

Secret Song

By Skylar Marks

“I'd like to dedicate this book to my Dad who supports me not only in my musical life, but in everything I do.”

Chapter 1

I like to feel the open air rising around me. I like to feel the wind whipping around corners and cooling me off. Every day I sit in the meadow. I close my eyes. I feel the sky and the wind. I feel the sounds and the hopes and dreams of the sky, then I take my pen and paper and guitar and write.

I feel too strongly, I say too much, and sometimes I don't know what I'm doing here. I have a dad, and an older brother who is six years older than me, so he feels he can boss me around and pick on me. I can't do anything about it. So because of them, I am not completely alone, but I feel like I am. My dad cares about me and helps me sometimes, but he doesn't understand.

It's November. The sky's bright, orange, pink, purple and blue. I sit in the meadow by my house. A word echoes over and over in my head: *Belong*.

I live in northern California. This time of year it's cold. So when I go outside, I have to put on a sweater or jacket. My dad is strict. "You may write music Jeremy, but you may only write about the things I say you are allowed to write about." But he lets my brother decide *his* future on his own.

I go to school but I also have a music teacher that teaches me for two hours every Saturday and Sunday so I am never free to play with anybody. Not like I have anyone to play with. My music teacher teaches my how to read notes and stuff like that. It's boring. But he also teaches me guitar chords. I also play harmonica but I don't really tell my father or he would make me throw it away. "Music is a waste of time unless you make a profit," he says. I tell him I'm lonely, I want a friend. But he doesn't listen.

I live out in the middle of the wilderness and I have no neighbors for miles. If I turned in a full circle, a house would not be sighted by my eyes. I am always lonely. I feel like crying a lot but I find a way to hold back the tears or my brother would say that I'm a sissy or something. The best time is when I'm sitting in the meadow by my house. In the middle of it there are

three rocks and I sit on the highest one. It makes me feel like a king. When I come out in the summer, the rock is warm. And I love to think, dream and write my music there. The rock is contoured just right , so I can sit on it easily.

Even though my dad says not to, I write my own music the way I want to. It's like my little secret. In the mornings my dad wakes me up roughly. I'm a light sleeper so a gentle shake would work fine but my dad has to do everything his way so I don't argue. I make my lunch, get my backpack and walk to school with my brother, Jim.

Lunch bell. Everyone piles into the cafeteria. When mom was here, we bought a guitar. It was mostly for decoration. That was six years ago. It was never like a decoration or a toy to me. I played it by strumming and then listening to the inner rings of the sound. There are lots of them. I would take the guitar up to my room and play with the door closed. I had a thick, solid door so no one could hear. My dad never seemed to notice the guitar was missing from it's usual spot, so I kept it in my room. I practiced every day for hours. That guitar was my prized possession. Just before mom left, dad lost his job. I saved up my money to buy a harmonica after school one day, but that's about all the money I had. I taught myself harmonica too.

One day I found out that my music teacher was going to quit. My father wasn't happy. I heard their angry discussions from the other room. "You can't quit. He needs to learn to read his notes better. If you leave how will he get a scholarship and go to college! How will he get a degree and make money!" My father screamed and screamed.

"I'm sorry, but I *am* quitting!" the teacher said adamantly. "You never even pay attention to your son's talent. So I don't know why you care. He doesn't want to read notes, and I've taught him as much as I can about chords and harmony. I myself am a classical music teacher, and that is what I intend to teach my students." my teacher said. "Get him a teacher that can teach him what he wants to learn!"

My music teacher flung the door open and I listened to him walk down the drive way with his black shoes going clip clop, clip clop, fading, until he got to his car.

“Fine, I’ll find some young kid who can teach circles around an old geezer like you,” my dad muttered.

I knew he would too, more to spite the teacher than to care for me.

I nodded. Things were looking up.

Chapter 2

I had my whole weekend free to do whatever I wanted. I wrote a song and I loved it. I knew my dad wouldn't. Overall, I think my dad was just jealous. He never gave me a compliment. He complimented my brother and supported him in whatever he did. But he never gave me the time of day.

When we got our report cards I often heard my brother saying, "Dad! I got an A!"

"Great son! Let me see!"

But when I would say, "Dad! Come see the A I got in science!" I would hear, "Not now. I'm busy."

"Yea, ok," I would whisper.

I've never wanted to be jealous of my brother, but I guess I was. Sometimes I would write songs about a perfect life, even though I knew things like that never come true. Sometimes that life didn't include having a brother.

One Saturday night I had a dream. I was on a beautiful island all alone. I wanted more than anything for someone to pick me up and take me home. All of a sudden, a boat came. It was in shallow water. I ran out into water up to my waist, waving. I looked at the man in the small wooden boat and then out at the gorgeous sunset. The man, he looked like my brother. "Jim?" I said, my mouth hanging open.

"Hop in," he said patting the seat next to him. I got in and he rowed out to sea. I was saved from my loneliness, but he was just rowing me straight out into the open sea. I didn't want to go. The only thing that was good about it was that we were rowing out towards that beautiful sunset.

On Sunday, I was informed that I was going to have a new music teacher. "I've spoken to him on the phone and he seems okay. I want you to be polite," my dad warned me.

“So you’ve never met him and you’re deciding that he is going to be my new music teacher for four hours every weekend?” I was really mad.

“Six.” My father corrected.

“Six?”

“Six hours. I’ve changed it to three hour sessions.” He looked me straight in the eye.

I glared at him.

“Hey dad!” Jim shouted from the top of the stairs. He explained his homework assignment asking if he could use the computer. My father nodded, so proud of his son. I rolled my eyes and stuck my hands in the my pockets. I had on a pair of old jeans, a ratty long-sleeved shirt, and thick socks to keep my feet warm. Jim on the other hand was neatly dressed, as always, in nice new jeans and a collared polo t-shirt that was squeaky clean.

The door bell rang.

“I’ll get it!” I shouted and slid across the wood floor in my socks. *Here goes nothing*, I thought to myself.

I expected to see a repeat of all the music teachers I’d had, in a nice outfit, sometimes even a coat and tie, and a stupid little briefcase, like they were coming for some kind of business meeting. But, I couldn’t believe my eyes. He was a tall thin man with long straight brown hair and happy brown eyes. He was wearing a pair of jeans and a crinkly long-sleeved brown shirt, and carried his things in a backpack. He smiled at me and for once, I wanted to smile back. I exploded with excitement inside.

“You must be Jeremy,” he said. “It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” he bowed jokingly then shook my hand.

My father rushed over to meet him. He was more than a little surprised by the way he was dressed. Anyhow, he shook his hand and showed him to the room where he was supposed to teach me.

It was a small room crowded with a chair, table, and chalk board. It was tiny, dusty and it smelled of mildew. I hated it. Whenever I went in there, I wanted sneeze from all of the dust. There must have been a colony of dust bunnies living in there.

My dad had introduced the teacher to me as “Mr. Clait.” Then he left the room.

“Call me Tim,” he said as he opened up his backpack.

Even though Tim was much older than me, he almost immediately felt like my best friend. I almost felt like I could tell him anything. (Not that I did at first.) And now, I actually looked forward to weekends. (Not that I had ever liked the weekdays better, or gave school the time of day, ever.)

After about three weeks of knowing him, he had a change of plans. “Why don’t we go outside today?” I took him to my favorite spot in the meadow. I showed him my favorite rock and we sat down.

“It’s very peaceful here,” he said.

The birds twittered in the trees and the sun shone magically down in streaked light between the branches. This was the place where all of the magic happened. It was the birth place of my secret songs. I felt relaxed for pretty much the first time in my life.

Chapter 3

I often thought about how I wanted my life to be, and imagined how everything would just fall into place. In fact, I didn't just *often* think about it, it was practically my mind's main subject. One day when I was supposed to be doing my homework, I snuck outside into my meadow. The light was dim but I could still see. I sat out there with my paper and pencil and guitar. It took almost ten minutes before the music came to me, but I knew it would. Then the words quickly followed. It was the most beautiful song I had ever written. . . . "Jeremy! Dinner!" Jim shouted from the porch though he couldn't really see where I was.

"Coming!" I called, folding my little masterpiece in my pocket.

Jim talked a lot at dinner that night. I was silent. When I was done eating, I quickly set my plate on the counter and ran upstairs to my room to finish my homework.

"I need to get something at the drug store." I told Jim the next morning.

"Whatever," he said.

"So can we leave a little early?" I asked sliding on my backpack and picking up my lunch. It was 7:00 and we usually left at 7:30.

"Whatever," he answered. "Bye dad!" he bellowed. "I'm taking Jeremy to the drug store!"

"Hold on." I said dashing up the stairs. My brother rolled his eyes and leaned against the wall.

"Can I have thirty bucks?" I asked my dad panting.

"No."

"Why? You give Jim money!"

“He’s older and more responsible than you are.”

“Thanks a lot dad,” I said sarcastically.

I whispered to Jim, “Can I have thirty bucks? I’ll pay you back.”

“Whatever,” he shrugged.

I went in the store and bought a cheap tape recorder and three empty tapes. Then Jim and I raced off to school. I raced to my desk just in time. A wave of relief swept over me.

Another boring day at school. At recess, I hummed a melody of my new song into the recorder and listened back. The sound was pretty bad, muffled and shaky. But it was good enough to help me remember melodies and other ideas that came to me. I stuffed it into my pocket and ran back to class.

Back home I burst through the door exhausted and lay on the floor of my room for a minute. I recorded a guitar part that I made up and then practiced the things Tim was teaching me. You see, I had a secret wish. I’ve always wanted to record a CD of my own songs. But number one, we couldn’t afford it and number two, my songs had to stay secret songs or my dad would change them. He wouldn’t want me to write about the things I was writing about, like loneliness, or how I hated school. I needed someone on my side. Pretty much the only one who knew I wrote music was Jim and he didn’t know I wrote “Jeremy” music. No one did.

It was Saturday. Yippee. Music teacher day. “You know, my dad was in the music business,” Tim said as he was reaching around in his backpack.

“What did he do?” I asked curiously.

“Well, he owned this little auditorium, and famous people would play there. Being around music my whole life I learned to play a few instruments. Guitar mostly, but I learned piano and harmonica too. I also learned to read notes. I don’t use them as much as I thought I would, so you don’t have to learn them if you don’t want to. There’s plenty of other things to learn. Do you want to learn to read notes, Jeremy?”

“No.” I said as politely as I could.

“I gotcha.” he said. “Meanwhile, my dad thought I looked kinda cute up on stage with my guitar, so he wanted me to be a performer. But I wanted to work in a recording studio. I liked all of the buttons and the new machines. They’re always inventing new machines for the recording studio,” he smiled. “Expensive ones!”

“So did you work in a studio?” I asked him, wide eyed.

“Yes. And I hope to again soon.”

“ I wrote a song.” I said, interrupting him. Oh yikes! What did I do! I took a deep breath. Three... two... one...

“Can I hear it?” Tim asked. I knew he was humoring me, but I knew I had to go through with it now. Drat.

I played my song perfectly. It was weird. I felt the emotion of the song melting over me like liquid sunlight.

“Wow! That's *good*.”

My heart was pounding. I just held my guitar and didn't move. Neither of us did.

Weeks followed where Tim and I sat in the meadow. I played him all of my secret songs and he listened carefully to every one of them. He let me know if he thought I needed to change something, or if something didn't sound right. He told me when it was perfect and then had me record the song into my little tape recorder so I wouldn't forget what I'd done differently.

My songs had always been secret songs. I did know what would happen if I played them for anyone else but Tim. Especially my dad. What would he say? Tim and I had a lot in common in that way. We both had dads who didn't support what we wanted to do.

One Saturday, when it was time for Tim to leave, he left excitedly after talking briefly to my dad. He almost forgot to say goodbye to me, he rushed out the door so fast. By this time he had heard all of my secret songs.

The next day Tim brought by a tall kid in a t-shirt and a pair of shorts that were way way too long on him. And he had worn out sneakers and was carrying a camera bag. My dad walked slowly to the door and looked him over. This guy and Tim looked like they could be college buddies. The boy said his name was Dan Forewell. I said hi and backed up a little after quickly shaking his hand.

“This guy,” Tim said putting an arm around Dan, “is a YouTube videographer. We're gonna try to get you on YouTube!”

That was cool! Dan looked like the type of guy that was a technical computer wiz. I sensed he a good at what he did. And I thought that videoing me for YouTube was a really neat idea.

When Dan looked down at me, he gave me a warm smile and shook my hand and that made me more comfortable. Because when he said hi to me, his voice was about as low as my dad's.

Tim, Dan and my dad all sat down at the dining room table and my dad told me to run along and play. I ran outside to the meadow, sat on my rock and peered into the distance. I saw a blank sky. Nothing but pure blue for miles. I felt afraid, but no one else realized it.

Chapter 4

As I've mentioned in not so subtle ways, I didn't like school. It wasn't any different than home. I didn't have any friends. I was smart, but I often daydreamed and the teachers would get angry. I didn't see why because I always got the work done. But I was kind of like the dart board. Not all the time, but a pretty generous majority of it. So I inched my way through the day just waiting for it to pass. Hoping no one would tease me or try to get me in trouble.

One Wednesday after school, Dan came again with Tim. It was odd because they didn't usually come unless it was the weekend. But now Dan was becoming part of my music lessons. He videoed me every once in a while, especially when I was playing some new song. But I didn't mind. I liked Dan a lot and he always asked permission first. He never just assumed he could start videoing me in the middle of me playing.

"Hey Jeremy," Tim said kindly "We've got some news."

"Is it bad?" I asked in a worried tone.

"Oh no. There's nothing to worry about. Dan and I just need to ask you a few questions."

I put down my homework and looked at them. I studied their eyes for a second. I thought maybe I had been kicked out of school for not caring, which would have been bad in some ways, and not so bad in lots of other ways.

"Ok, I'm ready," I told them .

"How many songs have you written?" Tim asked.

"Well... a lot. Maybe thirty or forty I guess."

“But why did you hesitate to tell me that you wrote songs at first? I mean what’s wrong with writing songs?”

“They’re secret songs.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” I almost told him about my dad but I stopped.

“What? Is something the matter?” Tim looked concerned.

“No,” I said managing a fake smile.

“All right then, we have one more question. What would you most like to do with your music?”

I didn't know what to say. Making an album was a secret too but it slipped out. “I guess I’d like to make a CD in a recording studio,” I blurted. Me and my big mouth. But neither Tim nor Dan looked too shocked like my dad would've been.

Tim thanked me and then he and Dan went to talk with my father. I went up to my room to finish my homework.

The next morning, I walked to school with Jim. I almost fell asleep in class and didn’t eat lunch. I came home and stuffed my sandwich in my mouth and then ran upstairs to finish my history. But as soon as I opened the book, “Jeremy, someone’s here to see you!” my dad yelled from the bottom of the stairs. I came down quickly. It was Tim and Dan.

I knew both of them had been talking with my dad the previous day. I hoped they didn't say anything about an album because my dad would have just laughed and told them he couldn’t even afford buying a CD player, so forget about having the money to make a CD.

Tim said to me, “Dan is also a reporter for BAM Magazine. We work together, sort of like a team sometimes. His magazine is mostly about musicians and. . . .Jeremy, we think that you might be ready to record your first album. And we’ve found a way to pay for it.”

My eyes widened. I looked at my dad who had his arms folded and was standing in the corner.

“Can I dad? Please?” I begged. My dad grunted and said yes. I had a feeling he wasn’t too happy about this plan but I was sure he was thinking maybe we could make a little money off of it.

“We’ll start tomorrow by making a demo in my friend's studio. Then, hopefully we can find a record label who will sign you and pay for everything on a much bigger scale.” Tim said casually. But I also saw him beaming. He was excited about this!

That night, I sat up in bed wondering what would happen. I knew my dad was jealous, and I also had a feeling my brother was going to be too. But, I didn’t really care, I had Tim and Dan on my side and that was enough. I could hardly sleep. I was so excited. My own album!

I knew that if mom was here right now she would be cheering for me.

Chapter 5

I bounced out of bed and jumped down the stairs. After I got dressed I packed my guitar and harmonica.

“I’m ready dad!” I called from the doorway.

“They’ll be here soon! Be patient,” he told me. “

I ate a bowl of cereal and then the doorbell rang.

“All right,” said Tim, “You ready?”

I said yes and darted outside. I waved goodbye to no one in particular since dad and Jim had already gone back to whatever they were doing. Then I turned towards the street and saw . . . a limousine! I had never been in one before so I stared wide eyed at outside, then the inside, at the TV, the icy bottled waters, and candy! It had genuine leather seats and velvety gray walls. I studied the details thinking it would probably be my last time riding in a limo.

“Wow,” I said, looking at Tim, who was watching me in amusement.

“Oh the limo,” Tim laughed, “If your album works out, you’ll be riding in lots of limos.”

“Can I have a soda?”

“Help yourself.” Tim said. “It comes free with the ride.”

This was cool.

“Put some of the bottled waters in your backpack,” Tim said. “You’re going to need it. Your voice will get tired and dry.” Then he said, “You know Jeremy, making an album is hard work.” Tim explained.

“Don’t give up when you’re in there,” Dan warned. “It’s easy to lose perspective and just want to go home. Stick with it and you’ll be fine.”

“You’re going to need to do the guitar parts and the singing separately,” Tim added.

“Why?” I asked. “Wouldn't it be easier to just do them at the same time?”

“No.” Tim said. “Because in a recording you need to play with a click to get everything lined up on a time grid. And you’ll need to play in perfect time, and we’ll need a very specific guitar tone. Your voice also needs to be perfectly in pitch, but you’ll need to sing emotionally at the same time. Just stay focused and you’ll be fine.”

“You two sure know a lot about recording.” I said sipping a raspberry soda. I was blissfully naïve. I had no idea what they were talking about.

“It's our job.” Tim told me.

“You record people a lot?” I asked.

“We help people like you.” Dan added, “Well, usually a lot older than you. But like you.”

The limo driver pulled up to the studio just as the three of us were finishing our conversation. It was a tall building with the name of it in big blue letters. It said: “Pro Recording Studio -- since 1956.” I could hardly wait to go inside. My heart was pounding.

I stepped into a giant room filled with machines, buttons, lights, and a little booth where a set of head phones were hanging on the microphone stand. There was a big glass window that let me see everything going on, and so the recording engineer could give me a thumbs up and stuff like that. Big computers and big metal boxes with thousands of tiny buttons and levers sat on shelves everywhere. There were three giant Mac computers sitting on a huge desk. Five guitars sat on a rack and two hung on the wall. Over in the left corner, a bass guitar was gently set against the wall. A man about six feet tall walked over to me with a giant smile on his face. He had on a kind of purposely slightly ripped green t-shirt. I liked that. I didn't like it when adults looked so formal.

“You must be Jeremy!” he said warmly shaking my hand. “I’m Mike, your recording engineer.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said to him shyly. I started to feel nervous for some reason.

“Ain't he cute?” he said to Tim smiling. “Nice to see you again, buddy!” he shook Tim’s hand.

“You remember Dan, don't you?” Tim said.

“Ah yes! The You Tube star maker! How many eyeballs did you get for Vanessa Albright last week, dude?”

I was a little confused by the conversation so I walked into the recording booth, wrinkled papers in my hand with my lyrics written on them, and I sat down on a small chair with a soft blue cushion. I set up the papers on the music stand.

I tuned my guitar to this odd little tuning machine they had. Then, Mike closed the door. I put the headphones on and I could hear Mike in the other room through them. “Are you ready there, champ?” he asked.

“I think so,” I said back, giving him a hesitant thumbs up. It felt weird having giant headphones on my ears, but the biggest change was playing with a click track. It was a click that kept the beat like a metronome so I could keep perfect time.

I felt nervous. What if I couldn't do it? What if Mike didn't like my songs. My stomach flip-flopped.

“Can't I play without the click?” I begged.

“I’m not sure he can pull it off.” Mike said quietly with the talk button still down. Did he want me to hear that? “It’s hard for anyone to play with a click for the first time, but especially a kid.”

“He's not used to it but he will be soon.” Tim reassured him.

Tim was right. After a while it was comforting to have this little perfect drum leading the way.

In four days (four hours a day) we had recorded ten songs. But, Tim said they were having intonation problems with my guitar. He told me we might have to fix that. It was ok with me.

During lunch break on the final day Mike and I had an interesting conversation. “You know Jeremy,” he said, “you've done really well on this project. I want you to know that we are all very proud of you and how focused you are. Recording is hard work.”

“It's a dream,” I replied.

“That's true. It helps when you've wanted to do something for a long time and finally, after waiting and hoping and working hard, you get your wish. You know if you don't keep working and practicing you won't get better though. The secret is to keep working hard and not let things like recording a CD go to your head.”

I nodded while biting into my turkey sandwich. But I was listening carefully.

“You know, there was a boy in my dad's school named Denny. He was the greatest basketball player on the team. Though he was only about seven at the time, he could make great shots. He had great moves. He was tall, and he started playing at a very young age. And, he was better than everyone else in his school. He moved on to high school and got onto the basketball team there, but while the other boys practiced, Denny didn't. He thought he didn't have to. And by the last year of high school, he was the worst player on the team. Why is that?”

I knew exactly what Mike was saying to me. It was like I had been taught that lesson before somehow. I told Mike: When you're born with a gift, you need to give back to it. It's like a baby or a seed. If you don't give back it will die. If you have the talent to be a great basketball player, you need to practice so you become even better. There's no end to it. If I stopped practicing guitar, never tried to get a better tone, never tried to make the

buzzing sound go away when I play a hard chord, I wouldn't be here in the recording studio right now. I wouldn't have gotten to be here.”

“And,” Mike said, “We're now going to work on harmonies!”

“Really? Harmonies?”

“Well of course! Your songs deserve harmonies.”

I knew how to do harmonies. I had heard them on so many great CDs, my ears naturally understood how to do it with my own songs. So we sped by that in about two hours.

Dan was taking videos here and there and we were all having lots of fun. That final day, Mike burned a CD of the unmixed tracks to let my dad and brother hear.

Chapter 6

I have to admit I was very nervous as I walked up our stone steps and onto our porch. I took a deep breath. What if dad and Jim didn't like the CD? I opened the door.

“Hi Dad . . .Dad?”

“What?” he said from upstairs at his computer.

“I've got a rough mix of my CD. Would you like to listen?”

“I'm busy Jeremy, can you wait until later?”

“Fine.” I replied. Maybe it was a blessing he didn't want to hear it. My secret songs. What would he say when he heard what I'd been writing about?

Soon I heard him drag himself down the stairs, depressed as usual.

“Alright, put it on and let's see if it's any good.” He sounded annoyed as he sat down on the couch. A part of me wanted to tell him no. But the other part of me almost demanded that he finally get to know me. I bit my lip and pressed play.

After my first song was over my dad stared at me. Nothingness filled his dark eyes.

“Jeremy,” he said while I held my breath. I had no idea whatsoever what he was going to say. “Do you really think people are going to listen to this? Things like this may interest you, but not other people. And certainly not grown ups.”

Tears welled up in my eyes. I had worked so hard. I had never felt so horrible in my life.

I had never spoken to anyone like this, especially my own father, but I didn't care, "Everyone else who heard my music liked it, so maybe your wrong!" I ran up to my room and slammed the door.

I felt horrible. The entire night, I didn't speak to my dad and he didn't speak to me. I guessed he didn't care. I know everyone has different opinions, but the fact that he was so harsh and mean about it made it feel more like he hated me rather than only disrespecting me. I was wondering if he really did. Hate me. For some reason. It was the worst feeling. But then I thought, at least Tim, Dan and Mike like my music, and if only those three people on the entire planet liked it that was at least something to feel good about. Thinking about that made me feel a little better.

There was a knock at my door the next morning. I ignored it. It came again. "Go away!" I shouted.

"Come on, Jeremy," it was Jim. I still owed him the \$30. I figured he needed it back. He opened my door. "Jeremy, I have to say something and I need you to listen."

"I can guess what you're going to say."

"No you can't. Please. It's important."

I buried my face into my pillow.

"Listen!" Jim said his voice was now sounding like he really meant it. "Jeremy, I'm older than you and I have the right to say a few things. I know how you feel when dad acts like I'm his favorite. But dad's had a tough childhood. You may not know, because mom left when you were really little, but mom told me these things before she left. I was really too young to understand ten, but I get it now, and so will you."

I was surprised. I had never known anything about my dad. And I'd never heard Jim talk like this. I listened to every word. "When dad was a boy, he and the family were really poor. There was barely had enough food for all five of his brothers and sisters. When he was about ten, his mom died because they couldn't afford money for her medicine. He and his mom were very close. It broke his heart. But he went on acting tough and faking

everything because he wanted to act tough and strong or at least appear to be that way.”

I was shocked. If mom had died right now, I would have been so sad, even though she wasn't around. But she was still alive so there was still at least a chance of us seeing each other again. I never could have let go of that chance.

“His dad struggled with work and tried to support his family and then his two older brothers left home to be on their own. Then his dad only had to take care of four children. But when dad was about eighteen, his dad died. His dad was his best friend. So then he felt like he'd lost everything. He went on with his life but he didn't see anything much to be happy about until he met mom. By the time he had us he was starting to become pretty happy again. But then mom left. And that was the final straw. I guess he felt his life was officially over.”

“Why did she leave?”

“Jeremy, what I am trying to say is when dad acts like he likes me better it's for a reason. His dad was a really good musician. He tried to make a living playing music. There was music in the house all the time. Even dad played guitar. He still does now, you know, when he thinks everyone is asleep. He keeps it locked in a closet in his room. And you remind him so much of his dad, he can't take it. So that's why . . .you understand, Jeremy? So don't take it personally.”

“I'm sorry. I didn't know any of this. If I had. . . ”

“It's ok,” Jim said looking down at the quilt we were sitting on. He turned very quiet. “But, this is the most important thing I need to tell you. I like you CD.”

“What?” I said looking up at him curiously.

“Actually, I think you're amazing. And I know you think I'm just your mean older brother, but I'll always be there for you. That's a promise.” Then he tapped me on the arm and walked out of the room.

Those words, and him touching my arm like that meant so much to me. I almost started crying. And for the first time in my life, I thought: *My brother really loves me.*

Chapter 7

The music was really starting to come together. So I was happy about that, but sad at the same time because I was thinking how I would feel if I was in dad's shoes.

I was in the recording studio a lot more than school, which was a huge joy for me. And knowing that Jim actually gave a care about my CD got me even more inspired to worked hard. Harder than I had ever worked on anything in my whole life.

“Take four!”

“Wasn't that one ok?”

“

“One word was just a little off in that section. Try it one more time.” Mike said through the headphones.

—The rough vocals had been good enough for my dad and Jim to hear but if we were going to let other people hear it, we were going to have to get the singing perfect. I have to say, I did not consider myself a great singer. But this recording was definitely helping me get better.

We listened back to my vocal. He was right, it was a tiny bit off. “Yeah, you were right.” I said. I walked back into the vocal booth. After two more takes and three hours of mixing, we completely finished the song.

“Eight more to go,” I said on lunch break.

“You know Jeremy, your music is not just good for your age. It’s good regardless of your age. I think we should really try to get it out there.” Tim said seriously. My eyes got really big.

“What do you mean 'get it out there'?” I asked.

“Well,” Tim explained, “When your CD is finished, we are going to try to get some of your songs on the radio and put more videos on YouTube!”

“Uh... Well... I...” I stammered, what if it was just going to make my relationship with dad even worse?

“Maybe... but... then again, maybe that's not a good idea.” Tim looked surprised.

“What's wrong with that?” Tim asked-

“You wouldn't really understand. It's kind of personal.” I looked down at my plate.

When it was time to go we didn't ride in a limo. Only on the first day. Now we rode in taxis but I didn't really care.

When I got home I went upstairs to clear my head a bit. I lay on my bed wondering how I looked to other people. Did they see me as snobby or not focused? Maybe as a dreamer who wished he didn't live in the real world? Maybe they saw me as a child who didn't like anyone because they thought I was mean or unfriendly. But I wasn't snobby and I was focused. I was a dreamer but that's ok. I didn't really like kids my own age because they would sit around talking about the newest DS game while I was writing a song in my head. But that didn't make me mean, did it? When I thought about that, something really obvious came to me. When people think of me, it didn't matter what they think. It mattered what *I* think. As long as I knew I was a good person, it didn't matter. But I lived in a little Jeremy world and the problem was that I was too afraid or naïve to come out of that world and live in the real one. Especially if I hurt my dad by doing it.

Chapter 8

I woke up the next morning and I wasn't as excited to go to the studio as I was the night before.

“Dad! I'm leaving! Bye!” I shouted from the doorway.

“Jeremy, won't you shut up and be a little quieter in the house?” my dad said coming down our long stairway. He looking at the clock on the stove. “Jeremy, it's only nine thirty. You have a half an hour!”

“I'm just going to wait out side for them,” I told him reaching for the nearest apple in the fruit bowl.

“It's freezing out there!”

“I'll wear a coat. I'm wearing a coat and long pants. I'll be fine!” I said eating the apple very quickly.

“Whatever, just don't get sick! It's just another expense.” he muttered grumpily walking back up the stairs. *Whatever, Mr. Grumpy*, I thought.

I threw the apple core into the sink, and dashed out the door closing it as quietly but as fast as I could.

Tim and Dan came to pick me up in the taxi. “I've got to talk to you about a few things in the car today.”

“Ok.”

“Jeremy, the music has gone beyond the “demo” stage. The company who put up the money for this project likes it and want to sign you! They think you're more than just a novelty. You could get your music out there in the world. You wouldn't have to be our little secret any more. Maybe you could even become famous!”

“I don't think I can do that,” I said, feeling confused.

“Jeremy, you could also make a lot of money.”

“How much money?” I asked.

“Who knows? If you become famous, millions of dollars!” Dan said.

“Wow.” I thought, if I made that much money, Jim could go to college in two years, dad wouldn't be so stressed, and I would save some money for when I grow up.

“Okay, I guess that's a good thing.” I told them.

They smiled and hugged me as we got out of the car.

“And,” Tim said, “now you'll be going somewhere special tomorrow. But it's a surprise.”

I felt really excited.

“Oh, and pack a suitcase for about five days. I told your dad this might happen. He said it was okay with him.”

Chapter 9

We took a limo the next day. I had a soda and a piece of candy, just like the last time.

“Where are we going?” I asked, my mouth full of a chocolate something.

Tim pointed to a huge building as I was taking a sip of soda to wash down the chocolate and the fizzing went right into my nose.

“An airport?” I asked rubbing at my nose.

“Yup, we're going to LA.” Tim said.

“You're joking!” I gulped. My nose started to fizz again. “Ow!”

“I'm not -- you're going to record in a big LA studio!”

“Oh my gosh! Really?” I had never been to a big city. I'd lived in the country my entire life. I couldn't wait!

“Yes. Mike's there already. He took the plane last night.”

“But I can't afford to fly!”

“I told you at the beginning, a company's paying for everything.” Tim told me hauling his suitcase out of the trunk. He handed me my backpack.

“What company?” I asked.

“It's a small company. But it's good. I help run it, in fact. My dad owns it.”

“Oh, now I understand. So you are like his baseball scout?”

“Well, I didn't mean to be a scout!” he laughed. “You just happened to show up.”

“How long's the flight?” I asked, gathering my things and picking up the new guitar Tim was letting me borrow.

“About two hours.”

“Oh, that's not that bad,” I said, grabbing for a final two pieces of candy. I stuffed them in my pocket for the plane.

We walked into the busy building, people rushed passed. The runny sound of people talking in all directions filled my ears. I had never been in an airport so I looked around admiring everything. We went through to the gate as the security people checked our baggage. We sat down at gate A 63.

“It'll take a while. You want to walk around? Look at the stores maybe buy some gum for the plane?” Dan asked.

“Sure!” I said. “But I have two pieces of candy in my pocket.”

“That's fine. You can never have too much sweet stuff, I always say.”

“Just don't hurt your stomach, ok?” Tim chuckled.

“Me?” Dan laughed.

“No, Jeremy!”

There were thousands of flavors and manmade food colors in the store. I picked bubblicious watermelon flavor (the six foot of gum kind). Tim picked mint and Dan picked fruit. “Do you want some skiddles or something?” Dan said, feeling them in his hand. I took the skiddles from him and a king-sized twix bar. That would keep me happy for a while, and I got a weird looking sticker book too. A big one.

We got on the plane. I got the window seat. “So, you excited?” Tim asked me.

I nodded, my mouth full of sugar.

The plane took off. We started speeding down the runway and when we soared into the air my heart took off as well. I watched as we went higher and higher. I wasn't scared at all. We raced by clouds. At one point it felt like we were going to touch the sun.

“So, um, it looks like you haven't been on a plane before.”

“No.” I said still looking out the window.

Tim smiled and went back to the book he’d brought along.

After I was done looking out the window I decided to work on my sticker book. It had musical instrument stickers that you had to put on the correct shadow. It told you a couple facts about each instrument and you had to guess which one it was. That kept me busy for about an hour. When I was almost done the captain said we were going to land. I put the book in my backpack and looked out the window and watched us drop back down to planet earth.

Chapter 9

A minute from landing my eyes grew wide as the landscape sailed past me. I had never seen a city before. High buildings stretched below us. Millions of cars and trucks raced past on five-lane highways. Billions of little shops and colorful stores were set right beside the busy roads. I felt a bump, waited for the bell, kind of like you have to do at school, grabbed my backpack, and stood up with the rest of the passengers.

“Where are we going to stay?” I asked after we retrieved our bags from the merry-go-round baggage machine.

"In a hotel called the Westbury Suites," Tim told me looking around.

“What are you looking for?”

“He’s looking for the limo driver,” Dan said. “He’ll be holding a sign that says: Big shot LA Studios.”

“Will the hotel be fancy?”

“Yes, little guy.”

“Are we going to start tomorrow or the next day? And how many days are we going to record? And how many hours a day?”

“Slow down, buddy, I’ll tell you when we get to our room.” Tim waved as he saw the man with the sign. He was tall and had white gloves, a suit and a tie. He had a nice face.

“Are you guys going to the recording studio?” the man asked as we walked up to him.

“Yes,” Tim said putting down his suitcase to catch his breath.

“Did you bring your son?” the man asked.

Dan laughed but tried to stop himself.

“This boy is recording the CD,” Tim told him.

“Oh, I see!” the man commented. I think he wasn’t supposed to say any more because that was about all that came out of his mouth the whole trip.

Giant buildings seemed to touch the clouds as I looked up at them. Thousands of people walked by on the sidewalk. I had never seen so many different types of people. There were old people, young people, black and white, rich and poor, and even people in wheelchairs, and beggars on the sidewalk jingling a can hoping people would drop in a coin or two. But people just walked by.

“Why don't they give the beggars money?” I asked, feeling very sorry for them.

“Well, you never know what they're going to spend it on.” Tim said glancing out the window and then back at me.

I thought about that for a second but it didn't take me too long to realize what he meant. At least I thought I understood. I mean, my dad probably would have spent the money on a TV or something stupid.

We pulled up to a beautiful hotel with crystal clear windows with flower boxes planted underneath each one. As I stepped inside the front entrance I looked down at the shiny marble floors, and the beautiful delicate flower wall paper. Not my style, but very pretty. There was a fancy couch on one side and a table of flowers on the other. There was a plate of cookies on the coffee table but I'd had enough sweets for one day. The lady at the front desk informed us that there was a lovely breakfast restaurant we could go to each morning.

“Could we get some extra blankets?” Tim asked.

“Of course!” the lady smiled. She handed us our key and we went to our room on the first floor number 108.

“Now that we're settled in, I will answer your questions.” Tim said. “We are going to record for five days. Six hours each day. The last two days we'll mix.”

“Wow! And, wow.” I said.

“I know it's a lot of work, but if we want to make this CD great we're going to have to work hard.”

I nodded and smiled.

“Jeremy,” Dan asked, “I was planning to take some videos in the studio? Okay with you?”

“Sure.” I said. We had a double bed set up and Tim let me pick the one I wanted. Then he said I could watch some TV. I watched SpongeBob. Then, it was time for bed. Tim said I would need a good night's sleep and we would go to breakfast the next day at eight thirty. Then at ten thirty we would go to the studio, which was a ten minute drive from here. We would work until four thirty and then come back for dinner. Everything was very scheduled out. It sounded good to me, and I couldn't wait to see the studio.

Town was busy that morning – as usual - as thousands of people raced up and down the sidewalks. After ten minutes of blurry things buzzing past my window we pulled up to a large circular building. On the front, in grey letters, it said: Big Shot LA Studios. The outside of the building was a friendly light blue. There was a building next to it that had dozens of windows. I imagined that was where I was going to record. A big open room with lot of windows. As we walked towards it I started to get nervous but I was going do this. I knew Mike was the assistant engineer, but I didn't know the main engineer. I wondered if he was going be nice or laugh at me or call me a squirt or something obnoxious.

We walked into what looked like a waiting room. A lady came up and offered me a mini candy cane. I wondered where they got candy canes from in the middle of April. And why everyone leapt trying to drown me with candy and cookies all the time. This sure was different than being home!

—I looked around at the green walls, with glassed in paintings on the walls. Most of them were framed CD covers with the names of the artist underneath. They were all people who had recorded there, I guessed, and they all were pretty famous. There was Bruce Springsteen, Sting, Bonnie Raitt, Ray Charles, Stevie Wonder, Chaka Khan, Steve Winwood, and Gary Marks. He had two records. They were called, “If All They Said Was True,”

and “A Whisper Can Change the World.” He sounded cool. I was gonna look him up when I got back. Tim said he knew him.

“What was he like?” I asked.

“Nice guy. Really smart, and wrote the most unique and interesting songs. You'd like him.”

“He sounds cool.”

We were led into a room filled with amps and computers and machinery everywhere. There was a vocal booth that was much bigger than the one in the first studio, and really nice microphones. Buttons were everywhere. It looked like they were even on the walls. Mike came over to greet us along with another guy.

“The famous Jeremy.” The new guy smiled. He was a little taller than Mike. And he was skinny, but strong. I could feel it when he shook my hand firmly. “My name is Chris Beecher. It’s a pleasure to meet you! I heard your rough mixes and they blew me away.”

“Thank you.” I said, setting my guitar down on the floor.

Tim and Chris walked into the room where the main board was and started muttering and pointing. It didn't make any sense to me.

Dan and I had a lot in common, even though it didn't seem like it. We were both kind of quirky and shy. I had a feeling if he was in a group of people his age, in their early twenties, he wouldn't be the most popular.

They said I could choose to stand or sit while I played guitar, depending on the song. That way I could either feel like I was in a rock and roll concert, or sitting on my couch at home.

By lunch, we had gotten three tracks. We'd been working three hours but I was having the time of my life. After another three hours, two more tracks! It was about four thirty and I was tired and ready for a break.

When we got back, I plopped down on the bed, and watched SpongeBob again, a different episode, then we went to dinner.

The restaurant was in a fancy room. More old lady rose wall paper like the wall paper in the lobby. I was really getting sick of the pattern. And green carpet so if someone spilled something it would just blend right in. There were white tablecloths that were placed neatly on each table and a candle in the middle. I ordered a steak with buttered vegetables and a smoothie for dessert. The food was delicious and I went to sleep full and content.

Chapter 10

Everyday was new in the studio and we were having a blast. On lunch break I wrote an email to Jim and told him about recording and LA. When I finished, I bit into my sandwich and chewed happily. “So, what kind of people have you met being a big recording engineer?” I said.

“Oh, well some really neat people. There was Bruce Springsteen once, and I recorded Gary Marks. He's this cool new guy.” Chris told me.

“Well guys, we have one day left to record.” Tim interrupted. He shook his head. It’s going well. No problems. H shook Chris's hand.

At the end of the day we went back to the hotel room. While Tim was next door visiting with Dan I picked up my guitar. The gentle strumming brought me back to my meadow where the air was crisp and sweet. Where I could feel the warm sunshine on my face, where I could hear the soft winds whispering to each other. That’s where I felt at home. I had never felt I had a home before. I realized the meadow had come with me. It could be anywhere I was.

We went to a new restaurant outside the hotel. It was the fanciest place I had ever been. Women were dressed in long skirts decorated with sequins. Big diamond rings were wrapped around their fingers. Necklaces of rainbow gems hung around there necks. The men were in ties and suits, looking dapper I guess. And I was in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. My mopyy brown hair hung ragged over my ears. Tim and Dan were more dressed up than I was.

Giant crystal chandeliers hung from a high ceiling. We sat down on pillowed chairs made with satin. Gleaming silverware had been placed perfectly upon a cream-colored tablecloth made of a silky fabric. China cups were set out neatly upon each table. I sat down and felt like I was sitting in a King’s castle. It was the best meal of my life, in the most beautiful place I’d ever been in my life – except for my secret song meadow.

Chapter 11

It was the last day of recording. I was sad to finish, but I also missed being back home. I couldn't wait to just be alone with my family, even if dad didn't want to be around me that much. And, of course, I longed to sit in my meadow and feel free and happy and calm.

The mixing was long and very detailed. I couldn't hear a lot of what they were pointing out. But I tried to learn everything I could.

The next day, Chris and Tim were back at it. Mixing the final songs.

"Hey Jeremy, I have an idea," Dan said.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Well, I was thinking while they're in there you and I can make a music video!"

"Really?"

"Yeah. I was thinking about it all night so I brought you some cool clothes to wear, and I have my best lenses. We don't have much time but I wrote out a quick storyboard last night." he handed me a piece of paper. "You like it?"

"It's great! But why did you bring your costume bag? Why can't I just wear my regular clothes?"

"Because the audience will get bored watching just any old kid in any old clothes. We have to draw their attention." He opened his costume bag. I didn't know he had clothes like this in there.

"Why do you have all these weird shirts and stuff?" I asked while rooting through them trying to find a good outfit.

"Well, I'm a videographer," he smiled. For about a half an hour, we decided on the clothes I was going to wear. We found four outfits for the four different scenes.

“You know Jeremy, the most popular You Tube videos are watched by thousands of people every day!”

Making a music video was the coolest thing I ever did. We spent four hours straight working and shooting, and I was acting all the time. Dan even captured a spontaneous moment of a butterfly landing on my finger. I had to run down the road, and sit with my guitar in an alley, and jump from a parked car. It was very active.

When my CD was done Chris made ten copies. They looked like blank CDs, but they were mine. We were going to make a cool cover and make it look like a real album! But that would take a couple of months. I could wait though. We went back to our room and got some sleep. We would be leaving for home the next morning.

After the flight back we got into a taxi and gradually we drove from a big town to a small town to a smaller town. Up a two lane street and into the countryside. I was home. Jim was waiting alongside my dad on the front porch.

Chapter 12

At the dinner table we were quiet, then Jim broke the silence. "So how was it recording in LA?" Jim asked.

"Cool." I said biting into my mashed potatoes.

Jim continued, "Reporters from town have called, and even from the city! They want to do interviews with you and all that!"

My dad was silent. I looked up at him but he didn't meet my eyes. He took his last bite of food and went upstairs without saying a word to me.

I looked down at my half empty plate. "I'm done," I said solemnly. I rinsed my dish and went to my room. I looked at my CDs and threw them lightly on the ground. There was no way I could get my dad to love me.

The next morning I heard chattering out my window. I looked to find about a dozen people out in the yard surrounded by the neighbors' dogs, who I guess were curious about the commotion.

One guy had a video camera and a couple of other guys had microphones. I got dressed quickly, brushed my teeth and combed my hair, then went downstairs and peered out the front door.

My dad was there talking to some reporters. He looked up and so did everyone else when I stepped onto the porch. Jim was out there too, about five feet away from my dad. I looked around at all the faces. Every single one was silent, so I decided not to say anything. All of a sudden there was some chattering and it quickly spread. I walked over to Jim. "What's up?" I whispered.

Jim remained quiet.

"Well what's going on?" I repeated.

No answer.

“I had no idea.” I heard my dad say quietly to the reporters, continuing what he was saying before I came down. “It *was* me. Yes he had no right to do that. I'm sorry.”

“Had no right to do what, dad? Did I do something wrong?”

“I'm afraid so. You've lied.”

“About what?”

“About the songs. You know I wrote them, but you took the credit.”

I started to feel angry, and was about to say something, but the press wasn't going to believe me. I turned towards Jim. Everyone was quiet. Jim was looking down at his shoes. How could my dad do that? I planted my face towards the ground.

“He's not a phenom, ok? He's just a good copier. And it's a nice story for all of you, but it's a fake. I'm sorry for all the trouble my son has caused.”

But as he was speaking, it seemed that his eyes couldn't meet the reporters'. He hesitated when he spoke, which was rare. It seemed as if something inside his was making him say these things. But another something inside knew it was wrong.

“No!” Jim yelled out.

“My dad's the liar,” he said. “My brother wrote the songs. And, well, he's *really good!*”

I looked at him amazed. My brother would do that for me. But what would dad do? I looked at him. His eyes were blank and so was his face. He wasn't sad or angry, he wasn't upset. All of the reporters looked around, They were muttering to each other, not knowing who to believe. But instead of trying to figure it out they just got confused, thought the whole thing was weird, and decided it wasn't worth them being there anymore. None of them were in the mood to play TV detective. They didn't care. They just walked away, and in seconds, the yard was clear. Even the dog went back home.

We walked back into the house.

“I'm not mad at you dad.” I said. “I know why you did that. It was because of your dad, wasn't it? You want me to stop reminding you of him? But my songs, dad, they're real. They're important to me. I'm never going to stop. And I'm not going to keep them a secret anymore.”

“You're right, yes, you know, you're right. And Jim's right.” His eyes became, teary but instead of turning his face away he looked right at me. “I want to hear your CD, because you, you should be proud.”

And my dad smiled at me for the first time in years. I ran over to him and wrapped my arms around him and he hugged me back. On everyone's face there was a smile. I felt so happy, there was no way to explain that feeling. That moment started a new beginning.

My dad heard my CD that night and loved it. I felt so proud. “Great job, son!” He gave me a high five. I didn't know if he was going to laugh or cry. But he really did *hear* me, for the first time ever, and wanted to know me. And I can tell you there's nothing better than having a dad who really wants to know who you are.

Chapter 13

At school, there was still some teasing and bullying but I had Jim, and now my dad to stick up for me. Overall, my life was as perfect, as it was meant to be.

My dad got me a brand new guitar. My harmonica was rusty so I got a shining new one. I played at the school talent show and got the biggest applause. Of course, there were also some jeers and forced laughter from a few jealous kids. But I expected that. I won the second place ribbon! First place went to a girl that came out in a leotard and was able, I swear, to twist herself into a pretzel. I voted for her myself.

When people came up to say, "You must be so proud of your son!" my dad said, "Yes, I am," and grabbed me by my hand.

The days turned to fall and winter. I played football in the frost outside with Jim. Now life fits together just like a finished puzzle. My CD got released in the winter and it had a cool cover, lyric sheets, and the whole shebang. It did pretty well. The company wants me to do another one. But, that didn't matter as much as the fact that that my family was now a real family.

It turned to March, and little flowers began to grow in my meadow. My dad got a new job and is so happy now. I sat on my big gray rock and felt the cold breeze against me. It felt just like it tussled my hair, it made me feel free, happy and calm. I call this my peace place. Because it doesn't have to be a secret any more. I go there almost every day.

The days rolled around to summer. Warm, long days of running around in the yard. Playing tag with a friend or two. Not everyone in school was awful, I guess. And on weekends I had guitar lessons in the morning, and a family picnic in the afternoon.

I recorded my second CD and I turned eleven. For my eleventh birthday I had Tim, Dan and Mike over for lunch and dinner, along with some new friends for a sleep over.

I recorded with Chris and Mike in LA again. They were so great to work with. And one day, I just know I'll meet Gary Marks.

Chapter 14

Now as I sit by the fireplace I hear the sounds of the logs crackling in odd unpredictable rhythms. Dad and I are strumming on our guitars, Jim's playing the tambourine, and a smile is lit on every face.

In the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy chanted, "There's no place like home," and I couldn't agree more. With Jim, my dad and I so close, I finally realize what home is. And there's another home where I still go -- the place where I write my secret songs.

The End