpaper.

“Costa Cider, Space Monkey Mafia, Sirenade . . . Are these all *student* bands?”

Michiko smiled. “Yup.” She pointed to a bright green flyer. “That one’s mine.” Her finger rested

on the block letters that spelled JOSIE'S LUNCH.

"You're in a *band*?" Why didn't I think of this before? I didn't have to be a music major to be in a student band! "What kind of music do you play?" I asked her.

Michiko eyed me warily. "Mostly rock, with some folk-alternative influences."

"I've always dreamed about being in a rock band. How often do you rehearse?" I babbled. "What instrument do you play—or do you sing?"

Michiko walked me away from the bulletin board. "Actually, Gina, I'm sorry but I'd rather not talk about my band right now. We're kind of going through a rough patch."

"Oh, I'm sorry. What's wrong?" I asked. My heart was sinking—I felt like my first connection to the music scene at NYAAT was slipping away.

Michiko shook her head and said nothing.

"I mean—well, do you need a guitarist?" I blurted out. Maybe I could fill in, just like Angel Dominguez.

Michiko stared at me. "No," she said finally, and in a firm voice. "We don't need a guitarist. And I really don't want to talk about this, Gina."

"EeeeeeeEEEEEE!" A piercing scream cut through the crowd that had been forming in the

hall, startling Michiko and me. We watched as a beautiful, pert-nosed girl with boy-short platinum hair and a tiny designer summer dress ran toward two other girls with long, flowing, shampoo-commercial hair and cheerleader-short skirts. The scream, it turned out, was a happy one, as all the girls had their arms thrown wide open and were grinning at one another.

They were a chorus, all of them screeching, “EeeeeeeEEEEEE!”

One of the long-haired girls (a brunette) said: “Ohmygaaaaaaa! You look sooooo fabulous with that cut!”

The golden long-haired one chimed in with: “HOT! Totally hot! Oh, I am so totally going to chop off my hair!”

The short-haired girl gave her head a little shake. “Thanks! I know, I know. I got it while I was on the Riviera.” She smiled as her two friends pawed at her hair.

“A French tan, too! I *love* a French tan!” cooed Goldie.

The brunette pouted. “Me too. Oh la la!”

The short-haired one held up a hand and commanded, “Okay, stop! Now, tell me: Did either of you see... *him*?”

Brunette whined, “No! Did *you*?”

“No!” said the queen. “Oh, I can’t wait to see him! I’m sure he’ll look hotter than ever!”

Michiko clucked her tongue. “Come on, Gina. Let’s go. It’s just a bunch of dollies. If I watch anymore I’ll be sick.”

“Who are they talking about?” I asked.

Michiko rolled her eyes. “Probably Craig. Craig Hall. He’s only in the eighth grade, too, but he’s this guy that even girls in the upper school are crazy about.”

“I guess he must be pretty good-looking.”

“Only if you call tall, broad-shouldered guys with startling blue eyes and angelic singing voices attractive,” Michiko said.

I giggled. “I guess I’ll know him when I see him.”

She widened her eyes and nodded. “Oh *yeah*.” She turned away from me, but not before I saw her blush.

As we made our way up the grand staircase, I caught the reflection of the three fembots in the mirrored wall. Something about the girl with the short, platinum blond hair drew my eye. I saw myself frown in the glass. “You know what’s weird?” I asked, turning to Michiko. “The girl with

the short hair reminds me of a girl I used to be friends with back in the third grade.”

Michiko shuddered. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

I snorted a laugh. “But it couldn’t be—”

“I sure hope you don’t mean—” Michiko said.

And together we ended with, “—Willa Burch.”

Michiko gasped in horror. “No way! You were friends with—with Willa?”

“We were just little kids. It was the third grade. She was an artist, too.”

Michiko didn’t change her expression. She still looked like was standing upwind of a garbage truck.

But suddenly my memories of that time came back strong. I remembered how happy Willa had been when I first met her. Fun-loving. The type to laugh at anything and anyone. We’d become friends when her father started working at the same gallery as my mom and began teaching the kids’ after-school art program there. After a while Willa was over all the time for playdates. And I loved hanging out with her dad and getting a taste of what having a father around could be like. That’s why it was so shocking when her parents broke up. Willa’s personality seemed to change overnight, and mean kids started calling her

‘Weeping Willa.’ Then she and her mom just kind of disappeared. I’d always wondered what had happened to her. “Maybe I should go over and say ‘hi,’” I told Michiko. “See if she remembers me.”

Michiko actually put out her arm to stop me from going back down the stairs. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you. I doubt she’d give you the time of day. People call her ‘Willa the Witch’ these days. Let’s just continue with the tour.”

“Are you serious? She can’t be that bad.”

But just as said that, I caught Willa’s reflection in the mirror.

She seemed to be looking straight at me. Did she...recognize me? I smiled at her.

Willa didn’t smile back. Instead, her face darkened and her eyes narrowed into slits. She tilted her head as if to get a better look at me.

“Come on. I’ll show you where your locker is.” Michiko was already halfway up the stairs. “You can catch up with Willa later. She might be in some of your classes. She’s an art major, too, you know.”

“All right,” I said. But as I followed Michiko, I couldn’t help but think that Willa *had* seen me—recognized me, even. And the part I didn’t get? She didn’t seem happy about it.