

'Uncle' Jim's car continued speeding down the dark, wet freeway to an unknown destination. Takako didn't look at the driver; she stared out the window into the night, trying not to show her panic and fear. What could she do? What were her options? And why was this happening to her? She quickly tried to think of an escape plan.

Just then, Jim interrupted her thoughts.

"We'll be stopping soon. I'm starving, and you may want to visit the ladies' room. So, at the next exit we'll stop at a truck-stop café. When we get out, follow me closely. And I'll expect you to behave yourself while we're eating. OK?"

Takako wondered what he was talking about. She had studied English in school, but Jim's language was peppered with expressions that were unfamiliar to her. That made her situation even scarier.

"Pardon?"

"I said that you should pretend like we were having fun; that everything is OK; that we are just on a normal trip to see your friend and my niece."

Takako suddenly became curious.

"Is Christine really your niece?"

"You'll find out soon enough!"

The cafe appeared in the distance, and the two remained silent until the car pulled up in the parking lot and stopped near the front door.

"Remember, Takako, if you cause any problems, you won't ever see Christine. Do you understand?"

Takako nodded her head. She wanted to see Christine, although she had never actually met her. What a dilemma! She had never been in a worse predicament. The only person in North America she knew was her pen pal, but she had yet to meet her!

Jim came around and opened her door and helped her out. They walked into the diner and Takako hurried to the washroom. Just before she entered, she noticed that Jim had positioned himself casually outside the door like a security guard. Where would she go if she managed to escape? She didn't even know where she was. And there was Christine to worry about. What would happen to her? Takako wouldn't try to get away yet, even if she could.

Later, at the table, Takako and Jim sat quietly like a couple of weary, wet travellers. Takako remained silent while Jim was ordering the food. She not only looked tired, she *WAS* tired.

They ate without speaking. Takako peered over the booth's partition and looked around at the rest of the diners. Mostly she could see truckers, probably far away from their loved ones as well, but at least *THEY* were safe. There were several families too, with some of the smaller kids running around the tables and making quite a bit of noise. The restaurant was quite clean, and the air conditioner kept the smoke from the cigarettes at a minimum. Jim took out his pack and lighter and lit a cigarette, but this time he didn't offer Takako one. She wondered if he knew that she was a

violin player. She was too tired to worry about it; all she wanted to do was to sleep for 24 hours straight! Then she could wake up from this nightmare!

After Jim paid the check, he motioned to Takako to head out to the car. He followed closely behind, almost like he was expecting her to bolt into the night, or back into the restaurant like a kidnapped child escaping her captor. Just as Jim was opening the café door to allow Takako out, a loud male voice rang out from the restaurant: "Excuse me, Takako!" Jim froze in his tracks, and Takako whirled around to see who her rescuer could be. Finally, the nightmare was over! Or was it?