



Cat
Grant

Allegro
Vivace

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...I knew without looking that he'd trailed me to the bus stop. The rain had started again, so I ducked under the overhang. Matt stood a few feet away, out in the open, the hood of his jacket up. I could still feel his eyes on me.

Finally, I couldn't stand it anymore. "What do you want?" I barked in the same tone I used in class whenever I wanted to scare the crap out of someone.

Didn't work. His smile only grew brighter. "I was going to offer to buy you a drink and let nature take its course, but it looks like that's off the menu."

"Knock it off, okay?" I sighed. "This isn't funny."

"Sorry. Thought you might be in the mood for a little flirting."

"Not really. But I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong impression."

He stepped closer, close enough to touch, those beautiful eyes of his raking me from head to foot. His gaze settled just below my belt. "Not at all."

The air was suddenly thick as ice. It was too damn hard to breathe. He gently brushed his hand across my cheek. Its heat burned worse than the tendonitis in my own hand, searing me inside and out. And God help me, I never wanted it to end.

"What do you *want* from me?" I rasped.

"The same thing I've wanted from that first day. The same thing you've wanted, too."

"You're wrong."

"Really?" he breathed. Then he showed me what a liar I was by capturing my mouth with his...

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BY

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ALLEGRO VIVACE
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CHAPTER 1

From the second he set foot in my classroom, I knew he was trouble.

Maybe it was the way he sauntered in, as if he were a rock star. He couldn't have been more than twenty—awfully young to carry off such arrogance, even if I had to admit he did it well. He fingered his violin case, his lush mouth quirking up in irritation when I didn't break off from correcting my student's bowing technique. With an audible sigh, he plopped down in a seat at the rear of the classroom, folded his arms across his chest and skewered me with a glare.

I rubbed a hand over my beard, stifling a groan. Nothing like a little potential drama to spice up the first day of a new semester.

He darted up to my desk the moment class ended and stood

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there tapping his foot while I made a notation in my lesson planner. I got a perverse thrill from making him wait. Being the head of the violin performance department carried more pains than perks, so I'd take the latter where I could find them.

I set down my pen and glanced up at him. "What can I do for you, Mr...."

"Matt Dugan." He paused a moment, as if his name should mean something to me. When I didn't respond, he bit back another sigh and added, "I was told one of your private tutorial spots is still available. I'm here to audition."

He didn't beat around the bush; I had to give him props for that. But I didn't know if it was his confidence, or the way his blue gaze bored through me like a laser, that sent a prickly flush creeping up the back of my neck.

I took him in quickly: tall and fit—but from the look of his toned but not grotesquely muscular arms, he didn't live at the gym. Dark hair. Olive skin, dusted with stubble. Lean, long-fingered hands. Musician's hands. Everything I found attractive in a man. Didn't mean I'd be granting him any favors, though.

"You've been misinformed." I stood up and shoved some papers into my knapsack. "I've filled all available spots. Auditions were last week. If you wanted to be considered, you should've been there."

"I know. And I meant to audition last week, I really did. I just got a little...busy."

I was about to ask him what could've possibly been more important, but the telltale steamer trunks under his eyes explained it. Too much partying, not enough practicing. Not my problem. "Sorry, I can't help you. There are a couple of other professors giving private tutorials this semester. One of them might still have

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space available.”

“I don’t want them. I want you, Professor Parrish. Everyone knows you’re the best performance instructor in the department.”

When arrogance doesn’t work, resort to flattery. And yes, for a split-second, I was flattered. But I also knew a master manipulator when I saw one. Reminded me of myself at his age.

“Do you have any idea how many students auditioned for those spots?” I asked.

“A-A few, I guess.”

“Forty students. For three openings.” I waited a moment for that to sink in. “Why should I knock one of them aside to make room for you?”

“Look, I know it’s a lot to ask, but if you could make an exception just this once—”

“If I make an exception for you, I have to make one for everybody.” I slung my knapsack over my shoulder and headed for the door. “Try again next semester.”

I had an inkling he wouldn’t be dissuaded that easily—and I would’ve been disappointed if he had. But sprinting down the hall and grabbing my sleeve was a bit beyond the pale.

“Just give me five minutes.” He fell back a step as I ground to an abrupt halt and yanked my arm away. “Once you’ve heard me play, you’ll change your mind.”

I should have turned my back on him and speed-walked the last few yards to the faculty lounge, but I didn’t. He’d made an impression on me. Unfortunately, not in the way he’d intended. “So you’re that good, are you?”

He flashed me a cocky grin that made the blood roar between my ears. “Yes, I am.”

“Really?” It took all my resolve to maintain my facade of

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nonchalance. “If you’re such a genius, why haven’t I heard of you before?”

“I was going to school back east. I transferred last semester.”

“Where back east?”

“Juilliard.” My eyes must’ve widened because he added, “It’s in New York.”

Smartass. I was starting to like this kid, even if I couldn’t figure him out. “You got into one of the best music schools in the country and then you left? Voluntarily?”

He shrugged. “I grew up in San Francisco. My family’s here. I wanted to come home.”

Now I understood. Another kid with a modicum of talent, who’d grown up thinking he was destined to be next Heifetz. Then he’d gone off to the Big Bad City and discovered he couldn’t hack it. Well, it wasn’t my job to hand him whatever he wanted on a silver platter simply because he thought it was his due. He could get in line with everyone else, the way I had.

“You really should hear me play,” he said. “You won’t regret it.”

I just laughed and walked away. He followed. “Tell me something,” I said, once I’d made it to the faculty lounge door. “Does being this annoying usually work?”

A shrug, coupled with another grin. “Looks like it’s working fine for you.”

It took me a few seconds to summon up a suitably pithy reply, but by then, he’d turned and strode away.

* * *

The faculty lounge was already bustling with lunchtime

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activity. I grabbed my ham and cheese on rye and low-fat yogurt from the fridge, poured myself a mug of black sludge and snagged the last wobbly Formica table near the window. I enjoyed staring out at the quad while I ate, watching the students scurry to and fro like so many ants, gray clouds scudding across the gloomy January sky. I found it calming, even meditative.

It took me only a couple of minutes to zone out. I gnawed absently at my sandwich, barely noticing when Gil Menendez's familiar stocky shadow fell across the table.

"Earth to Aaron." I had a vague awareness someone was speaking to me, but I didn't snap to attention until I heard the loud scrape of a chair being dragged over from a neighboring table. "Man, you must've had one rough morning."

"Fucked-up room assignments; students showing up late and unprepared. The usual first day crap." I reached for my yogurt, took a bite and pushed it away. Somehow, I'd ended up with banana. I loathed banana. "Of course, they're easier to deal with than the ones who think they're God's gift."

"That used to be us, give or take twenty years."

"Don't remind me." I couldn't help shuddering, although the memories weren't that bad—what little remained lodged in my brain after all the booze, drugs and sex of our not-so-glorious yesteryears had rinsed the rest away. Sometimes I wondered how Gil and I had managed to live through it, much less survive into our forties. We'd both grown thicker around the middle, hints of gray salting our hair and beards now, though on him, it looked far more distinguished.

My coffee had gone cold and tasted even more bitter and acidic than when I'd first poured it. I thought about getting a fresh cup, then shrugged and slouched back in my seat, rubbing my swollen,

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gritty eyes. I'd gotten six whole hours of sleep last night, above average for me these days. Budget cutbacks had forced the conservatory to trim its administrative staff, including my assistant, which meant I had to bring home paperwork every night.

Could've been worse. At least it kept me busy, kept my mind off other things. One foot in front of the other—that was my new credo. Stay focused. Keep barreling ahead.

Gil studied me for a moment, picking at his waxy scoop of tuna salad before setting down his fork. "Have you thought about going back to that therapist?"

"What for? Didn't do me any good the first time around."

"It's been almost two years, Aaron. You should be—"

"Getting out more?" *Oh, God, not this conversation again.*
"You've met me before, right? You remember I have a job?"

"You can't work twenty-four-seven."

"I can try."

"And you'll end up collapsing from exhaustion by the time May rolls around, just like last year. I don't understand why you push yourself so hard. If I had all that trust fund money Kevin left you, I'd be lounging on a beach in Ibiza ogling the native boys."

I wadded up the brown paper bag my sandwich had come in and pitched it into a nearby trashcan. "I'd be bored out of my skull after the first week."

"Look, I don't mean to be a nag. I'm just worried about you."

"And I appreciate it. But there's nothing to worry about. I'm fine." With that, I sprang up and grabbed my knapsack, then headed for the door.

About ten feet down the corridor, Gil caught up with me. "I need to ask you something."

Two more classes this afternoon, followed by office hours—

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and now I had to listen to Gil angling for favors, too? Another time, another place, I might've been more diplomatic, but right now, my patience was worn down to the fucking bone. I could just imagine what he wanted.

"Let me guess," I said, whirling to face him. "The photocopier's broken again, so you had to pay out of your own pocket to get sheet music copied at Kinko's?" At his nod, I barely suppressed the urge to roll my eyes. "You're the third person to tell me about that today. What do you expect me to do? I'm not in charge of fixing the office equipment."

"But you could talk to Helen about it." His voice rose, his face flushing bright pink. "I know ten bucks is nothing to you, but it makes a difference to us poor slobs who have to work for a living."

Students dashed up and down the corridor, shooting puzzled glances in our direction. *Great.* A department head getting in a public argument with a teacher on the first day of the new semester. It'd be all over campus by the time last period let out.

"Gil, c'mon. There's no need to get upset. I'll do what I can, but that's all I'm promising."

Gil swallowed hard, then nodded. "And that's all I'm asking. Thanks."

My classroom lay a few yards down the hall, a short distance from Gil's office. A student waited outside. He bounced on the balls of his feet, glancing at his watch, an instrument case tucked under one arm.

I stopped dead. "Shit." When Gil shot me a puzzled look, I added, "That kid. He dropped by my class this morning demanding that I give him one of my private tutorial spots. He's probably here to ask you the same thing."

"What...you mean Matt Dugan?"

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“You know him?”

“I’m the one who sent him to see you. So what did you think of his playing?” Gil prompted.

“What’re you talking about? I turned him down flat. I don’t have time to grant auditions to every student who waltzes in a week late with some lame excuse.”

“Not so lame, actually. I think he’s got some problems at home.”

I let out a slow breath. “Obviously you’ve heard him. What’s your opinion?”

“The kid’s got an ego on him, but it’s well-deserved. I had him in class last semester, and he blew everyone else out of the water. If you’re too busy, I suppose I could take him on for his tutorial, but it’d be a waste of time. I’ve already taught him everything I can. So I figured I’d hand him over to the master,” Gil added with a grin.

I would’ve dismissed it as another overworked professor passing the buck to his superior, if not for the fact Gil didn’t bestow such high praise lightly. If he thought this kid had something, maybe it was worth my time to give him a listen.

Didn’t mean I had to be overjoyed about it. “Damn you, Gil,” I muttered.

“Is that a yes?”

“Okay, okay, he’s got his audition. Tell him to drop by my office after three.”

“Thanks. You won’t be sorry.”

“I already am.”

* * *

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The kid showed up at the stroke of three with his violin and a more conciliatory attitude. Either Gil had given him a few pointers on how to deal with me, or else he'd figured out for himself that playing unstoppable force to my immovable object would most likely end up with him splattered all over the asphalt.

"If this isn't a good time, I can come back later," he said as he poked his head in, gesturing at the mountain of papers strewn across my desk.

"I said three o'clock, didn't I?" There was no need to be testy, except for the fact I preferred to keep my students off-balance and at a safe distance. Trying to be their BFF would only get me an endless parade of them in and out of here, when I needed every spare minute to beat back the never-ending glut of administrative paperwork.

I threw down my pen, flexing the fingers of my right hand to ease the burning ache that had already set in. Fucking tendonitis. Writing inevitably set it off.

Or playing. My gaze drifted to the kid's violin case, lingering on the slim, supple-fingered hand wrapped around the handle.

"Let me make one thing clear," I said. "You're only here because Professor Menendez vouched for you."

The kid smiled, this time with genuine warmth, all traces of the brashness he'd shown that morning gone. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

"We'll see how much you appreciate it when we're done here." I pushed aside some of the papers, then leaned an elbow on my desk. "All right. You've got your five minutes. Impress me."

He glanced around, trying to find somewhere to set down his violin case amidst the clutter of my messy desk and walls of shelves packed with music scores, CDs and books on theory. Finally, he balanced it atop a stack of books on the chair in front of

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my desk, opened it, drew out his instrument and gave it a quick tuning, followed by an experimental draw across the strings with his bow. Then, closing his eyes, he took a deep breath and launched into a Bach partita.

It took only a couple of bars before I realized, to my sinking chagrin, that he was indeed every bit as good as he'd claimed. Rock-solid technique, with every note perfectly weighted, like a string of pearls. Faultless intonation. *Jesus*. I hadn't played half as well at his age.

He simply lowered his instrument and stood there waiting for me to say something. Then his lips twitched, and I could tell he was holding back a grin. Little fucker knew he'd nailed it.

"How long have you been playing?" I asked.

"Since I was five."

"Favorite composers?"

"Mozart. Bach. Schumann. Brahms. Tchaikovsky."

Late Romantic, with a little classical and Baroque tossed in for good measure—the typical conservatory student list of greatest hits. "Do you know the Sibelius concerto?"

"I've sight-read it a couple of times, but I haven't had a chance to study it in depth."

I spun around in my chair and reached for a score in the bookshelf behind me, then laid it on the desk and flipped it open to the second movement. "Start here and play me the first few bars."

"But...I just told you, I don't know this piece."

I'd knocked him off-kilter, which was fine with me. Sooner or later, he'd have to learn to perform under pressure. "Good. I want to hear how you play something you don't have committed to memory. So play."

He did, and this time, as I'd expected, it didn't touch the

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brilliance of what I'd just heard. The technique was still solid; he didn't miss a note, but there was tentativeness and a lack of passion that didn't surprise me, considering he didn't know the piece well. Not a bravura performance, but at least a competent one—and from a sight-reading, yet.

Most students left the conservatory playing at that level. Some went on to play in Broadway shows or small chamber groups. With luck, and a decade or two of hard work, a few of them had even landed first or second chair in a major orchestra.

In ten years of teaching, I could count on two fingers the number of students I'd thought had the makings of a top-ranked soloist. This kid was one of them.

I didn't know it was possible for one's heart to sink and soar at the same time. *Shit*. My days were already overscheduled. My three tutorial spots were spoken for. What was I going to do, kick one of those kids out in favor of this one? I'd never get away with it. The dean would have my ass on a pike.

There was only one solution. A painful and inconvenient one from where I sat, but I knew I'd regret it if I passed up the chance to tutor him myself.

"All right," I said finally, standing up to reach for my day planner. "I can work you in on Monday and Wednesday mornings, from seven until eight-thirty. It's the only time I have available."

The kid's face lit up like sunrise on a summer morning. "Oh, my God...thank you so much! I didn't think you'd say yes."

"Give it a couple of weeks and you'll probably wish I hadn't." I scribbled in my book, nodding at the Sibelius score lying open on my desk. "Take that with you and study the first movement. We'll work on it this coming Wednesday."

"Wow." His eyes went wide. Gorgeous blue eyes, full of

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excitement and a passion for living. I vaguely remembered what that felt like. “Guess I’ll be pulling some all-nighters.”

“Count on it.” I couldn’t help grinning. The kid had no idea what he was in for. By this time next month he’d be wishing me dead, not staring at me as if I were God, the angels and Superman all rolled into one.

I hadn’t taken on a challenge like this in a long time. And honestly, I couldn’t wait.

CHAPTER 2

Terence, my ten-pound orange tabby, pounced on me at a quarter to five, yowling for breakfast. I dozed off again for a minute or two, until I felt his furry noggin butting against my chin. If I didn't appease him now, he'd start biting. With a sigh, I swung my legs over the side of the bed and staggered to the kitchen to put a handful of kibble in his bowl.

He gave my fingers a playful nip when I scratched his ears, then buried his head in the bowl and started devouring his meal. This small feline companion and I had been through a lot together. He'd comforted me during and after Kevin's long illness, offering unconditional love, demanding attention when my instincts screamed for me to close in on myself and shut out the rest of the world. I'd lost count of the days when feeding Terence was the

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only thing that got me out of bed.

I would've gone back now and slumbered gratefully until my alarm went off at six. Then my bleary gaze fell across the calendar on the fridge and I realized it was Wednesday.

With a groan, I trudged back upstairs to the bathroom and turned the shower on, waiting until the spray got hot enough before stepping under it. I emerged a few minutes later, clean and marginally more clear-headed, then rubbed myself dry with a thick terrycloth towel before padding back into the bedroom to throw on some clothes.

The cafeteria at the conservatory didn't open until eight, so I made coffee, sloshed milk on a bowl of whole-grain cereal and sat down at my kitchen table. It needed a new cloth; there were holes in this one where Terence had sharpened his claws on it. One of the chairs had broken a few months ago, and the one I sat in now creaked and wobbled. I had a long list of stuff in the apartment that needed repairing or replacing, but work kept me too busy to take care of it.

I lived only a few blocks from the conservatory, so most mornings I preferred walking to work. I kept my head down, gaze focused on the few square feet of damp asphalt right in front of me. Otherwise, I might catch a glimpse of some dark bundle of humanity huddled in an alleyway or curled up in a parked car. The economic woes of the past couple of years had hit this city hard.

The heavens had decided to open last night, unleashing a torrent of rain, though now it had tapered off to a light sprinkling. It would alternate between the two all day, in fits and starts. Typical January weather—rain, gloom, and more rain, with the sun peeking through every few days before running for cover again. After ten years, I was used to it.

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The lights were on in my wing of the building, though classes wouldn't officially start for another hour. I nodded at the custodian pushing his cart down the hall outside my classroom, then started to shiver the moment I stepped inside. The place was so cold my breath drifted out in steamy puffs, so I bumped the thermostat up to sixty-five. The dean would have a fit, but too bad. Stringed instruments didn't perform well in a chilly environment, and neither did students—nor did I.

Seven o'clock came and went. Then five minutes after. Then ten. Fifteen. Twenty. At twenty-five minutes after, I heard the outside door groaning on its hinges, followed by squeaky-wet footsteps barreling down the hall. Then the kid burst through the door, windblown and breathless. Water dripped from his coat, pooling on the floor. The floor of *my* classroom. Where he was twenty-five fucking minutes late.

"I-I'm sorry, I really am." He stripped off his wet raincoat and hung it over the back of a chair. "It started pouring, and my second bus never came, so I ended up running the last five blocks."

He looked at me, obviously waiting for a response. I fought off the urge to toss him out on his tardy ass. Since I couldn't get back the hour of sleep I'd lost, I might as well see if he'd done his homework.

I let him have a long, excruciating moment to ponder his transgression before pointing at his violin case. "I'm assuming you've studied the first movement of the Sibelius?"

"Yes, absolutely." He yanked the score from his bag and put it on the music stand, then scrambled to get out his instrument. "I'm ready."

"Good." I sat down, folding my arms across my chest. "Play."

"What, you mean the whole movement?"

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I nodded.

“But...it’s fifteen minutes long.”

“I’m aware of that, Mr. Dugan. I’ve played it a few times myself.”

“I-I know, but I was just—”

“We have an hour left. Let’s not waste it. Start playing.”

I’d rattled him, and it showed in his performance. Sloppy attack, a flubbed note or two, but within a few bars, he recovered. It still didn’t approach the stellar caliber of the Bach partita I’d first heard him play, and he hadn’t committed the score to memory yet, but it was acceptable, for a first try.

“Not bad,” I said once he’d finished.

He grinned, letting out a deep breath. “Thanks.”

“Of course, it wasn’t all that good either.” When his expression crumpled like a soggy soufflé, I suppressed a sigh. Maybe it was too soon to start pushing him, but I disliked half-measures. No doubt, he’d been showered with compliments on his playing his entire life. Time to administer a wake-up call. “How long does it normally take you to memorize a new piece?”

“A whole concerto? A couple of weeks, give or take.”

A relatively quick study, on top of everything else. I was downright envious. “I expect you to play this entire piece without the score by a week from today.”

His mouth fell open. “Y-You’re kidding, right?”

“Do I look like I’m kidding?”

“But I’ve got other classes, and then there’s—”

“Your life outside this classroom doesn’t concern me. You’re the one who nagged me to take you on. Now you’re telling me you can’t handle it?”

His jaw tightened, his blue eyes turning to steel. “That’s not

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what I said. I just don't think I can play the whole thing from memory that quickly."

"Then why are you here?"

"B-because I want to learn from the best."

"Drop the damn flattery!" I snapped, startling him so much, he skidded back a step. "Tell me the real reason. Why are you here?"

"Because this is the only thing I've ever wanted to do, all right?" He steadied himself quickly, meeting my gaze. "It's the only thing I'm good at. And I want to do it better than anyone else."

Finally, an answer I could respect. "The first break in my career came when I was asked to fill in for another artist who'd cancelled at the last minute. It was the Tchaikovsky concerto. I'd only played it a handful of times with the score in front of me. And they probably would have let me perform it that way, but I couldn't. Because a professional never goes onstage unprepared."

"So how did you do it?"

"I stayed up all night drinking black coffee and playing the damn concerto until I knew it cold. Then the next evening, I went onstage and played the hell out of it. And that audience gave me a standing ovation."

"I know." A slow, sly smile slid across his lips. "I was sitting in the second row with my mother."

For a moment, I wasn't sure whether to believe him or not, but it was enough to surprise a laugh out of me. "You must've still been in diapers."

"Oh, c'mon, it wasn't that long ago. And for the record, I was eight."

"And you still remember it? Well, thank you," I said quietly. "I don't hear things like that too often anymore."

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“It made quite an impression. So when I heard you were teaching here, naturally I wanted to study under you.”

Jesus. Talk about an unfortunate choice of words. That prickly flush crawled up my neck again. “My point is, if you want a career as a professional musician, you need to be prepared to perform at a moment’s notice. A professional also never keeps his colleagues waiting,” I added with pointed emphasis. “I don’t care what you have to do to get here on time, but get here. Show up late again, and you’re out.”

He nodded. “Of course. It won’t happen again.”

“Good.” I sat back down, gesturing at the instrument in his hand. “Now, once more, from the beginning.”

CHAPTER 3

Gil showed up on my doorstep that Friday evening with a bottle of cabernet and a large pizza. I did a double take, then stood back and let him come in.

“Not to sound ungrateful, but what’s with the impromptu feast?” I asked, ushering him into the kitchen.

“It’s been a rough week. I wasn’t in the mood to cook, so I figured you probably weren’t either. Besides, there’s no way I can eat one of these by myself.”

I grabbed a couple of dinner plates, along with knives, forks and wine glasses, then joined him at the table. The spicy aroma was appetizing enough, but I had to blink when he opened the pizza box, revealing a deep-dish Chicago style smothered in olives and mushrooms. “Were they out of pepperoni?”

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“Shit.” Gil’s face fell. “This was Kev’s favorite, wasn’t it? Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Honestly, I was rather touched that he still remembered. I grabbed a slice, carved off a bite and shoveled it into my mouth. It was hot and marginally tasty, but otherwise nothing to write home about. The sudden rumbling in my stomach, however, reminded me that I’d skipped lunch today.

“So how’s it going with the Dugan kid?” Gil prompted.

“Okay. At least he hasn’t fled screaming yet. I’ll say one thing—he’s got a great technique. Obviously his parents could afford the best teachers.”

“His parents were his teachers. Or at least, one of them was.”

When he didn’t immediately elaborate, I shot him a quizzical look. “Is that all, or do I have to guess?”

“I thought by now he would’ve told you himself. He’s Carmela Branciaga’s son.”

My fork hit my plate with a clatter. It had been twenty-five years, but I still remembered Carmela. We’d played together in the Tanglewood Orchestra when we were both fresh out of the conservatory. Even then, her skill with the violin had been nothing short of brilliant. She’d gone on to a successful solo career, but then a few years later, suddenly announced her retirement and dropped out of sight. “You’re kidding me. I didn’t even know she had a son.”

“Yeah, she was married to... I can’t remember his name, but he was music director with the San Francisco Symphony about ten years ago. I think he’s chief conductor in Berlin now.”

I let out a slow whistle. The Berlin Philharmonic was a job most conductors would gouge out an eye for. “Well, now I know where the kid gets his talent. But why didn’t you tell me when you

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snookered me into giving him that audition?”

“He asked me not to. He said he didn’t want any special treatment.”

“Good. Because he won’t get it from me.” Despite that, my opinion of the kid had just scooted up a couple of notches. “If he wants a solo career, he’ll have to earn it on his own. Nobody’s going to care who his parents are.”

“You think he’s good enough?”

“He could be. And evidently you thought the same, or you wouldn’t have pointed him in my direction.”

Terence hopped up on the table, sniffing our plates before turning an unimpressed tail, jumping down and trotting over to his bed in the corner beside the fridge. I grabbed another slice, took a bite and chewed slowly. “All right, he’s good. Very good, in fact. Problem is, he knows it.”

Gil laughed. “Something tells me that won’t be a problem for you.”

“Depends on how you define it. We’ve already had one rather interesting lesson.”

“Do tell.”

I took a long sip of cabernet to fortify myself. Rehashing wasn’t my strong suit, so I gave him the quick, thumbnail version.

Gil’s eyebrow crept up to his hairline when I mentioned how the kid remembered hearing me play all those years ago. “Sounds like somebody’s got a crush.”

“Oh, please.” I let out a snort. “I’m old enough to be his father.”

“Maybe that’s the attraction.”

“What attraction? I don’t even know if he’s gay.”

“You’re kidding, right? I picked up on it from the moment he

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walked into my classroom. I'm amazed you didn't. Guess the ol' gray gaydar ain't what it used to be."

This was nothing but ridiculous, idle speculation—not to mention, none of my business. Still, when I remembered the way the kid smiled at me, I squirmed a bit in my seat. "Doesn't matter. He's a student; I'm his teacher. Never going to happen."

"He's over eighteen. It's not illegal—or even against the rules, strictly speaking."

"It's against *my* rules. Last thing I need is to be accused of playing favorites. Besides, in a town like this, where he's got thousands of beautiful men to choose from, why in the fucking hell would he want me?"

"What, is your mirror broken? Because you don't look like a freak show reject to me." Gil wagged his head. "I know how hard it's been, but you've survived losing Kevin. There's no reason you can't be happy again with someone else."

"I'm fine with things the way they are. Getting out of bed every day and putting one foot in front of the other's all I can handle right now."

"And burying yourself in work. Maybe it keeps you going, but it doesn't look like it's making you happy. Why don't you drive down to the Monterey house for the weekend? That usually puts you in a mellow mood."

I shook my head. "I'm too busy. Besides, I can't take seeing all those old photos of Kev and I together. Another reminder of something I doubt I'll ever find again."

"Well, if you stop looking, it's bound to become a self-fulfilling prophecy."

"C'mon, Gil, you know how grumpy I get. Kev's the only one who was ever able to put up with me. And now I'm forty-five,

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which, in gay terms, might as well be a hundred.” I shrugged. “I’m okay, I really am. I’ve accepted it. I suppose I could go visit some old haunts downtown, but what’s the point? I’ve got better things to do than stand around being ignored.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“Yeah? And how many dates have you had lately?”

Gil shot me a mock scowl and poured us more wine, emptying the bottle. “There were a couple of silver foxes who used to hang out in the clubs back in the day. I seem to recall they did all right.”

“And I seem to recall us making fun of them. God, we thought we were such hot shit back then, didn’t we? Thought we’d be young and beautiful forever. Well, guess what?”

“If it’ll make you feel better, let’s go upstairs.”

“Very funny.” I scooped up our plates to take them over to the sink. In all the years I’d known Gil, we’d only had sex once, and that was mostly by accident. We’d ended up at the baths one night after a long bar crawl, so fucking blotto we didn’t even realize who we were doing it with until I’d already stuck my cock up Gil’s ass—and then we figured we might as well finish. We’d ribbed each other about it ever since, though I had no desire to repeat the experience. Friends like Gil were a lot harder to come by than one-night stands.

“So,” Gil said when I came back to the table, “now that we’ve got the crying-in-our-booze part of the evening over with, shall we go check out what’s on ESPN Classics?”

Sports were Gil’s thing, not mine. But what was the alternative—kick him out and sit here alone, slogging through more paperwork? I’d had my fill of that.

“Go turn on the TV,” I said, shooing Gil into the living room. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

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I preferred scotch at this time of night, but knew I'd end up with a killer hangover in the morning if I started mixing now. So I got a fresh bottle of red from the wine rack in my hall closet and opened it, then grabbed some clean glasses. God help me. I was nowhere near drunk enough to get through an entire evening of hockey and football.

CHAPTER 4

Matt showed up a full five minutes early for his lesson the following Monday and played the Sibelius concerto all the way through without opening the score. Note perfect. I had to clench my jaw to keep it from falling open.

“Well,” I said at last, “how did you manage that?”

“Let’s just say I’ve been keeping the Starbucks near my house in business the past few days.” His red-rimmed eyes told me he wasn’t lying. He laid his instrument down on a nearby stool and took a deep breath. “So, what’s the verdict?”

I could tell him what I really thought, but he wasn’t here for praise. He was here to learn. A pat answer would be too easy.

I gestured for him to take a seat, which prompted him to shoot me a puzzled look. I usually kept my students standing throughout

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their lessons, while I sat or stood as the mood struck me. It helped to reinforce the teacher-student power dynamic. But what I wanted to say now was something that needed to pass between equals—temporary equals, at least.

“Tell me,” I said. “What does an audience expect of a performer? When they buy a concert ticket, what are they paying to hear?”

It took him a moment or two to formulate an answer. “A solid, professional performance, I guess.”

Right there, in those six little words, lay his problem. “If that’s all they wanted, they could stay home and listen to a CD. Have you ever heard the old historical recordings of Arthur Schnabel playing the Beethoven piano sonatas?”

Matt shook his head.

“I’ll loan you my set. Technically, they’re far from perfect—the recording’s muddy, and Schnabel misses notes all over the place. But none of that matters because it’s some of the most heartfelt music-making you’ll ever hear. I defy you to make it through the opening movement of the Moonlight sonata without tears in your eyes.”

“That’s what audiences want? For me to make them cry?”

“They want to be moved. They want to *feel* something. Joy, sorrow...whatever the music calls for. The first movement of the Sibelius is incredibly melancholy, but I don’t feel that when I hear you play it. All I hear are the notes.”

A long, frustrated breath, and then, “Give me a break, okay? I only finished memorizing the damn thing yesterday!”

“I know. And believe me, I don’t expect miracles. But if you want to be a great performer, you have to look beyond the notes.”

This time he laughed, rubbing a hand over his face. “You

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sound just like my mother. I bet the two of you would get along great.”

“As a matter of fact, we did, back in our younger days.” At Matt’s surprised look, I added, “How is Carmela, by the way? I haven’t heard a word from her in ages.”

“She’s...good, relatively speaking. I mean...” He stared down at his hands for a moment. “She’s been sick for a while now. Multiple sclerosis.”

Oh, good God. How horrible. No wonder she’d disappeared from the scene so abruptly all those years ago. “I’m sorry to hear that,” I murmured. “I had no idea.”

“Not very many people do. She’s kind of a private person. She doesn’t want anyone outside the family to know. So I’d appreciate it if you’d keep it in confidence.”

I had to clear my throat before replying. “Of course. It’s... Well, it’s too bad. She was an extraordinary musician.”

“She still is. She just can’t play anymore.” His soft smile revealed the depth of his love for her. If he could learn to capture that kind of emotion in his performances, he’d hold any audience enthralled.

* * *

The dean summoned me to her office a few days later. Since it was far too early for our monthly administrative meeting—or too late, depending on one’s point of view—I guessed it could be for only one reason.

Helen had the phone glued to her ear when I walked in, so I took a seat and glanced idly around the room. I’d never paid that much attention before, but beneath all the papers and books that

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were the bane of every teacher's existence, her office wasn't much bigger than mine. It was, however, more tastefully decorated. She had a pretty, if rather forgettable, watercolor hanging on the wall behind her desk, alongside her diplomas. My single lone degree was now a dust magnet in the attic of my Monterey house.

I launched into preemptive defense mode the moment she hung up. "Look, I know you're not happy with my turning on the heat an hour early, but I've got a tutorial at seven o'clock that I can't reschedule—"

"Who said anything about the heat?" She peered at me over her bifocals, blinking as if I'd just sprouted an extra head.

"That's not why you're about to tear me a new one this time?"

"Aaron, why do you always..." She rolled her eyes, grabbing a file from the stack on the credenza behind her. "Never mind. For once, I didn't haul you in here to argue over pennies. Gil tells me this new student of yours has some real potential."

The hair on the back of my neck started tingling. Helen didn't make a habit of calling meetings to discuss one particular student. "He's talented, but he's got a ways to go before graduation. I'm confident he'll get there, though."

"Think he'll be ready to take the lead solo in the senior class concert?"

Where was she going with this? "I'm sure he'll want to audition."

She pulled off her glasses, rubbing her forehead just below the hairline. Her roots were even grayer than mine. "Aaron, I need to level with you. The school is in financial trouble. Enrollment's dropped ten percent since last year. We need something to put us out there, make us more attractive to new students and deep-pocket donors."

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So much for this not being about money. I should've known. "And exploiting the son of one of the world's finest violinists would certainly help, wouldn't it?"

"Don't look at me like that," she snapped. "I'm trying to run a conservatory here, and all I ever get from you is more of your damned attitude. For God's sake, Aaron, you graduated from this school. Do you want to see it close its doors for good?"

"Matt doesn't want to ride on his mother's coattails, Helen. Whatever he achieves, he wants to know he did it on his own. I have to respect his wishes. You should, too."

"Her support could be invaluable to us. Couldn't you at least mention that to him? Don't you think he'd want to help, if he knew how crucial this is?"

"He might." I rose and headed for the door. "But I'm not going to ask him."

CHAPTER 5

The next few weeks plodded on in routine fashion, until one morning I rolled out of bed feeling as if a giant cloud had opened up over my head. Maybe I was coming down with a cold, though I felt more foggy-brained than achy or congested. With a supreme effort, I dragged my butt into the shower and let the hot water pummel me for a few minutes.

The fog had lifted by the time I climbed out—just barely, anyway. I choked down three Aspirin with water from the tap and briefly considered calling in sick. But stubborn pride and my sense of self-preservation stopped me. I hadn't taken a day off this entire school year, mostly because I was afraid of what I'd find once I returned. The paperwork would swamp my desk, spill onto the floor and out into the hallway. It would engulf the entire building.

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Then, utter pandemonium and the end of the world as we knew it.

It was Friday, and my first class wasn't until nine. I preferred to arrive at school early and barricade myself in my office, but this morning I sat in the kitchen idly carding my fingers through Terence's fur, lingering over my coffee until the last possible moment. I was out the door at a quarter till, plagued by an odd niggling that I'd somehow forgotten something.

To my relief, the day passed uneventfully, until Gil rapped on my door around five that afternoon and poked his head in. "How you doing?"

"I've had a dull headache all day, but I'll live." I shrugged. "At least it's Friday."

"You want to go do something?"

"Nah. I'm not really up for anything but crashing on the couch and channel-surfing."

"Well, if you want some company, say the word."

I chortled. "You must be desperate if I'm the best date you can score."

"I just thought you might not want to be alone tonight. My mistake." He gave me a quick parting wave. "See you Monday."

Jesus, he'd actually sounded a bit miffed—and concerned, too. What was so important about today anyway? I dug my desk calendar out from under the nearest mound of papers and flipped to today's date. February twelfth.

The second anniversary of Kevin's death.

No wonder I'd felt like crap all day. My body remembered, even if my mind didn't.

I tried to keep working for a while longer, but now I couldn't concentrate. *Fuck it.* I shoved some papers into my knapsack, threw on my jacket and headed out.

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It was a relatively nice evening—clear, but not as chilly as it usually got when it hadn't rained in a few days. All of a sudden, I realized I really didn't want to go home. On a whim, I caught the next bus downtown and got off at Castro Street.

The sidewalks got crowded down here on Friday nights, but it was still early. I took a leisurely stroll, stopping to browse in my favorite bookshop, smiling wistfully at the laughter and appetizing aromas wafting from all the bars and restaurants. Time was, I couldn't go more than a couple of blocks without running into someone I knew, but tonight no one paid me the slightest attention. Gorgeous men of various sizes, hair colors and ethnicities passed me by—just like the last decade of my life. I might as well have been invisible.

I shoved my hands in my pockets and walked on, weariness starting to creep over me. Up ahead, bright, warm lamplight from Kev's and my once-favorite watering hole crooked a plaintive finger in my direction. I hesitated a moment before going in.

There were still a couple of tables left near the big picture window overlooking the street, so I grabbed one, waving over a handsome young waiter to give him my drink order. I decided to splurge on a double Glenfiddich, neat. If I was going to toast Kev's memory, I'd do it in style.

The amber liquid went down smooth as butter, warming me from the inside out. It also served as a hollow-bellied reminder I hadn't eaten anything since noon. One drink, then I'd head home. Terence was probably getting just as hungry as I was.

A not-so-unpleasant lightheadedness swept over me as I savored the delectable, peaty-tasting single malt. "Here's to you, Kev," I murmured. "Rest in peace, love."

Oddly enough, I didn't feel like crying. I'd done my share of

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that over the past two years. The overwhelming sadness that had hung on me like a wet blanket for so long now appeared to have lifted. For how long was anybody's guess.

I'd no sooner knocked back my last swallow than my glance zeroed in on a familiar face passing by outside. Matt, flanked by two other students I vaguely recalled from the corridors at school, all engaged in animated conversation. I considered making a discreet dash for the back door, but it was too late—Matt's intense blue gaze had already locked on mine. A cocky grin slid across his lips, just like that day when he'd first strode into my classroom.

He said something to his companions, then turned and marched inside, making a beeline for my table. *Shit*. Not good. Not good at all.

"Is this seat taken?" He didn't bother waiting for my answer, just yanked out the chair across from me and sat down.

Fortunately, I was still seated myself. That blinding smile of his had made the crotch of my jeans uncomfortably tight. "Are you old enough to be in here?"

"Ever heard of a fake ID?"

Well, hello again, Mr. Smartass. "As your teacher, I feel honor-bound to voice my disapproval."

"You're not my teacher—not in here, anyway." He shrugged. "In here, we're just two guys having a friendly chat."

I forced a chuckle. "Thank God for chance meetings."

"Not really. I was having dinner at that Thai place up the street. I saw you walk by."

"Oh, so you're stalking me now? Should I be worried?"

"I guess that depends on whether you're flattered or creeped out."

That certainly settled the "Is he or isn't he?" question, though

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not in a way that put me any more at ease—in fact, quite the opposite. Trying to deflect with more witty banter would only encourage him. Time to shut down this conversation.

I climbed to my feet and hastily zipped up my rain jacket. “I should be getting home. Have a pleasant evening, Matt.”

I knew without looking that he’d trailed me to the bus stop. The rain had started again, so I ducked under the overhang. Matt stood a few feet away, out in the open, the hood of his jacket up. I could still feel his eyes on me.

Finally, I couldn’t stand it anymore. “What do you want?” I barked in the same tone I used in class whenever I wanted to scare the crap out of someone.

Didn’t work. His smile only grew brighter. “I was going to offer to buy you a drink and let nature take its course, but it looks like that’s off the menu.”

“Knock it off, okay?” I sighed. “This isn’t funny.”

“Sorry. Thought you might be in the mood for a little flirting.”

“Not really. But I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression.”

He stepped closer, close enough to touch, those beautiful eyes of his raking me from head to foot. His gaze settled just below my belt. “Not at all.”

The air was suddenly thick as ice. It was too damn hard to breathe. He gently brushed his hand across my cheek. Its heat burned worse than the tendonitis in my own hand, searing me inside and out. And God help me, I never wanted it to end.

“What do you *want* from me?” I rasped.

“The same thing I’ve wanted from that first day. The same thing you’ve wanted, too.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Really?” he breathed. Then he showed me what a liar I was by

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capturing my mouth with his.

CHAPTER 6

It was the kind of kiss I could tumble into and never be heard from again. Soft, warm lips nipped at mine, teasing me open for the gentle flick of his tongue. The first tender touch I'd known in two years, and it nearly wrecked me. My knees wobbled; my head spun. My heart felt as if it would punch its way out of my chest.

A passing taxi blasting its horn jolted me back to reality.

No. Not here, not now. Not with him.

Matt stumbled back a step at my not-so-gentle push. I knew that lust-drunk look on his face too damned well. No doubt I was sporting the same look myself.

"Wh-what's the matter?" he said.

I smoothed the front of my jacket and readjusted my knapsack, which had slid off my shoulder. Anything to keep him from trying

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to kiss me again. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

He shrugged, wiping his mouth. “I know. But I had to take my shot.”

“Fine. You’ve taken it.” The telltale squeal of the bus’s brakes was fast approaching. Thank God. “And if you’re smart, you won’t take it again.”

The bus screeched to a halt. I got on, paid my fare and took a seat by the rear door. Matt stood on the curb watching it pull away, rain splattering his dark blue jacket. It was almost the same color as his eyes.

* * *

The following Monday was the day from hell. Matt lumbered in a hair before seven and played the third movement of the Sibelius with his jaw clenched so tight I expected the chin-rest of his violin to shatter. When he finished, he set his instrument down on a nearby stool and stood there, training his sullen gaze on the linoleum.

I was having an equally hard time looking at him, too. This was exactly why I never mixed personal and professional relationships. Now everything had gone to shit.

“Did you practice over the weekend?” I asked finally.

“Six hours, both days,” he snapped. “I can practically play the damn thing in my sleep.”

“That explains why you almost made me nod off. Play it again, and this time *think* about what you’re playing. I’m tired of listening to auto-pilot performances.”

For a second, he looked as if he wanted to pick up the nearest chair and hurl it at me. “I don’t understand what you want. I

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thought I was playing the piece perfectly.”

“Perfection’s boring. You need to find the heart of the piece and play it from there. So do it.” He got about twenty bars into his second try before I stopped him. “Did you hear what I said, or am I wasting my time here?”

“I’m trying, okay?” he said through gritted teeth. “If you’d cut me a little slack—”

“I’ve already cut you plenty. We’ve been working on this same damn concerto for over a month. You should have it by now.”

Now he had no problem looking at me. If stares could wound, every inch of my skin would’ve been hanging in bloody ribbons. “You’re a real bastard, you know that?”

“It’s been said. Go on; play it again.”

“Fuck that.” He grabbed his case and laid his instrument carefully inside, then closed the latches with a loud snap. “We both know what this is really about.”

Oh, terrific. Just what I needed—a temperamental diva fit. Well, it wasn’t going to work, no matter what had happened between us the other night. “Get your violin back out. The lesson’s not over yet.”

“It is now.” He snatched up his case and stormed out.

For a moment or two, I considered going after him, but the corridor was already filling with students. Not a good idea. Best to give us both a little time to calm down.

The rest of the morning followed in a similarly crappy fashion. By the time the lunch hour rolled around, I wished I’d stayed home with the covers over my head.

I grabbed a roast beef sandwich and coffee down in the cafeteria and fled to my office to eat in relative peace. I’d nearly finished when there was a soft tap at the door, and in stepped Gil.

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"I didn't see you all morning and then you didn't show in the lounge, so..." He shrugged, dropping into the chair in front of my desk. "I got a little worried, especially after last Friday."

"Sorry," I replied with genuine contrition. "Believe it or not, I didn't even remember what day it was until after you'd gone."

"Yeah, I figured. Sorry about getting my boxers in a twist. So you got through it okay?"

"Yes and no." I sighed. "I hopped the bus downtown and decided to stop in at Twin Peaks for a drink. And who should I run into but the Dugan kid."

"You're kidding."

"Wish I was. He followed me out to the bus stop and planted one on me."

Gil's incredulous expression dissolved in laughter. "Guess I was right about that crush."

"I'm glad one of us finds it hilarious. Now the kid's imploding, and I'm the one stuck mopping up the fallout." I drained the last of my coffee, grimacing at the bitter aftertaste. "It's partly my fault. I should've never had that heart-to-heart with him a few weeks ago. Now he thinks we've got some kind of personal connection."

"Maybe that's not such a bad idea."

"What isn't?"

"C'mon, you remember what we were like at his age. Every twenty-year-old guy on the face of this planet, gay or straight, thinks of only one thing—getting laid. Maybe that's the way to get through to him."

Now it was my turn to laugh. "That's the craziest fucking thing I've ever heard."

"Maybe, maybe not. Right now, you're just the guy who yells at him in class. If he thinks you actually care about him, he'll

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probably be easier to handle.”

To my amazement, I actually considered it—but only for a second. “That’s a bit too cold-blooded for my tastes.”

“You can’t teach him anything with all that sexual tension in the air.”

“Oh, so I’m doing it all for him, am I? I had no idea I was so magnanimous.”

With a glance at his watch, Gil rose. “Think about it. Might do you both some good.”

Think about it? I’d been doing nothing else since Friday night, and all it’d gotten me was a stiff prick chafing against my zipper. Actual sex with a twenty-year-old? An exceptionally hot twenty-year-old to boot? Good God. I’d probably keel over from a heart attack on the spot.

CHAPTER 7

Matt was waiting outside my office when I arrived at a quarter to seven on Wednesday. I stopped dead the moment I saw him. After our blowout the other morning, I was surprised he'd shown up at all.

He smiled nervously, holding out the CDs I'd loaned him. "Thought I should give these back to you."

I took them with a nod. "Thanks. What about our lesson?"

"You mean, you're still willing to...after I walked out on you like that?"

"We're both here, aren't we?" I unlocked my office, then ushered him inside. Being alone with him wasn't the best idea, but having this conversation out in the hallway was an even worse one. I sat down, waiting for him to do the same before I continued.

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“What did you think of the Schnabel?”

“You’re right. They’re astounding performances. I see what you mean about playing beyond the notes. I guess perfection doesn’t necessarily equate with brilliance.” He sighed. “But I want to be brilliant. I want to be as good as my mother was. And you’re the only teacher in this school who can get me there.”

The sincerity in his tone and expression told me it wasn’t false flattery. I actually found it touching. “That’s a bit of an exaggeration, but thank you. However, it might be best if Professor Menendez took over your lessons starting next week.”

“You’re palming me off on someone else because I kissed you the other night?”

“Matt, it’s not that—”

“I don’t want anyone else. I want *you*.” He leaped up and knelt beside my chair, his face disconcertingly close to mine. So close, I could feel his warm breath on my skin.

I had to shut my eyes for an instant before my brain could form words. “I can’t be your teacher and your lover, Matt. It simply won’t work.”

“Says who? My parents worked together throughout their entire relationship. They made some of their best recordings together.”

“And they ended up divorced.”

“Yeah, but that wasn’t because of work.” A twinge of some obviously painful memory darkened his expression. “Plenty of great artists have been involved both personally and professionally. Sutherland and Bonyne. Rostropovich and Vishnevskaya. Barenboim and du Pré. If it worked for them, why can’t it work for us?”

“Because it can’t,” I said flatly. While I didn’t want to hurt him, I had to make myself clear. “For one thing, I’m no great artist.

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I'm a teacher in a small conservatory, and you're my student. A personal relationship is unethical."

"Ivo Pogorelich married his piano teacher. Half my professors at Juilliard were supposedly sleeping with their students. Or at least many of us thought so." He slid his hand onto my thigh, and I nearly jolted from my seat. The electric touch of his slim, gorgeous fingers would've coaxed a gasp out of me if I hadn't tamped it down at the last possible second. "You want me just as much as I want you. You know you do."

Then he reached for my crotch, cupping my burgeoning erection, and there was no point denying it anymore. Still, I tried. "Matt, don't. Please."

Oh, God, that grin again. "I like it when you beg. Do it some more," he murmured.

"You're a fucking tease, you know that?"

He kept leaning in closer and closer, until his lips almost touched mine. Almost. With a groan of pure frustrated lust, I grabbed him by the nape of the neck and smashed my mouth against his.

He reminded me of melted chocolate—sweet, rich and incredibly hot. And now that I'd opened the door to the first real passion I'd known in years, I couldn't get enough. I tangled my fingers in his hair and held on, a fresh wave of pleasure washing over me at his delicious moan.

Breathlessness finally drew us apart. I let my head fall back, the room spinning so madly, I was only half-aware of Matt pushing up my sweater and yanking my shirt from my belt, before starting to kiss a warm, wet trail down my chest and belly.

His hands fumbled at my belt and fly. He had my zipper down and my boxers open in a second, leaving me groaning at the

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sudden waft of the room's chilly air on my cock. But when he bent down to warm my shaft with a puff of his own breath, I almost lost it right then and there.

He slid his gorgeous lips over the swollen red tip of my prick and swallowed me whole, bobbing his head up and down until I began to moan and yelp loud enough to shake the walls. I tried holding back, longing to savor every precious, ecstatic second, for all the good it did.

Right now, there was nothing I wanted more than to come in this young man's beautiful mouth.

* * *

Afterwards, Matt zipped up my trousers and held out his hand to me. I shook my head and managed to rise without his assistance, despite my wobbly knees and a slight lingering dizziness. Then we went into the classroom together for his lesson—amazingly, only about ten minutes late.

It was our most productive lesson to date. Matt played the concerto with concentration and real understanding, infusing the notes with a deep emotion I'd heard from him only once, when he'd played that Bach partita.

When he finished, he set down his instrument on a nearby desk and waited, twisting his hands together. I simply nodded and said, "I think you're onto something. Finally."

"Wow." He let out a breath. "I can hardly believe it. It sounded so different this time, I started to wonder if I'd gotten it wrong again."

"Not at all. In fact, that's the most accomplished performance of the piece I've ever heard from you. So what changed this time,

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aside from the obvious?”

He looked a bit startled by the question. “I don’t know. I guess I figured I had nothing left to lose. I got so caught up in playing, I didn’t even get nervous until I was finished.”

Maybe Gil was right. Maybe all the sexual tension in the air was what had kept Matt and me from connecting in the classroom. Now that the giant firecracker had apparently been defused, maybe we could get down to some serious work.

I opened my knapsack and pulled out the music for a Mozart sonata. “Why don’t you look at this for next week?”

Matt glanced at it for a moment, frowning. “But...we’ve just started making headway on the Sibelius.”

“I know. But let’s give it a rest for a week or two and come back to it fresh.”

“Okay.”

We packed up our things and got ready to go. Just as we got to the classroom door, he reached for my hand. I shook my head. “Not here,” I murmured, nodding at the small window in the door.

Matt rolled his eyes. “Aaron, c’mon. Don’t be so fucking paranoid.”

My heart did a tiny tap-dance at the sound of my name on his lips—those same pink, slightly swollen lips that had given me such amazing pleasure eighty minutes ago. But I couldn’t let him be so familiar, not when someone might walk in any minute.

“In public, it’s still Professor Parrish.”

He opened his mouth to object, but I silenced him with a cutting gesture. “We have to be discreet, Matt. Unless you want your friends to start snickering behind their hands every time they see you coming.”

“Okay, okay, I get it.” That didn’t stop him from stepping so

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close to me I could smell the tangy aroma of good clean sweat clinging to his skin. It took every last shred of willpower to keep from burying my face in the hollow of his throat and licking it off him.

“Guess this means I can’t kiss you now, either,” he said.

“I’ll see you in my office next Monday before class, all right?”

“That long?”

“A little cooling-off time will do us both good.”

“Oh, fuck you, *Professor*,” he said with a grin, already heading for the door.

Soon, I hoped. Soon.

CHAPTER 8

We started meeting in my office every Monday and Wednesday before Matt's lesson, but soon it turned into five days a week. It was insane, but I couldn't help it. Every hour we were apart, my mind whirled with the memory of his warm, spicy scent, the way his silky hair spilled through my fingers when he fell to his knees to suck me.

This morning we no sooner stumbled inside than I pushed him up against the edge of my desk and kissed him savagely, then ripped open his fly and shoved his jeans and briefs down to his knees. We'd been at this a month, and I hadn't tasted him yet.

"Wh-What are you...Oh, Jesus!" he said. His moist lips fell open as mine engulfed the tip of his slender, pink-crowned cock. Salty and slightly bitter, the flavor of him exploded on my tongue,

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urging me to swallow him down to the hilt.

I could've stayed down there all day, coaxing him to the brink of climax, then easing off, listening to his delightful gasps and muttered curses, while he gripped the desk until his knuckles looked ready to split his skin. Finally, I pulled off long enough to slick down my middle finger with a good, thick coating of spit before picking up where I'd left off, this time working my slippery digit slowly into his tight, hot hole at the same time my mouth worked over his cock.

"Oh, God, oh, *fuck!* Aaron, I can't..." His hands slid from my shoulders to the back of my head, holding me there while he shot. As if he were afraid I'd stop before he was done. Not fucking likely. Christ, I hadn't tasted such a luscious mouthful in ages.

He crumpled against me when I rose to help put his clothing back in order. "Fuck, Aaron, that was... God, I'm still shaking."

I chuckled in smug satisfaction. "Well, you've given me so many memorable blowjobs, it's only fair I return the favor."

"Now it's time for me to return yours." And thank God because my own prick was just about ready to burst through my fly. Instead of pushing me back into my chair the way he usually did, this time he hooked one finger in the eye of the zipper and slowly worked it all the way down, then reached inside to wrap his fingers around me. Those same slim, gorgeous hands that could wring tears from a violin soon did the same with me. With a broken cry, I spurted into a tissue Matt had grabbed from the box on my desk, our mouths colliding desperately a moment later. The lingering salty-bitter flavor of his come, coupled with his tongue's slick, velvety slide against mine, made me lightheaded.

Then there came a sharp click of footsteps in the hallway outside, and I instantly froze. Had someone overheard us?

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The sound stopped, and in the few short seconds of silence that followed, my mind raced with countless ugly possibilities. The custodian probably wouldn't say anything. Neither would Gil. But if it were another teacher—or, God forbid, a student—Matt and I could be in for some serious harassment. Whispered gossip in the hallways and classrooms. Obscene graffiti scrawled on bathroom walls all over campus.

Helen, hauling me into her office to tell me to keep it in my pants, at least while I was on school property. That is, if she didn't fire me on the spot.

The footsteps resumed, quickly fading into the distance. Doomsday averted—this time.

"S'okay," Matt murmured, stroking my shoulder in a futile attempt to calm me down. "I'm sure whoever it was didn't hear us."

"We heard him, didn't we?" I sighed. "This is crazy. We can't go on meeting here. We're begging to get caught."

"Where, then? You want to get a hotel room?"

It had crossed my mind more than once, but something in me balked at the idea. It was just... "Too damn sleazy," I replied, dismissing it with a shake of my head.

"Oh, and meeting here isn't?" He draped his arms around me, then leaned forward, resting his forehead against mine. "Why don't I come over to your place?"

That would've been perfect, except for one thing. "Gil drops by unannounced all the time. I don't want to have to explain to him why you're there."

"I don't think he'll have too much of a problem figuring it out."

"Probably not. But then he'll start hounding me for details, and that's something I'd rather not deal with."

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“Aaronnnnn, c’mon...” he whined. “I mean, I love giving and getting blowjobs as much as anybody, but this is ridiculous. I’m dying for you to fuck me.”

We’d tried—God knows, we’d tried—but there was no room to do it properly here in this cramped little cubbyhole. The last time Matt had straddled my lap, I hadn’t even managed to get inside him before my chair tipped, dumping us both onto the floor. I suppose I could’ve just bent him over the desk, but I didn’t want our first time together to be some rushed, porno-style fuck. I wanted us to take our time and enjoy it.

And suddenly, the ideal solution popped into my head. “How’d you like to go away with me this weekend?”

“What, both days?”

When he bit his lip, I could’ve kicked myself. His home situation had completely slipped my mind. “Of course, if you can’t leave your mother alone that long, I understand.”

“No, that’s fine. She’s got twenty-four hour live-in care. The difficult part’ll be explaining where I’ve gone for two whole days. She gets nervous when she can’t get hold of me.”

“You’ll be well within cell phone range, I promise.”

“But you’re not going to tell me where?”

I grinned. “It’s a surprise.”

“Now who’s the tease?” He kissed me tenderly, and the breath nearly stopped in my lungs. Jesus, the power this kid had over me. Even after a month, it still caught me off-guard.

“Okay, I guess I can swing it,” Matt said. “I’ll tell her I’ll be fiddling with a friend all weekend. Which is technically the truth.”

“You’d better believe it.” I kissed him back, then added, “Bring your violin. I plan to keep your ass busy, in and out of bed.”

CHAPTER 9

I faked a cold and conned Gil into taking over my afternoon class on Friday, then picked Matt up at the Starbucks a half-dozen blocks from the conservatory at one o'clock. After weeks of rain and gloom, the sun had finally decided to show; in fact, it was so pleasantly warm, I rolled back the ragtop on my red-and-black '65 Corvette.

"Nice car," Matt said as he climbed in, putting his overnight bag and violin case in the tiny back seat. "Wouldn't have pegged you for an old classic like this, though."

"What, old classics shouldn't drive old classics? This car's kind of a personal milestone. Bought it used with the only royalty check I ever got from that one recording I did of the Tchaikovsky. The company went bankrupt a year after they issued it."

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“Ouch. Talk about a kick in the teeth.”

“In hindsight, it’s probably for the best. It wasn’t too long after that when my tendonitis first started flaring up. Would’ve been an even bigger blow if I’d still been under contract.”

Matt nodded, sliding on his sunglasses. “I know. My mom had problems with her fingers going numb for months. One day she’d have problems playing, and the next day she’d be fine. She was in the middle of making a record the first time it got so bad she couldn’t continue. She managed to get through the first movement, but when she came back the next day to finish, she kept dropping the bow. Everybody thought she was drunk. It was pretty humiliating for her.”

“I can imagine.” God, poor Carmela. Leaving a recording unfinished must’ve been doubly galling for a perfectionist like her. I’d prided myself on never canceling a performance due to my tendonitis. For months, I’d played through the pain, with the help of pills, until I realized that, day by day, my skill had begun to slip. Still, I probably could have milked a few more years out of it, playing second or third chair in some sub-par regional orchestra, but the mere thought made me shudder. I’d worked too hard for too damn long to settle for second-rate.

“I told her about you being my tutor,” Matt added, leaning over to speak directly into my ear as I swung onto the freeway. “She remembered you the moment I mentioned your name.”

“I’m surprised. It was so long ago.”

“Apparently you make quite an impression.”

I chuckled. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

We made good time, zooming down Highway 101 with the wind whipping through our hair. I’d made this drive so many times over the years I could do it blindfolded. If I shut my eyes for a

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second or two, I could almost imagine I was speeding home to spend the weekend with Kevin after five long days of teaching in the city.

My house sat on a hill overlooking Monterey Bay, with a glassed-in front porch that offered a glorious view of it on sunny days like this one. I pulled into the carport off to the left-hand side of the building and climbed out, waiting for Matt to do the same before I reached into the back seat for our luggage. I had to bite back a laugh at his goggle-eyed expression when I led him up the cobblestone walk to the front door.

“Wow,” he whispered. “I had no idea the conservatory paid so well.”

“It doesn’t.” I unlocked and opened the door, ushering him inside. It’d been a few months since I’d last visited, so I’d called ahead to my housekeeping service and had them give the place a good cleaning, change the bed and bathroom linens and stock the kitchen with a weekend’s worth of food. “My partner bought this house long before he and I met. My late partner, I mean.”

“Oh, God, Aaron...” At his stricken look, I suddenly realized I’d never mentioned Kev to him before. “I’m sorry. Was it a long time ago?”

“That night you saw me at the bar was the two-year anniversary.”

“And that would have to be the night I decided to make my move. No wonder you were so pissed off. God, I’m such a fucking idiot!”

“No, you’re not.” I leaned in to give him a kiss. “And for the record, I’m glad you made the first move. If you hadn’t, we probably wouldn’t be standing here right now.”

He grinned and kissed me back. “Being congenitally pushy has

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its perks.”

A breeze had wafted in from the bay, blowing chilly air onto the porch and prompting us to step inside the house proper. I took Matt’s jacket and hung it up in the foyer closet with mine, then gestured for him to follow me into the living room.

No matter how long I’d been away, all it took was a couple of minutes here in my favorite room before a wave of welcome relaxation sluiced over me. I’d picked out the thick Turkish rug, overstuffed leather furniture and home theater system myself. One of Kev’s bronze mermaid sculptures stood nearby, a silent sentinel guarding the room. The far wall was lined with shelves packed with books, CDs and my old music scores. I watched Matt take it all in, drifting toward the baby grand piano in the corner, a Steinway & Sons logo etched above the keyboard in elegant gold script. A jade green ceramic urn sat atop it, beside a framed photo of Kev and me, both in white tuxes, gold bands glittering on our left hands.

Matt stared at it for a long moment before glancing back at me. “So the two of you were—”

“We flew up to Toronto for the ceremony a week after Kev got his diagnosis.” The last word came out as a strangled whisper.

“HIV?”

“Cancer.” Goddamn it, now my eyes were stinging. I didn’t want to do this, not here. Not now.

Matt didn’t say anything, just walked up and wrapped his arms around me. A sob rose in my throat, threatening to claw its way out, but I dragged in a shaky breath and managed to quell it.

“S’okay,” he murmured. “Go ahead, let it out. I won’t tell a soul, I promise.”

I could feel the hot flush on my cheeks as I lifted my head from

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Matt's shoulder. This was mortifying enough without the added indignity of actually bursting into tears. "I-I'm fine."

"You sure?"

I nodded. "Yeah. Sorry about that."

"Why? I'm not." Then, with a gentle kiss on my forehead, he added, "You've invited me into your home and your heart. That's an honor I don't take lightly." Another kiss, coupled with a soft smile that lit up the whole room. "C'mon, why don't you give me the grand tour?"

"And here I thought you couldn't wait to tear my clothes off."

"There's plenty of time for that. Right now I'd rather savor the anticipation."

I showed him through the kitchen and cozy dining nook, then took him by the hand and led him upstairs. The first bedroom on the right was my old practice studio. My music stand sat in the corner, alongside more shelves of scores and CDs. On the walls, I'd hung framed posters announcing various performances I'd participated in over the years. A small stereo system stood at the opposite end of the room, a plush leather armchair a few feet in front of it.

"Wow," Matt murmured. "I'd kill to have a studio like this. I have to practice in my room at half-volume most of the time, so I don't keep Mom awake."

"We can work in here all day tomorrow, if you like. I'll even let you pick out which score to play."

"From that collection? It'll take me most of the day to choose!"

"Play your cards right, and I'll let you work your way through all of them."

He gaped at me. "That could take years."

"Exactly." With a grin, I tugged him along to the bedroom at

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the end of the hallway. The housekeeper had put my favorite Persian blue duvet and matching pillow shams on the king-size bed I'd once shared with Kevin. I hadn't visited here in months, partly because it seemed so damn cold and empty in this room without him. But today, with Matt beside me and the afternoon sun's pale gold fingers poking through the curtains, I felt anything but cold.

Now that this moment had finally arrived, I started to tremble. Matt cupped my face with both hands and kissed me gently, then eased me back a couple of steps until the backs of my knees bumped the edge of the bed, and down I sank.

When I began unbuttoning my shirt, he reached up to lay his hand over mine. "Why don't you relax and let me do the work for a change?"

When I remembered all the encounters we'd had in my office, most of them involving my cock in Matt's mouth, I couldn't help chuckling. "What do you mean, for a change?"

Now that amazing luscious mouth twitched in mock annoyance. "Aaron, c'mon. I've been fantasizing about seducing you properly for weeks. So let me do it, okay? I promise you won't be disappointed."

He'd promised me the same thing about his playing, and, despite that rough patch at the beginning, he'd more than delivered. I couldn't wait to see what he did now. "In that case, be my guest."

"Good. Now lie back." That familiar assertive, cocky tone of his sent a lightning bolt of pure arousal spiraling through me, zinging straight to my crotch. Still, I managed to hold my hands at my sides, resisting the urge to unzip and relieve the pressure.

Matt slipped off my loafers and socks, then started lightly massaging the balls of my feet. His hands had strength and sinew,

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not to mention calluses on the tips of his fingers that tickled a bit. I let my eyes drift shut and drank in his relaxing touch.

He worked both feet from balls to heels and back again, never wavering from his task, no matter how much I moaned and squirmed. But when he took one of my big toes in his mouth and started swirling his tongue around it, my ass came up off the mattress.

“What’s the matter? You don’t like it?” he asked, his mischievous eyes twinkling up at me.

“Slow down, okay? It’s a little...overwhelming.” I’d tried just about every kind of sex act there was at one time or another, but somehow I’d skipped toe sucking. Jesus. If this was the first act, I could only imagine the grand finale.

“Okay, I’ll let you have a breather while I make myself more comfortable.”

He rolled back on his heels and straightened up to a standing position in one amazingly fluid movement, then shrugged off his jacket and tugged his plain white T-shirt up and over his head. Even after a month as lovers, I’d never seen him bare-chested before. The smooth, golden-skinned planes of flesh made my lips and fingertips tingle with expectation.

He quickly unbuckled his belt and toed off his sneakers, then skinned down his jeans and briefs, kicking them aside. His cock popped up, its rosy tip winking at me. Both of us were panting as if we’d run a mile flat-out, and all we’d done was stare at each other.

He climbed up on the bed beside me and claimed my mouth in a hot, wet kiss. My pulse started to pound in earnest. But when he rolled onto his side and presented his round, firm ass, I caught a glimpse of something suspiciously shiny and silver peeking out from between those cheeks. When it finally dawned on me what it

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was, the breath in my lungs went still.

A butt plug. Stainless steel from the look of it, with a smoothly rounded loop on the end. I hadn't used—or even seen—one of these things in ages. God, I really was getting old.

“Have you been wearing that all afternoon?” I asked incredulously.

Matt looked over his shoulder at me and laughed. “I put it in at the bathroom at Starbucks before you picked me up. Made hitting all those potholes on the drive down really interesting.”

“I'm surprised you were able to stand it.”

“It was a challenge, but I like challenges. As if you didn't know that already.” He wiggled his butt. “Why don't you take it out for me?”

Matt had used enough lube to make sliding the plug out fairly simple, so I stuck my index finger in the rounded loop and pulled slowly, until the widest part of the plug had breached Matt's hole. It looked around an inch in diameter, maybe even a bit bigger. I stared at it, resisting the urge to let out a slow whistle. Matt didn't do anything halfway, that's for sure.

I pulled it nearly all the way out, then pushed it back in again. And again. And again after that, until Matt gave a strangled moan and dug his fingers into the duvet.

“Nice toy you've got here,” I murmured, giving him a slap on the ass just to see him jump. “But if you don't mind me asking, what prompted you to use it?”

“Y-Your cock's nice and thick...which I love, but...I figured it'd probably take a while to get you inside me if I didn't...loosen myself up a little first.”

“That's very thoughtful of you.”

“I had a...feeling you might say that.”

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“Smartass.” With that, I gave him another deep plunge with the plug before yanking it all the way out, grinning at Matt’s loud yelp. Luckily, his hole was slippery enough that I didn’t have a problem sliding in a finger, but adding another made the fit tight enough to start the blood rushing in my head—both of them.

“Get me a condom,” I barked, tearing off my own clothes, while Matt scrambled to unzip his overnight bag. I’d just finished kicking off my pants when a long, crinkly silver strip landed on the mattress next to my face. I stared at it for a moment, unsure whether to gulp or burst out laughing. “You do realize I’m forty-five, right?”

“Is this not enough? Maybe I should go buy another package—”

He started to get up, but I grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him back. “Put it *on*.”

With a wicked grin, he moved to straddle my thighs, ripping open the shiny foil with his teeth. I’d expected him to roll it on the usual way, but instead he clutched it gingerly between his teeth before bending down to ease it over the crown of my cock with his lips and tongue, sliding down all the way until I bumped the back of his throat. He gave a couple of teasing little bobs of his head before pulling off.

“Where the hell did you learn how to do *that*?” My voice was nothing more than a growl.

“Oh, one of my exes had this stupid hooker fantasy. He used to pretend to pick me up on the street, then left money on the table once we were done.”

“Is that something that turns you on?”

“Not really. I only did it because he wanted to. I’ve got everything I need right here.” He skimmed his hands over my

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chest, smiling the sweetest smile I'd ever seen. "Is it okay if I ride you this time?"

I'd been dying to get him flat on his back with his legs in the air, but for this first time, it was probably a good idea to let Matt take the driver's seat, so to speak. Last thing I wanted was to hurt him—at least, not too much.

At my nod, he reached for the bottle of lube he'd pulled from his bag and squeezed some into his palm before quickly slicking up my cock. Then, with a deep breath, he lifted himself up, guiding me inside him.

Matt opened for me like a flower greeting the morning sun. He slid down until he was sitting in my lap and began rocking slowly, his mouth falling open in a full-throated groan. "Fuck, Aaron...you feel so fucking good. Why'd we wait so long to do this?"

I tried to reply, but only incoherent babble came out. The furnace-hot grip of his flesh had rendered me stupid. It'd been so long since I'd done this, I knew I wouldn't last. But I had to, goddamn it. This was our first time. I couldn't disappoint him.

When I felt the telltale pull and tingle in my balls, however, I almost started to cry. Matt took it as a cue to speed up, leaning back on both hands to help deepen his thrusts. His cock bounced heavily, red and rock-hard, painting sticky stripes of pre-come all over both our bellies. I grabbed hold of it and stroked, letting the frantic movements of his hips do half the work.

He came a few precious seconds before I did, roaring like some magnificent jungle beast before falling forward to collapse in my arms. We lay there together, my spent cock still inside him, for what seemed like hours—and for all I know, it probably was. Drowsiness soon overtook me, turning my limbs to lead.

When I woke up, the room had gone dark. And Matt was gone.

CHAPTER 10

I found Matt down in the kitchen, clad in jeans, an old red-striped apron and nothing else, standing at the center island chopping mushrooms and green onions like a seasoned pro. The chef's knife sailed through the vegetables in such a blur, I wasn't sure whether to applaud or back away *very* slowly.

I waited until he'd rinsed off the sharp object and stowed it safely back in the knife block before coming up behind him and wrapping my arms around his waist. "You almost gave me a heart attack. No more getting up before I'm awake, okay?"

"Sorry." He gave me a quick kiss and a sheepish look, then turned to face the four-burner gas stove. A stainless steel skillet sat on the front right-hand burner, with butter slowly melting in it. "But I'm starving. Must've been all that exercise. Well, that, and

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not eating anything since this morning.”

The onions’ pungent aroma made my stomach rumble like a cloudy sky in an electrical storm. “Whatever you’re making, I’ll have some, too.”

“I’d planned to bring it up and serve it to you in bed, but since you’re already here...” He cocked his head toward the tall white Frigidaire. “There’s a bottle of white wine in there. Why don’t you take it over to the table and open it? I should have everything ready in a few minutes.”

I had to poke through a few drawers before I found the corkscrew, then I grabbed the nice cold bottle and a pair of glasses. But before I sat down, I hesitated. Should I offer to give Matt a hand? Then I remembered the last time I’d tried cooking. I’d left my steak under the broiler too long and set off the smoke alarm. Best not, then. Besides, if Matt’s knife skills were any clue, at least our dinner would be edible.

I watched in amazement as Matt broke four eggs into a mixing bowl and whisked in some milk, then salt and pepper before pouring it all into the skillet. A few minutes later, he flipped the omelet with a skill that would’ve done Julia Child proud, then added some shredded cheese and the veggies he’d chopped. Then he flipped it in half and slid the whole thing onto a dinner plate.

He scooped up a couple of forks and brought it all over to the table, serving it up with a flourish. “Dig in,” he said, pushing out the chair opposite me with his foot before sitting down.

I took a small bite, chewing cautiously at first. The eggs were the tiniest bit runny, melting together with the cheese. Just enough onions to give it some bite, mushrooms to lend it texture and a slightly musky tang. Not only edible, but pretty damn tasty.

Matt stared at me, waiting for my verdict. I took another bite

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and chewed it more slowly this time, letting the subtle, creamy flavors sink into my taste buds. Finally, I nodded. "It'll do."

"Gee, thanks, Professor. Nothing like having your performance criticized."

"The performance you gave upstairs this afternoon wasn't bad either." I smiled and reached for his hand. "In fact, I found it downright...inspiring."

"Aaron..."

I brought his hand to my lips, brushing a soft kiss across his knuckles. "I don't know what I've done to deserve you, but I'm glad you're here."

"Me, too." He poured us both some wine, and we clinked our glasses together and drank. I liked the way he gazed at me, with tenderness and quiet joy, over the rim of his glass. It had been too damn long since I'd enjoyed an après-sex meal with a lover. It'd been too damn long since I'd enjoyed a meal, period.

"Where'd you learn to cook?" I asked around a bite of omelet.

"The Food Network, mostly. And a couple of old books our cook left behind after we let her go." He shrugged. "Wasn't much point keeping her on after Mom got sick and all the dinner parties stopped."

"You cooked for your whole family?"

"I had to, pretty much out of self-defense. Mom burned boiling water, and Dad..." He got a wistful look on his face, then shrugged. "Well, he wasn't around. It was either do it myself, or starve."

"I had no idea things were so rough for you."

"It wasn't that bad. I kind of liked it when it was just me and Mom. The first few years she could still get around and take care of her personal needs without help. She'd have good days and

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she'd try to play a little. Then she'd have bad days when she couldn't even get out of bed. Pretty soon there weren't any good days left. She's been in a wheelchair since I graduated from high school."

I put down my fork and stared at my right hand, flexing it slowly. All the years I'd pitied myself, whining about my damn tendonitis, when Carmela had it a thousand times worse. "So your father's completely out of the picture?"

Matt hesitated a moment before nodding. "He didn't take Mom's diagnosis very well. A few months after, he left on a European concert tour, and we didn't hear from him all summer. Then Mom got the divorce papers in the mail."

I was floored. "Sounds like you're both well rid of him."

"Don't I wish. He's still supporting us—at least, until my career gets started. He made a deal with Mom to cover her medical bills, along with my tuition and the mortgage and everything else, in exchange for her not contesting the divorce."

"I thought Carmela had made a decent amount of money from all her performances and recordings."

"She did. But it was all gone by the time she got sick. She and my Dad lived the sweet life when they had it, though—they blew every dime on traveling and entertaining. I'd lived all over Europe before I was ten." He shrugged. "I had the kind of childhood most kids only dream about. And despite everything else, Mom and I still had each other. Makes it hard to complain."

We finished our dinner and sipped our wine in comfortable silence. While I hated to spoil this quiet moment with chatter, I couldn't let it pass without telling him how I felt.

"You're an admirable person, Matt—and that's not something I say too often. That's an incredible responsibility you've

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shouldered. I couldn't have done it at your age. And to become an accomplished musician to boot..." I shook my head. "You're amazing. I'm privileged to have you in my life."

He jumped to his feet and darted over to me, leaning down for a kiss. "Do you know how amazing it is that this even happened? I've had a crush on you since I was a kid!"

I laughed. "And I was, what? A young man in my thirties?"

"I bought your CD of the Tchaikovsky when it first came out. I played it in my room late at night, and looked at your photo on the back when I..." He blushed.

"That's the first time anyone's ever told me that!"

"I'll bet there are plenty of young musicians who've been inspired by you." He beamed, kissing me again. "And out of all of them, you chose me."

"What do you mean, all of them? They're not exactly beating a path to my door!"

"More for me, then."

Something suddenly occurred to me. "Did you intend to seduce me all along?"

"Are you kidding? You scared the hell out of me at first. I thought you hated me."

"What changed your mind? Something must've prompted you to approach me that night at Twin Peaks."

"The three beers I had with dinner probably had a lot to do with it. I saw you sitting there, and I knew I had to take my chance. If you said no, at least I'd still have you as my teacher."

"But I did say no, and you didn't give up. Thank God."

He grasped me by both hands and pulled me up into his waiting arms. "Shall we make it an early night?" he whispered, nipping gently at my earlobe.

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“What about the dishes?”

“They’re not going anywhere. And neither am I.”

That was all I needed to hear. With a grin, I raced him upstairs.

* * *

Matt brought me breakfast in bed the next morning—fresh raspberries, buttery croissants still warm from the oven and hot, strong French roast. Nectar of the gods. I slouched back on my fluffy down pillows and slurped down half a mug full in one long gulp.

The berries were fresh and firm, more tart than sweet, exactly the way I liked them. Then the croissant was so feather-light, it practically melted the instant it hit my tongue.

Matt sat cross-legged near the edge of the bed, sipping at his own mug, watching me with a blissful smile. “Guess I don’t have to ask if you liked it.”

“If you made these croissants from scratch, I may have to propose.”

“Puff pastry’s way beyond my culinary skills. There’s a bakery a few blocks up the street. I got the coffee there, too. Didn’t want to waste precious time in the kitchen that I could be spending here.” He stretched out next to me and rested his head on my shoulder. “I might just be the happiest man on earth right now.”

“Second happiest.”

“Really?”

That made me chuckle. “Why so surprised?”

“Well...I’ve slept with plenty of guys, and I’ve had some pretty intense crushes. But I’ve never fallen for anyone this fast. And nobody else has ever fallen for me, period.”

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“I find that hard to believe.”

“Apparently I’m too impulsive and overemotional. That’s what the ex with the hooker fantasy said, anyway.”

“His loss, my gain. I prefer men who aren’t afraid to show their feelings. They make the best lovers, and the best musicians. Speaking of which, we should be getting to work.”

Matt groaned and wrapped an arm tightly around my waist. “Aw, not yet! I just want to lie here with you like a lazy lump for a couple more minutes.”

Honestly, after the wild night we’d had, so did I. Hoisting my mug to take another sip made every muscle in my upper body scream. Matt’s warm, slender frame pressed up against me was starting to have an all-too-familiar effect, but now I was too wiped to do anything about it. I hadn’t felt so decadently debauched since my old tricking days, twenty-odd years ago.

I must’ve drifted off, because the next thing I knew, Matt was kissing my shoulder and slowly drawing his fingernails across my bare chest. “Sorry,” he whispered. “Looks like we kind of overslept.”

I fumbled for my watch on the bedside table. Either it was almost noon, or close to six-thirty. Judging from the sunshine streaming through the curtains, I bet on the former.

Matt rolled to his feet and yanked off his T-shirt, unzipped his jeans and let them fall to the floor. There was nothing underneath that layer of denim, except his half-hard cock. One glimpse had my mouth watering.

His gaze followed mine, a slow smile spreading across his lips. “Think I’ll grab a shower. If you want to join me, I’m sure I can squeeze you in.”

Me, Matt, and gallons of hot, soapy water. Nothing wrong with

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that picture, other than it might end up being the death of me. I decided to chance it.

* * *

The studio had always been my refuge, the one place where I could actually lose track of time. Many's the afternoon I'd come in and started playing, only to look up and find Kev standing in the doorway, scowling at me. He'd tried to call me downstairs for dinner, but I hadn't even heard him.

Today I sank gratefully into the leather armchair and waited while Matt thumbed through my shelves of scores. Half an hour later, he toted a small stack over to the carved oak music stand.

"I can't make up my mind, so I'll let you choose. I've got Mozart, some Bach, Haydn, Brahms...even the Tchaikovsky." He let out a shaky breath. "I'm hoping you don't pick that one."

Fortunately for him, I wasn't in the mood for anything melancholy. "Which Mozart do you have there?"

"Concerto Number Five."

"Start with that, and we'll see what other tortures I can dream up for you."

His expression told me he was biting back a retort, while I barely held my own evil grin in check. He took a few moments to adjust his tuning, then launched into the concerto.

Its sweet, plaintive opening notes floated through the air like snowflakes and hung there for the briefest instant before melting away. He'd played the Mozart sonata I'd assigned him in class with the same deft, delicate touch. Perhaps pushing him so hard on the Sibelius had been a miscalculation. Maybe he wasn't ready for such an intensely emotional piece. The more refined classical

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repertoire certainly seemed a better fit for his talents.

Still, there was something missing. His top notes sounded thin, which I'd never heard from him before. Maybe it was the difference in rooms; my studio had a softer, deader acoustic than the conservatory classrooms. The lack of reverb had simply exposed his violin's limitations. It was fine, for what it was—a well-made but otherwise unremarkable modern instrument. For a professional career, he'd need something better.

Matt broke off playing in mid-phrase as I got up and padded over to the nearby closet. I rummaged around on the top shelf until my fingers closed over the handle of my old violin case, dust wafting into my eyes when I pulled it down. I hadn't realized it had been so long since I'd last taken a look at it.

I set the case down, taking a moment to swab my face with a handkerchief before trying to open it. One of the latches caught, stiff with age and disuse; I had to work it back and forth until it finally loosened, then popped open with ease. No dust had seeped inside. My old friend's sleek, polished wooden surface shone in the afternoon sunlight, more beautiful than rubies—and in this instance, almost as valuable.

I wiped it down lovingly with a soft cloth and checked the strings before beckoning Matt over. "Care to give this one a try?"

"Is that the one you played on your recording?" He examined it closely, turning it over in his hands. His mouth dropped open. "Th- This is a real Stradivarius, isn't it?"

I nodded. "Not from his golden period, but still a damn fine instrument. Kev bought it for me when he was commissioned to do that piece for the Gettys' private collection."

"You mean, Kevin Lange? Your partner was Kevin Lange, the sculptor? His work's in the Museum of Modern Art!"

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“We met in New York about fifteen years ago, back when I was bumming around picking up whatever gigs I could. A friend dragged me to one of his gallery shows. I didn’t know a damn thing about sculpture, but the second our eyes met across that room... Well, that was it.”

“Jesus,” Matt said. “That’s so fucking romantic, I can’t stand it.”

I laughed. “Let’s see if you can stand drawing your bow across these strings. Go on, give it a try.”

It took him a few minutes to get the tuning right, and even then, he had a couple of false starts before launching back into the Mozart. But this time he sounded all wrong—mannered, nervous, fingers shaking. I suffered through it for the first few bars, then finally had to stop him.

“Relax, okay? It’s a violin, not a dozen eggs. You won’t break it.”

“I know, but it’s hard, adjusting to a new instrument. Especially one this awesome.”

“Try it again. Take your time and remember to breathe.”

His beautiful eyes drifted shut. He stood motionless for several long moments, calming and centering himself, then started over. The change in sound quality pushed me back in my seat. It was like the difference between seeing a painting close up versus looking at a badly-lit photo of it. The Strad had a richer, meatier tone that poured out like honey. Made me realize how good Matt was, for giving proficient performances on the instrument he’d been forced to play thus far.

He made it through the first movement and stopped, then set the violin on the stand and mopped his forehead with the back of his wrist. “Wow. That was pretty fucking amazing.”

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"I agree. If you'd like to use it as your primary instrument, I'd be happy to loan it to you."

"Aaron, that's really generous, but...no, I can't. This must be worth... Well, I don't even want to know what it's worth. Besides, I ride the bus to school every day. What if it gets stolen?"

He had a point there. "I'll bring it to school, so you can play it in class. When you need to practice, you can come over to my apartment. All right?"

He stared at me, honestly stunned. "Are you serious?"

"You can't prepare for a professional career playing a sub-standard instrument. Besides, I'm sure you'll make it worth my while."

"You'd better believe it!" He darted over, wrapping his arms around me, kissing me full on the mouth. "Never thought I'd ever play anything as gorgeous-sounding as this. Mom had a Guarneri del Gesù that some foundation loaned her, but she had to return it when she got sick. I think it was worth a couple million. She wouldn't even let me touch it."

I chuckled. "Well, you never really *own* a Strad or a del Gesù, you just take care of it until its next player comes along. I think you'll do this one proud."

We kept on with the Mozart for a bit longer before switching to a Haydn sonata. The intense practicing soon had our empty bellies roaring like jungle beasts, so we headed downstairs to see what we could scavenge for dinner. Matt found a couple of boneless chicken breasts in the fridge. He cubed them, then chopped some onions, mushrooms and red bell peppers and sautéed the meat and veggies together. Its spicy, piquant aroma soon filled the entire kitchen.

I ambled into the living room while Matt cooked, perusing my

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CD shelves for something to lend a little ambience while we ate. The ideal choice leaped out at me, right there at eye level—Carmela’s recording of the Brahms concerto. I put the CD in the player and went back in the kitchen, holding up its case to show Matt. “Thought I’d put on something to help set the mood. This okay with you?”

Matt glanced up, and for a second, I could’ve sworn he looked startled. “What kind of mood are you aiming for—gloomy and suicidal?”

“I thought you liked Brahms.”

“Depends on how I’m feeling.” He took the skillet from the stove and dished its contents onto dinner plates, then handed me one. “Right now, thanks to a certain slave driver, I’m feeling pretty fucking ravenous.”

A loaf of crusty sourdough bread with butter and the rest of the white wine we’d opened last night rounded out the meal. We sat down and dug in, but after a few minutes of stuffing our faces, I noticed Matt staring sullenly down into his plate. He wouldn’t look at me even when I dropped the rather unsubtle hint of clearing my throat.

I gave it until the end of the first movement before deciding I’d had enough. “Look, if you don’t like the music, I can always change it. But knock off this silent treatment, all right?”

“It’s not the music,” he replied, setting down his fork. “Well, okay, maybe it is. This is the last recording my parents made together. It doesn’t inspire a lot of happy memories.”

Oh, God. Now I felt like crawling under the nearest rock. “I’m sorry, Matt. I had no idea. I’ll go put on another disc.”

“No, it’s fine, you don’t have to. It’s actually one of my favorite recordings of hers. It just makes me sad when I think of

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what she could've accomplished if her career hadn't been cut short."

I nodded, perusing the back of the CD case as I sipped my wine. Carmela Branciaga, with the New York Philharmonic, conducted by Steven Matthew Beckett.

Beckett, *not* Dugan.

The question hung there on the edge of my tongue while I debated whether to let it out or swallow it. Finally, I couldn't stand it. "Did you change your name?"

He nodded. "As soon as I turned eighteen. My maternal grandmother's Irish. Dugan's her maiden name."

"Were you that worried about being accused of riding your parents' coat-tails?"

"No. I just didn't want anyone to know I'm his son. Or rather, that he's my father." Matt's eyes turned instantly steely, his tone dripping scorn. "I hate him for what he did to Mom. Want to know the reason he was in such a fucking hurry to divorce her? He wanted to marry his pregnant girlfriend. Not even a year after Mom got sick, and he couldn't wait to dump her for someone else."

I reached across the table and clasped his hand. "That must've been rough, but Carmela's a fighter, and so are you. The important thing is you both got through it."

"But isn't marriage supposed to be till death do you part? In sickness and in health? I mean, you stuck by Kevin till the end."

"Yeah, I did. But it was a near thing," I admitted. "Kev suffered for three years, but there were times when it felt more like three hundred. Some people aren't cut out to be caregivers. It's better to find that out earlier than later."

He snatched his hand back. "What, so you're taking *his* side?"

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“No, of course not, I’m just trying to point out—”

“Great, just great,” Matt snapped. He grabbed his plate, then marched over and dumped it in the sink. “Thanks for the support. I really appreciate it!”

A jab of anger flashed through me. I had to count to ten to quell the urge to lash back. At last, I got up and went over to Matt. He stood there gripping the edge of the sink, his shoulders trembling. He flinched when I touched him, then turned, letting me slide my arms around him.

“S-Sorry,” he murmured. “I didn’t mean to snap your head off.”

“It’s all right. I can only imagine the kind of pressure you’re under.”

“It just... It sucks, you know? I love my mom, but with Dad gone, I’m the only one left to look after her. I know it’s rough being in that wheelchair. I know she doesn’t mean to be difficult. But sometimes she makes me want to scream.”

I kissed him gently on the forehead. “Another trait she shares with her offspring.”

One corner of his mouth quirked up. “Gee, thanks.”

“I speak only the truth.”

“Well, the truth is, when I first went off to Juilliard, I was relieved. It felt good to get away, but it made me feel guilty, too.”

“Understandable. But what made you leave when you only had another year to go?”

“They didn’t invite me back. They said I was distracted and unfocused, and they were right. Mom had a couple of crises that semester, so I had to fly home to take care of things. I got stressed out, and I wasn’t sleeping too well. I ended up failing my final performance exam.”

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“Didn’t you explain your situation to them?”

“Oh, they knew, but they weren’t interested in hearing excuses. I didn’t get why before, but I do now. A professional doesn’t make excuses. You taught me that.”

I chuckled. “Good to know all that yelling made an impression.”

“Just a little,” he replied, leaning until I felt his warm mouth claim mine. “Give me a few minutes to clean up, then let’s go stretch out on the couch and listen to something relaxing.”

“Something tells me that’s not all we’ll do.”

Matt grinned. “Even better.”

CHAPTER 11

We dawdled over Sunday breakfast—homemade French toast with apricot jam and powdered sugar, washed down with hot black coffee. We ate at the kitchen table, peering out the window at fat swells crashing on the beach. It had rained last night, but the sky had begun to clear, sunshine now seeping through the remaining mist.

“Wish we didn’t have to go,” Matt mused. “It feels like we got here five minutes ago.”

“I know. Can’t recall a weekend that’s flown by so fast.”

“Is that good or bad?”

He sounded apprehensive, so I flashed him a reassuring smile. “A little of both. Don’t worry...we’ll come back soon.”

“I can’t wait.” He poured himself a fresh mug of coffee from

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the stainless steel carafe at his elbow, then slumped back in his chair to gaze dreamily outside. “Mind if we take a walk on the beach before we go?”

My first instinct was to say no. Slip sliding around on dry sand always left me with a backache. And this was February, which meant it was colder than a witch’s tit out there, and windy as hell. When he turned those blue eyes on me, though, my protests withered on my lips. Jesus, when did I turn into such a pushover?

“All right, but only for a few minutes.” I rose with a sigh. “Let me go put on my boots first, or I’ll end up flat on my ass in the sand.”

It was a shock, going from the warm house out into the morning chill. I pulled up the hood of my rain jacket and shoved my hands in my pockets. *Damn*. Now I wished I’d worn my gloves, too.

If the damp cold bothered Matt, he showed no signs of it. He’d skipped ahead of me down the stone steps leading from my street to the shoreline, stopping once he’d reached the bottom. Then he glanced back at me, bouncing like an overeager puppy.

I tottered onto the sand. Matt came up, wrapping an arm around my waist. “I won’t let you fall,” he whispered, then kissed me softly on the cheek.

I scanned the thin, pale strip of beach. This early on a Sunday, only a few other brave souls were out and about, scattered specks off in the distance. I exhaled in relief and let Matt guide me closer to the water, where the wet, packed sand gave my wobbly legs a lot less trouble.

The air burned in my lungs, tasting of salt brine with a distinct fishy undertone. Now that I’d gotten over the initial shock of the cold, I found it rather bracing. Kevin and I used to walk on the

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beach together like this back when I'd first moved in. I couldn't remember when we'd stopped, or why.

"This is great!" Matt cried, sprinting to the water's edge. He stuck his fingers into the surf before springing back with a yelp. "Next time I'll bring a Frisbee."

I laughed. "And somebody else to throw it to. I'm not as agile as you are."

"C'mon, Aaron, and quit acting like a little old lady. You're doing fine."

This time when he tried to grab my hand, I crammed it back in my pocket, shaking my head.

Matt rolled his eyes. "Relax, for Christ's sake. Nobody can see us. And even if they could, who're they going to tell?"

"Sorry," I rasped out. "Force of habit."

He stared out at the white-capped ocean for a moment, then hunkered down on his knees and dug his fingers in the sand. "You act like we're doing something wrong. It's not illegal to fall in love with someone younger. Or older."

"No. But it could be damned embarrassing for both of us if someone at school found out."

"Then we don't tell anyone at school. That doesn't mean we have to pretend we don't even know each other outside the classroom!"

"Yes, it does, Matt," I replied flatly. "You're already worried about people assuming you got where you are because of your parents. Would you be any happier if people assumed I'm giving you special treatment because we're together?"

"But you're not! You make me work as hard as anybody."

"They don't know that."

He stood up slowly. "Does this mean I can't even tell my

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mom? I don't like lying to her."

I shuddered at the memory of Carmela's formidable Latin temper, but nodded. "Go ahead and tell her. I can't imagine she'll be too pleased about it."

"You're not the first older guy I've been with. The last guy I dated back in New York was thirty-five. He even flew out to visit for a while. He and Mom got along great."

"So I'm not a temporary aberration, then?"

"Oh, stop it!" He threw his arms around me, kissing me so soundly I swayed on my feet. At that particular moment, I didn't give a shit who was watching. "For the record, Aaron Parrish, I prefer older men—specifically, *you*. Guys my age are jerks. Plus, they're lousy in bed. They're in such a fucking hurry to come, they miss all the fun of getting there. I'm more of an enjoy-the-ride kind of guy."

I laughed. "Really? I hadn't noticed."

The morning cloud cover had completely cleared by the time we piled into my Corvette for the drive back, but enough of a chill still lingered that I decided not to roll back the ragtop. We loaded the CD changer with enough music for the entire trip and sailed up the highway in record time. Matt slouched in his seat with his eyes closed, one hand resting possessively on my thigh.

At last, as I pulled up in front of a stately cream-colored Victorian in Pacific Heights, he turned to me and asked, "Want to come in and say hi to Mom?"

Tempting though it was, I decided against it. "You should tell her about us first."

"I was planning to do it tonight."

"Then go ahead—preferably without me in the room."

He stared at me, then burst out laughing. "What? You mean

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you're afraid of her?"

"I've heard about the legendary fights she and your father used to get into. They said she threw a *chair* at him once."

"She can't even lift a chair anymore, so I think you're safe."

"I'll bet she won't have any problem tearing a strip off me. Especially when she finds out I spirited her son away for the weekend without telling her first."

"Well, yeah. And she'll probably do the same to me, but I don't care." He leaned in for a quick kiss, then reached into the back seat for his bags. "My big, mean teacher's scared of my mom. That's too fucking funny."

I shot him the sternest look I could muster. "Knock it off."

He popped open the door. "See you in class tomorrow, Professor. Bright and early!"

I watched him take the front steps two at a time, his shoulders shaking with laughter, and wondered how long it'd be until I lived this down.

CHAPTER 12

I rolled out of bed Monday morning, and my lower back seized up on me. I had to grab the dresser to steady myself before straightening up. Terence sat in the doorway glaring at me with a “Where’s my fucking kibble?” scowl curling his furry upper lip. Clinging to the banister all the way downstairs was an ordeal I didn’t care to repeat, even if there was hot coffee waiting. Later, as I hunched over the bathroom sink groaning and brushing my teeth, I suddenly recalled why Kev and I had given up walking on the beach.

A scalding shower unclenched my tight muscles enough that I could stand normally while I shaved. There was something different about this person I saw reflected back at me in the mirror—the hint of a smile tugged at the corners of my mouth, and

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my eyes shone. I hadn't seen that look in ages. Was I actually...*happy*?

My short walk to school worked out most of my lingering stiffness. The custodian saw me at the door and came over to let me in himself. We exchanged nods. His eyes widened as I stepped inside.

"Thanks, Hector," I said. "Have a good day."

He flashed me a broad expanse of white, white teeth. "Sounds like you already are."

What was that supposed to mean? I considered asking him, then shrugged and headed for my office. Matt waited outside, sporting a grin that rivaled Hector's.

"Does the rest of the world know something I don't?" I unlocked my door to let us both inside. "Why's everybody smiling this morning?"

Now Matt started to laugh. "Did you realize you were whistling?"

"*What?*"

"Yeah, I think it was, 'I've Got You Under My Skin.'"

"That's impossible. I don't whistle. I've *never* whistled."

"Apparently you do now." Blue eyes dancing, he caught me by my belt loops and pulled me in for a long kiss. "I've unleashed the music in your soul."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"C'mon, Aaron. You're not nearly as gruff and formidable as you pretend to be. I've been onto you for a while now." Another kiss. "You're a sweet old romantic in bear's clothing."

"Accent on 'old,'" I grumbled.

"Stop it, okay? You know that's not what I meant."

My inbox teetered on the right-hand corner of my desk. It'd

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been close to empty when I'd left on Friday. Welcome back to reality.

"I told my mom about us," Matt went on as I dropped into my chair with a muted grunt. "She was upset at first, mostly because I hadn't told her you were the one I was spending the weekend with, but I think she'll come around. She said I should be careful because you had kind of a rep as a Lothario."

I couldn't help laughing. "That was a *very* long time ago."

"Yeah, I figured. But she still didn't believe me when I told her I had to seduce you."

"Oh, Jesus, you didn't!"

"Of course I did. Mom and I tell each other everything." He fell to his knees at my feet, prompting an enthusiastic response from a certain part of me right below my belt. "She was very interested to hear about your big, thick cock, and how you fuck me till I scream..."

He had to be pulling my leg again. I stood up, doing multiplication tables in my head to help my erection subside. "Nice try, Mr. Smartass. Now we're five minutes late for your lesson."

He stuck out his lower lip in a mock pout. "Guess we'll have to make up the time later. Mind if I drop by your place tonight to get in some...practice?"

"Before dinner or after?"

"After. Mom and I always eat together. Say, around seven?"

Now I'd probably have a hard-on all day. Strangely enough, I didn't care. "Seven it is."

* * *

The rest of the morning passed without incident, other than my

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empty stomach rumbling halfway through my last class before lunch. I sprinted to the cafeteria as soon as the bell rang, but the line already trailed out the door.

Gil stood a few feet away. Hunger trumping pride, I marched up and tapped him on the shoulder. “Mind if I cut in?”

“Sure, why not?” he replied a touch sourly, giving me a quick up-and-down look. “By the way, how’s that cold?”

Shit. I’d forgotten about the lame excuse I’d given him on Friday. I made an equally lame show of clearing my throat before replying. “Uh, better, thanks.”

“It must’ve really knocked you out. I dropped by on Saturday, and you didn’t answer the door.”

“Sorry about that. I didn’t come back to life till Sunday night.”

“Huh.” He grabbed a couple of trays, handing me one. “Then who was driving your car? I didn’t see it parked in its regular spot.”

Busted. Still, I wracked my brain for a plausible response. “Okay, you got me. I drove down to Monterey for the weekend.”

He stared at me, the lines around his mouth going tight. “And you couldn’t just say so?”

Oh, Jesus. Now I’d hurt his feelings. “Look, it’s not that I didn’t want to tell you—”

“Yeah, Aaron, it is.” He leaned in close, his voice dropping to a whisper. “You’ve shut me out for weeks now. I don’t know what’s going on with you, but I thought we were friends.”

“Give me a break, will you? I needed time to decompress, and you of all people should understand why. Hell, a few weeks ago you told me to take a drive down there, and now you’re giving me shit because I didn’t check with you first?”

The line ahead of us started to move. Gil and I lapsed into

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stony silence, sliding our trays along to the soup, salad and entrée stations. My appetite had evaporated, but I took a cup of the beef barley soup and a small salad, paid the cashier, then scanned the room for a table. There was only one left, a tiny two-seater near the kitchen. And, of course, Gil had just snagged it.

Well, fuck it. I couldn't let this opportunity go by without trying to make amends. I strode over, sat down and stared him in the face. "Look, I'm sorry if I offended you. But even the best of friends don't tell each other everything."

He thought about it a moment, then nodded. "Apology accepted."

"Good." Relief flooded out of me in a huge exhalation. "I don't enjoy being mad at you."

"Me neither. I'm glad you had a chance to get away. You look a lot more relaxed."

"Thanks." Here came the guilt again. I choked it down with a spoonful of soup.

"You've had a lot on your plate this year. I know I've said it at least a dozen times before, but if you need help with anything, just say the word."

For once, I was tempted to take him up on it. Less time in my office meant more time with Matt. "If you're serious, I'd be happy to christen your desk with some of my paperwork."

"Absolutely."

"Great. Drop by my office later, and I'll load you up. Any projects in particular you'd like to take off my hands?"

"I could order office supplies and sheet music. And then there's the senior concert. I know how much you hate organizing that."

"Say no more. It's all yours."

"See, that wasn't so hard, was it?" He smiled. "Thanks for

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trusting me to take care of it.”

“You won’t thank me by the time you’re done.” Still, it was a weight off my mind. Now I might get through the rest of this school year without having a nervous breakdown. “But remember, you asked for the job.”

Gil’s grin brightened. “That I did.”

* * *

After my last class ended at four, I ran home to get the apartment cleaned up before Matt arrived. I hadn’t dusted or vacuumed in weeks, and it showed. I wiped the dust off my coffee table, TV and stereo, then pushed on to the kitchen, scrubbing down countertops and cabinets and loading the dishwasher with a week’s worth of piled-up mugs and plates. God, I was such a slob.

I darted upstairs to put clean sheets on the bed and fresh towels in the bathroom, just in case Matt visited the second floor. The counters in there were none too clean either. A bottle of spray bleach took care of that, but also leached most of the color out of the blue hand towel I’d used to wipe everything down.

I cleaned out the shower, too, spraying the walls and doors with bleach, scrubbing under the bath mat, then stripped off my clothes and climbed inside to give it—and me—a thorough rinsing. Afterwards, I put on a fresh shirt and pair of jeans before giving the apartment a quick once-over to make sure I hadn’t missed anything vital.

My back started throbbing again as I stood over the stove heating up my hasty dinner of canned vegetable soup. *Damn.* I’d forgotten how strenuous and exhausting this housekeeping business was. Next week I’d call in a housekeeping service to do

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the job properly. I'd had it with living in a pigsty.

Matt turned up on my doorstep at seven sharp with a huge smile and a bouquet of red roses that made me raise an eyebrow. "Housewarming gift," he murmured, throwing his arms around me the second he stepped through the door. Then, as he swept the living room with a glance, he added, "Looks like this place could use a little brightening up."

"Good thing you're here then." Something solid and insistent bumped against my shin, accompanied by a squeaky, plaintive trill.

"Who's this?" Matt knelt to offer his hand for Terence's inspection. He passed the sniff test, and was rewarded with head-butting and enthusiastic purring. "What a handsome fellow, or, uh...is he a she?"

"Terence is indeed a he. But I'm surprised—he doesn't usually take to people this quickly. Even after five years, he still ignores Gil."

"Maybe he only likes the people who are special to you."

"Maybe." I laid the roses on the coffee table and reached for Matt's hand. "The music stand's set up over in the corner if you want to get started."

He hung back, his expression incredulous. "Wait a minute—you mean, you actually want me to *practice*?"

I couldn't help chuckling. "Easy, tiger. While your ardor's touching, you're going to need more than three hours a week to master the Strad. Especially if you plan to audition for the solo in the senior concert, which I hope you are."

Matt caught his breath. "Y-You really think I could get it?"

"I think you'll leave your competition in the dust—but only if you keep focused and don't take anything for granted." I gave him a kiss and a playful swat on the butt, aiming him toward the music

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stand. “Now, get to work.”

I decided to take a more hands-off approach tonight, settling on the couch to peruse some paperwork while Matt ran scales and practiced a couple of Mozart sonatas, stopping every few bars to adjust his tuning. The next time I checked my watch, it was closing in on ten o’clock.

I cleared my throat to catch his attention, but he was lost in the music. Finally, I hurled a crumpled paper ball at the music stand. “Let’s wrap it up, or neither of us will be much good for anything tomorrow.”

“Let me play this part for you, okay?” He closed his eyes and launched into the first movement of the Mozart G major sonata—and for the next few minutes, I forgot to breathe. The sound spilling from the Strad was...astounding. Incredible. Shining and pure, like liquid gold.

It didn’t sound anything like the way I’d played it. In a few lessons, Matt had claimed it as his own. It would still take some work to make it sound as if he’d been born playing it, but that was a simple matter of time and discipline. Matt had found the instrument that would make him a world-class performer. I was proud to be the one who’d put it in his hands.

He finished the allegro, then stood, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, waiting for me to say something. “What do you think? I’m still getting the hang of tuning it—”

“It was good, Matt,” I said quietly. “Very good.”

A slow grin spread over his face. “I think that’s the first time you’ve ever used that word.”

“I could tell you that’s because it’s the first time it’s ever been true, but it isn’t. In fact, I’m not sure there’s much more I can teach you.”

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“Well, too bad, Professor. We’ve got three more months of lessons to go, and I’m not letting you off the hook.” He came over, laid the violin and bow gently on the table and crawled onto the couch beside me. An entire day’s worth of denied passion finally overtook me, and I shoved him flat on the cushions before rolling on top of him, kissing him hard enough to leave bruises. His hand closed over mine and dragged it down to cup the hard bulge at his crotch.

I stared down at him. “How long have you been—”

“Off and on all fucking day. I even had to go jerk off in the bathroom at lunchtime.”

The image that conjured up was so damn hot, it made my own cock twitch. “You think of me when you do it?”

“Fuck, yes! I think about your mouth and your cock and how good your fingers feel when you’re getting me ready...” His voice had gone quick and breathy with desire. It sounded almost as delightful as when he’d wrung every last drop of sweetness from the Mozart. “Aaron, c’mon, fuck me. *Please*.”

I reached into my pocket, then suddenly remembered something. “Shit.” I groaned. “I forgot to buy condoms.”

“Are you *kidding* me?”

“I haven’t needed them until recently! Don’t you have any?”

“They’re in my backpack.” His eyes drifted shut for a moment. “Which I left at home.”

“Not a deal-breaker. Now I’ve got you where I want you, I’m not letting you walk out of here unsatisfied.” I felt the heat of his hard cock radiating through his jeans, so I unzipped them slowly, smiling at Matt’s gasp when his engorged flesh sprang free.

I’d planned to suck him off, but the simple touch of my fingers wrapped around his shaft already had him on the edge. A few

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quick strokes, and he spurted all over my hand and his belly. I licked us both clean, then skimmed my mouth over his and darted my tongue inside, sharing his own taste with him.

“Jesus, fuck, Aaron, that’s so good. So fucking good...” We lay together for a few blissful minutes, until I realized I must be getting heavy and sat up. Matt rolled off the couch to kneel on the floor, reaching for my fly. “Let’s get these pants off.”

“Matt, you don’t need to—”

“Oh, yeah, I do.” That cocky grin again. “I’ve been thinking about this all day, too. So why don’t you lie back and let me do wicked things to you?”

“How wicked, exactly? I’m not sure my heart can take it.”

He shot me an exasperated look and yanked my jeans down to my ankles. “Will you cut it out with the old man jokes? They were funny the first couple of times, but now they just piss me off. In case I haven’t made it clear, I’m crazy about you. *All* of you—including your gray hair and pot belly.”

“And here I’d hoped you hadn’t noticed.”

“It’s kind of hard to miss. Problem is, you think that matters more to me than your gorgeous mouth and big cock. And your fucking incredible mind that knows more about music and performance than I ever will.”

“You talk almost as well as you play.” That talented tongue of his had already started making warm, wet, ticklish little squiggles up the inside of my thigh, trailing a path all the way to my balls. When he sucked one and then the other into his mouth, my fingers sank so deep into the cushions I could’ve sworn I felt the upholstery rip.

I made noises, wild, abandoned, half-strangled sounds I’d never heard pouring from my own throat before. Then Matt slid his

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hands under me, pulling my hips to the edge of the couch so his tongue could tease, lick and finally plunge into my tight hole, and I let loose a moan that probably had my neighbors convinced someone was murdering me. I couldn't take much more of this.

I buried my fingers in Matt's hair to tug him off me—partly, at least. My cock bobbed in the air like a poor neglected flagpole. I waited with agonizing patience for Matt to lick the pre-come off the tip and suck it into his mouth, then I grabbed his head and started thrusting. His hot, sweet mouth sent me over the brink in seconds, hurtling into an orgasm so intense it left my ears ringing.

My back throbbed anew, but I didn't give a damn. Once my vision cleared and the tingling in my body subsided, I turned to Matt, now curled beside me. "That would've been well worth a trip to the chiropractor."

He laughed. "I think we scared the crap out of poor Terence. He high-tailed it out of here pretty damn fast."

"He'll be back. I usually refill his water before I go to bed. Speaking of which...there are some nice clean sheets on mine, if you'd like to try them out."

"Is that an invitation?"

"It is. Unless, of course, you have to get home."

"No, it's fine. Marjorie usually gets Mom to bed around nine. So I can stay." He grinned, grazing my mouth with his. "This could become a habit."

I grinned back. "I certainly hope so."

CHAPTER 13

Over the next few weeks, Matt and I fell into a happy routine. We had our lessons twice a week, along with three or four evening practice sessions at my apartment. He stayed over two or three weeknights and at least one weekend night. At times, he'd give me this odd, expectant look, as if he were waiting for me to invite him to stay permanently. That invitation sprang to my lips countless times, and died there.

I just couldn't say the words. Everything was going so well, I didn't want to spoil it. It would all be over soon enough anyway. Come May, Matt would graduate and move on with his life and his career. He wouldn't want an albatross like me hanging around.

But if I told him that, he'd insist it wasn't true, that he'd love me forever. Well, nothing was forever. There was only the here

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and the now. Best to enjoy what we had while we had it.

We took another drive down to Monterey the last weekend of March. With spring now in full flower, we threw open the studio windows to let in fresh air, the sound of Matt's practicing flowing out onto the beach. More than once, I spied people gathered on the curb to listen. Soon they'd be paying top dollar to hear him.

Around six that Saturday evening, I rapped my knuckles on the studio door, then stood there with my arms folded across my chest until Matt finally looked up. "Shall we start thinking about dinner?"

"Yeah. Now that you mention it, I'm starving." He wiped down the Strad with a soft cloth and put it back in its case, then came over to wrap his arms around my waist. "Why don't we go out tonight? I like cooking, but I do it all the time at home. Doesn't really feel like a vacation if I do it here, too."

I almost said no, but then I reconsidered. What harm could it do? I didn't live here full-time. Running into someone I knew was unlikely. "Any particular kind of food?"

"How about seafood? That's what Monterey's known for, right?"

I smiled. "I know just the place."

It was a tiny joint down on the wharf with a fishmonger's shop attached, the kind of place all the locals frequented. The air's salty tang stung my nostrils as we walked from the parking lot. At least a dozen people were waiting for tables, so I gave the hostess my name and we headed for the bar.

Not an empty stool in sight. I elbowed my way in between two seats and ordered a double scotch and a micro-brew. The bartender peered past me and pointed right at Matt. "I need to see his ID."

"Not a problem." Matt had his wallet out in a flash, waving a

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slice of laminate under the bartender's nose. I held my breath. Last thing I needed was for us to get tossed out of here for trying to pass a fake driver's license.

The bartender merely nodded and handed it back. A couple minutes later, we had our drinks. One lone seat had opened up at the far end of the bar. Matt tugged me over there, pushed me onto it, then leaned in to whisper, "Will you please relax? This is supposed to be a fun evening."

"Sorry," I muttered. "This sort of thing doesn't happen to me every day."

"No kidding."

"Well, I'm glad one of us thinks it's funny."

"Give it a couple of years, and we'll both look back on it and laugh."

"If I live that long."

He looked as if he wanted to say something, but instead he took a gulp of his beer and fell silent until the hostess called us to be seated.

The waiter handed us our menus, then scurried away to get us another round of drinks. "So, what do you recommend?" Matt asked.

"The fresh salmon's usually good, or the tilapia. Too bad we're a little early for oysters."

"Mm, oysters..." He wetted his lips with the tip of his tongue, making that same yummy sound he made when he had my dick in his mouth. "We should definitely come back for those."

I gave him my best put-upon look. "Enough with the teasing, all right? We're in public."

"Calm down, Aaron. Nobody's paying attention to us. And even if they were, so what? If they knew you were banging my ass

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every night, they'd probably be jealous."

"Oh, and nobody at this table's the least bit conceited, is he?"

Matt and I both ordered the salmon; his grilled, mine poached. We sat there watching the waves bobbing gently on the bay. I started to reach for Matt's hand, then I remembered where we were.

"Your house here's so beautiful and peaceful," Matt mused. "Why would you ever want to leave?"

"My job's up in the city."

"Yeah, but...you don't *need* to work, do you?"

"Depends on how you define need. If you're talking about money, then no, I don't need to. But I've never been happy sitting around doing nothing."

"It just seems like... Well, at the beginning I got the impression you don't really enjoy teaching."

I shrugged. "It's not the only thing I'm good at, but it's the only thing I can do now. I'm all right at picking up a bow to demonstrate technique, but I haven't done any serious practicing in years. There's no way I could give an actual performance."

"Oh, Aaron..." Matt murmured. "Doesn't that make you sad?"

"It is what it is. I'm still a musician. But like your mother, I don't play anymore."

The waiter brought us our entrees, and on a whim, I ordered a bottle of pinot grigio. My eyes met Matt's as we clinked glasses. The salmon was exquisitely tender, gliding over my tongue like fresh cream. Matt's dinner must've been equally good, judging from how quickly he devoured it.

We split a slice of New York cheesecake for dessert, washing it down with the last of the wine. The entire room had taken on a lovely alcohol-drenched glow. I settled back in my seat, pleasantly

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woozy.

Matt smiled at me. "Somebody's gotten into the spirit of the evening. Finally."

"What can I say? I'm a cheap drunk."

"Not at these prices." He reached for the check, but I beat him to it. "What? I can't even take you out to dinner?"

"You're a starving student. Save your money."

"I've got a credit card to use for emergencies."

"This isn't an emergency. Besides, how were you planning to explain a seventy-five dollar charge to your mother?"

"You think she doesn't know where I am every weekend and who I'm spending it with?" He tossed his napkin on the table with a sigh. "By the way, Easter's a week from tomorrow. Mom wants me to invite you over for dinner."

Now I sat up straight. "Really?"

"Why so surprised? She's invited you before, but you're always too busy."

Not busy as much as apprehensive. The truth was I had no idea what I would say to Carmela. I'd admired her artistry and professionalism, once upon a time. Now I wasn't sure how I'd react, seeing her in such a weakened state.

I obviously couldn't keep putting it off. No doubt, she'd show up at the senior concert, which would make things doubly awkward. This way, we could get through the inevitable rough spots in private.

Matt reached across the table, clasping my hand. I savored his warm touch for a moment, then gave him a gentle squeeze and pulled away.

"If you don't want to come, that's fine," he said. "I'll make up another excuse."

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I forced a smile. “Of course I’ll come. It’s a special occasion, right?”

CHAPTER 14

I arrived at Matt's house around four on Sunday afternoon. He answered the door clad in a festive-looking yellow apron, with a smile that grew to Cheshire cat proportions when he reached for the spring bouquet of white roses, daisies and irises clutched in my hand.

"Not so fast." I gave him a quick kiss as I stepped inside. "I brought these for your mother."

"I'll put them on the dinner table where we can all enjoy them, okay? Go on in the living room and visit for a while. Marjorie's got the day off, so it's just me on kitchen duty."

I sniffed the divine aromas wafting through the air, my stomach rumbling in anticipation. "What's on the menu?"

"You'll see," he replied with a wink, pointing me toward the

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second open door on the left.

I watched him disappear down the hallway, then took a moment to survey my immediate surroundings. The foyer was pleasant and even rather calming, with plush, cream-colored carpets and an elegant, if understated, watercolor hanging above a marble-topped table. Tasteful without being ostentatious. It had Carmela's imprint all over it.

Time to enter the lioness's den. I sucked in a breath, pasted on a smile and walked in. At first, all I saw was a figure in a wheelchair parked in front of the window, peering outside at the lovely spring day. But when she turned to face me, her smile told me where Matt's got all its brilliance.

"Aaron," she murmured, holding out a shaky hand, "it's good to see you. Come, sit."

Her bones felt so impossibly delicate, I gave her only the gentlest squeeze before taking a seat on the nearby Danish modern couch. Luckily, it was much more comfortable than it looked. The entire room, from the couch to the two matching armchairs and heavy glass coffee table, had a sturdy, solid feel to it that made Carmela appear that much smaller and more frail.

She'd always been petite. Tiny but titanic—that was how I'd always thought of her. A force to be reckoned with. She still was, if that spark in her eyes was anything to judge by.

She'd been quite a beauty in her day, which, to my surprise, her illness hadn't managed to extinguish completely. Same dark hair, now shot through with streaks of gray. Flawless olive skin. I saw a lot of Matt in her, from her deep blue eyes to her lush mouth. Even the way she held herself, with such strength and confidence, despite the obvious effort it cost her.

"Twenty-five years gone and here we are again," she went on,

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giving me a quick head to toe glance. Her consonants still had a slight Latin sharpness to them, reminding me that she'd spent the first few years of her life in Mexico. "You look well."

I relaxed, but only a bit. "Can't complain. Well...on the other hand, I guess I could, but who'd listen?"

"I feel the same way these days. When I first received my diagnosis, I cried for weeks. I raged. I made life miserable for everyone around me. Now, every day feels like a gift. I'm grateful to be alive and to have a wonderful son like Matt. He's sacrificed so much to take care of me."

"I doubt he thinks of it that way, Carmela. He loves you."

"And he loves you, too, Aaron. Very much, in fact."

Her directness sent a hot flush creeping up my throat. "Young men fall in love at the drop of a hat. I know I did, back in the day."

"But not now?"

Those eyes of hers bored through me like a laser. My mouth suddenly went desert-dry. "I, um...I-I lost Kevin a couple of years ago. Did you know that?"

"Yes, Matt told me." Her lips pressed into a thin line. I remembered that look all too well. An involuntary shiver twisted through me. "Are you saying you're merely...consoling yourself with my son?"

"No, of course not. I care very deeply for Matt. He's beautiful and talented, and for some strange reason, he adores me. But I have a hard time believing it'll last."

Now she smiled. "You still don't know him very well, do you? He doesn't let go of the people he loves that easily."

"And I thought you'd be happy to have me out of the picture."

"When Matt first told me about the two of you, I was a bit alarmed. But I can see you've changed from the time we first knew

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each other. You're mellower now, more serious. Matt's so brash and impulsive, he needs someone like you to help balance him, bring him down to earth."

It seemed a strange thing for her to say, until I realized how true it was. Matt had calmed down quite a bit over the past few weeks. I'd never thought to attribute it to my influence. "Quite a daunting prospect."

"You've already taught him so much. I've no doubt you can handle this, too."

"Don't give me too much credit. I merely put the final polish on what was already there." I reached for her trembling hand, cupping it between both of mine. "You do realize he's going to be one of the greats, don't you?"

"Well, of course." She beamed. "Look at who his teachers are."

Matt chose that moment to poke his head in. "Talking about me again?"

"You're not that interesting," his mother retorted. "Stop eavesdropping and get back in the kitchen. You've got two hungry people here waiting for their dinner."

"It'll be ready by the time you get to the dining room."

I was about to offer to wheel Carmela into the adjoining room, but she pushed the control on her chair and rolled on ahead of me at an impressive clip. It was a relatively intimate dining room with a round table big enough to seat six, covered by a cream-colored tablecloth with tiny blue and red flowers stitched at the hem. Fine bone china rimmed in gold and plain, lightweight flatware rounded out the table setting. The last thing seemed a bit out of place, until I realized Carmela would've had a difficult time handling heavy silverware.

A tossed green salad and crusty French bread were already on

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the table, along with a cut-crystal vase holding the bouquet I'd brought. And then in came Matt, carrying a rib roast on a large platter, with roasted potatoes, carrots and fragrant sprigs of rosemary tucked around it. My mouth watered as if I'd just heard Pavlov's bell.

Matt set the platter down and dashed back into the kitchen for butter and gravy, then one more time for a bottle of red wine and a corkscrew. "Sorry." Twin spots of charming, sheepish color sprang high on his cheeks as he opened the wine and poured each of us a glass. "Guess I'm not as organized as I thought."

"It looks delicious, Matt," Carmela said. "But then, your cooking always does." When she gave a nod, Matt scooped up her wine glass and held it for her while she took a sip. "Thank you."

Then Matt started slicing the roast—juicy and medium-rare. Its savory aroma tortured my nostrils and made my empty belly scream. He fixed Carmela's plate first, cutting up her meat and vegetables into small pieces before setting it in front of her. Then he picked up her fork and put it in her hand, wrapping her fingers around it so that she held it like a shovel.

"That okay?" he asked softly. When she nodded, he leaned down to give her a kiss on the forehead, then proceeded to prepare a plate for me, followed by one for himself.

I hadn't eaten a home-cooked roast in ages, and this one was glorious. I'd plowed my way through two thick slices before I noticed that no one was talking. Matt had pulled his chair close to Carmela's, evidently so he could keep an eye open for her subtle cues. Every few minutes, he'd lift the wine glass to her lips again, or help her spear an elusive morsel of food. He cared for her as if she was a child, but there was no sense of self-consciousness about it. It was simply the way things were.

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He glanced over at my plate, one eyebrow arched. “That good, huh? You want more?”

“Go ahead; twist my arm.” I heaved a mock sigh and handed over my plate. “Good thing I don’t eat like this every night. Too damn easy to get spoiled.”

“I know,” Carmela chimed in. “I’d better enjoy this as long as I can. Soon Matt will be far too busy with his career to play personal chef.”

Matt shot her a sour look. “I’m sitting right here! Besides, I’ll never be too busy for you.”

“Just wait and see,” she said. “Once you start performing, mundane tasks like cooking fall by the wayside. Speaking of performing...aren’t auditions for the senior concert next week?”

“As if you didn’t know! I’ve only been practicing for it like a maniac this past month.”

She rolled her eyes. “See what I’ve been putting up with for the past twenty years, Aaron? He doesn’t take me at all seriously.”

“Me neither.” I swallowed my mirth with another sip of wine. “Some days I wonder why he even bothers showing up for class.”

“C’mon, stop it! I wouldn’t be where I am now if not for you two. I just hope I don’t get so nervous that I blow the audition.”

“You won’t,” I replied flatly. “You can already play that Mozart G major sonata in your sleep. Superbly, I might add. If you don’t get the lead solo, it won’t be for lack of effort or skill.”

Matt gave me a sharp look. “I thought you told me not to take anything for granted.”

“You shouldn’t, but the plain fact is, you’re the most accomplished musician in the senior class. You’ll end up on that stage one way or another. And if that makes you nervous, you’ve still got six weeks to get over it.”

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“Thanks a lot.” Matt took another bite of meat and chewed it slowly before adding, “I can always count on you to not sugar-coat things.”

“You should invite your father,” Carmela stated. “I know he’d want to be there.”

Matt snorted. “No, he wouldn’t. I’ve invited him to every recital and concert I’ve played in since I was twelve. He never showed up for any of those. Why would he care this time?”

“Because this time is different,” she insisted. “It’s practically your professional debut!”

“And I made it this far without his name or his help. I sure as fuck don’t need him now.”

“Mind your language, Matthew. You know I hate that word.”

I hated to interfere, but the situation cried out to be defused. Maybe for once, I could be the voice of reason. “It’s not such a bad idea, Matt. Give you a chance to show him exactly how far you’ve come on your own.”

“Are you deaf? I just told you he wouldn’t care!”

“Of course he would. He’s your father, and he’s a musician. One of these days you might end up working with him.”

“Not fucking likely.”

“Matthew,” Carmela snapped. “Stop it, or—”

“Or what? You’ll cut up your own food? You’ll put yourself to bed?”

Oh, Jesus. I hadn’t meant to spark a full-blown fight. “Matt, c’mon, there’s no need to—”

“Leave me alone, both of you!” With that, he sprang up and stormed out of the room.

So much for my calming influence. Silence fell, punctuated only by the annoying scrape of Carmela’s fork on her plate. It had

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apparently slipped in her hand unnoticed during her argument with Matt. She stared down at it as if the offending appendage belonged to someone else. “Would you mind?” she asked softly.

I reached over and plucked the utensil from her grasp, then laid it atop her plate. “I should go after him. Will you be all right by yourself for a few minutes?”

She nodded.

Matt wasn’t in the kitchen or the living room, but the front door hung open a crack, giving me a not-so-subtle clue to his whereabouts. I found him sitting on the front steps. He scooted over to make room for me, melting against me as I slid my arm around him.

“I really, really hoped everything would go well tonight,” he murmured. “All I wanted was for everyone to have a good time and get along.”

Spoken like a kid forced to play peacemaker between a pair of bickering parents. All of a sudden, I had a very clear picture of Matt’s childhood.

“Look, no one’s going to make you invite him if you don’t want to,” I said. “At least, I won’t. I can’t speak for your mother.”

“She won’t, either. She can’t use the phone or write a letter without help. It’s the first time I’ve ever been grateful for that.”

“All right, then. There’s only one thing left to worry about...” I dropped my voice to a whisper. “What’s for dessert?”

He burst out laughing. “I know what I’d like, but that’ll have to wait till we’re alone. In the meantime, there’s pie.”

“Homemade?”

“From the bakery. But it’s still good.”

“Apple?”

“Peach.”

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His tongue caressed that word just like I wished it were caressing another part of me. “My favorite.”

CHAPTER 15

Matt showed up at my office the following Friday afternoon, looking as if a boulder had just fallen on him. He was actually trembling. It alarmed me so much, I jumped up from my desk and went over to him. “What’s the matter? Is it your mother?”

“N-No, it’s...the concert committee called me in for a second audition about an hour ago. But you weren’t there.”

I was genuinely thrown. “That’s because no one told me. I didn’t even know they were planning a second round. So, what happened?”

“I didn’t have anything else prepared, so I played the first movement of the Sibelius. And I must’ve done okay, because...” God, now he looked like he was ready to burst into tears. “I got it. They offered me the lead solo on the spot.”

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I threw my arms around him. "I had no doubts."

"Well, I did! Especially when I got their note in class this morning. I can't figure out what I did wrong the first time around."

"I'm sure they just wanted to see how well you perform under pressure." For all his outward show of bravado, on the inside, Matt was really just a scared little boy. What would he do when I wasn't around to reassure him anymore? The thought made my heart ache. "It's a good thing I wasn't there this time. I probably made you too nervous at the first audition."

"It is pretty hard for me to stand up there and not wonder what you're thinking."

"You need to stop worrying about that. Soon you'll be flying solo in every sense."

"Don't make me think about that yet." He sucked in a breath. "They really seemed to like the Sibelius. They asked if I could start preparing the whole concerto for the concert."

If I'd beamed any brighter, I would've turned into a searchlight. "That's wonderful! We'll start working on it right away."

Matt didn't look anywhere near as enthusiastic. In fact, he'd started to go a bit green around the edges.

"What's wrong? I thought this was what you wanted."

"I-I know, but...why that concerto? I can't play it for shit!"

"Obviously they disagree."

"You didn't!"

I counted to ten before I replied, "That was months ago. You've come a long way since then. You're ready to play the Sibelius now. Hell, you're ready to play anything. All it'll take is a little patience and hard work. But believe me, you can do it. I have the utmost faith in you."

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"I wish I did."

"You will."

He kissed me deeply, desperately, while he clutched at my shirt. I indulged him until he pushed me back against the edge of my desk and dropped his hands to my belt, forcing me to reach down and stop him. "Take it easy. I've still got an hour or two of work left to do here."

"Fuck that. I want to celebrate."

"By fucking me? I can think of more comfortable places. Namely, my bedroom."

"Fine. But let's go out to dinner first."

"Matt, you know we can't—"

"God, I'm so sick of hearing that! Who cares if people find out? What're they going to do, kick out the head of the performance department *and* their star pupil, a few weeks before the end of the school year? You just said I don't need this place anymore. Well, you don't need it either. I should walk out in the hall right now and tell everybody we're lovers."

My breath hitched. "Y-You wouldn't."

"Of course I wouldn't. Not without getting your okay. But Jesus, Aaron...I can't wait for the day when we don't have to sneak around anymore."

I'd grown weary of it, too. The weight of keeping our relationship a secret sat on my chest like a brick. Sometimes I thought I'd suffocate from it. Six more weeks. It may as well have been six hundred years.

"Tell you what," I murmured. "There's a little Italian joint right around the corner from my apartment. They make the best cheese lasagna in the city. Give me another hour or so to finish up here and we'll go, okay?"

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“You really mean it?”

“Absolutely.” I kissed him again and then tried to pull away, but he wouldn’t let go of me. “Matt, c’mon...”

“Sure you don’t want a little...pre-dinner appetizer?” he murmured.

“God, you’re such a tease.”

“I thought that was what you loved about me.”

True, though at the moment I found it more inconvenient than arousing. But that might make for an interesting object lesson. “I want you to do something for me,” I whispered.

“Anything.”

“This time of afternoon you shouldn’t have a problem finding an empty classroom. I want you to take the Strad with you and go practice the Sibelius. I want you to pour all the hunger and desire and nervousness and fear and whatever else you’re feeling into your playing. Then I’ll take you to dinner, and afterwards we’ll go back to my place and fuck until you’re bow-legged. How’s that for a celebration?”

He swayed in my arms, chuckling. “Sounds great, except you’ve got me hard already.”

“Good. Use it; channel it. The Sibelius is an intense piece. It’ll take all the emotion you’ve got, and more besides.” One more kiss, and I pointed him toward the door. “Now, go.”

I hurried, but it still took me an hour-and-a-half to slog through the rest of my paperwork. Could’ve been a lot worse if I hadn’t farmed some of it out to Gil. While I was a bit ticked that he hadn’t invited me to sit in on Matt’s second audition, it was probably for the best. This way, Matt and I both knew he’d won the solo on his own merits, without the slightest whiff of favoritism.

I found him in our regular classroom, practicing the second

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movement. He sounded much different from the first time I'd heard him play it back in January. More invested, caught up in the music. The truly great performers were the ones who made it sound as if they'd composed the music themselves. Matt wasn't quite there yet, but with a little more work, he soon would be.

He saw me standing there, but kept on playing until he'd finished the movement, then laid the Strad gently in its case. "At least it didn't suck this time."

"No, it didn't. In fact, it was...still not bad, but a better not bad than it was before."

Matt rolled his eyes. "Thanks a lot. Can we go eat now?"

Ravenous hunger spurred us on, and we made the five-block march to the restaurant in record time. Typical Friday night—the tables were packed already and it was only five-thirty. I was about to suggest ordering something to go when I spied a familiar figure standing at the counter not five steps in front of me.

And then Helen turned around. "Aaron! Fancy running into you here."

I hoped my smile didn't look too brittle. "I drop in every so often."

"This is my first time. I've heard so much about the place, then I found the takeout menu up on the bulletin board in the faculty lounge." She lifted the bag in her hand. "Figured I should give it a try."

Guess who the idiot was who'd put up that menu? "Good. Enjoy."

Of course, she couldn't just turn around and leave. She had to look right at Matt, standing there next to me, and flash him a smile. *Jesus*. I didn't know Helen had that many teeth left.

"You must be Matt, Aaron's famous protégé. Congratulations

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on winning that lead solo.”

He smiled back, apparently oblivious to the awkwardness of the situation. “Thanks. Hope I do a good job.”

“I’m sure you will. Have a pleasant evening, you two.”

For a second, I could’ve sworn I saw her wink. No, it couldn’t be. I was hallucinating. Did Helen already know about Matt and me? She couldn’t. Could she?

Suddenly I wasn’t hungry anymore. In fact, now I felt like throwing up.

I waited for Helen to disappear down the block, then turned tail and bolted. Matt trailed along behind me, calling after me. I didn’t answer, just kept my head down until I reached my apartment and ducked inside. Then I staggered to the couch and collapsed. The blood roared in my ears like a caged tiger. I had to put my head between my knees until it subsided.

Matt’s hand on my shoulder finally prompted me to glance up at him. His eyes brimmed with concern, but the tight, strained lines around his mouth told me he was angry, too. I couldn’t really blame him.

“You all right?”

I nodded. “Yeah, just a little...startled, I guess.”

“Only a little? You ran out of there like somebody was chasing you with a gun!”

“Matt, listen—”

“To you telling me we have to lock ourselves in the closet again? Because I’ve been out since I was sixteen. I hate lying about who I am and who I love, but I did it for you. I thought you just needed a little time to get used to dating someone younger, but it’s been months now, for fuck’s sake. Get over it already.”

He was right, and I knew it. But now I couldn’t even look at

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him. "It's not that simple."

"Sure it is. The dean already knows, and the world hasn't come tumbling down around us. You keep saying you don't want to tell anyone because you're afraid my friends will laugh at me, when you're really afraid of everyone laughing at *you*."

"And they would, believe me. You've lived a privileged life, Matt. You have no idea how cruel the real world can be."

"Oh, give me a break! After three years in New York, I'm hardly a dewy-eyed innocent." He rose and set the Strad's case down on the coffee table, then stepped toward the door. "Bottom line is you're ashamed of me. That's not something I can get past."

The sound of the doorknob creaking in his hand made my heart shudder. "Don't go."

"No point in me staying. The only problem here is you, Aaron. And you're never going to change."

Then the door opened and closed, and he was gone.

CHAPTER 16

I got very little sleep that weekend, and even less work done. Monday morning dawned bright and clear, like some extraordinarily cruel joke, the sun peeking over the hills as I trudged to school. Seven on the dot when I arrived, so I headed straight for the classroom. Five minutes later, Matt still hadn't shown.

I gave it another half-hour, then retreated to my office. I couldn't even summon up the energy to get angry. I'd hoped to sit down and talk to Matt this morning, now that we'd had a couple of days to simmer down. But apparently he wasn't going to grant me that chance.

I waited a few minutes after the eight o'clock class bell for the hallways to clear before I ventured outside and made a beeline for

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Helen's office. My stomach twisted up like a pretzel as I rapped lightly on the door, then poked my head inside. "I hope this isn't a bad time."

She glanced up at me, smiling. "I had a feeling you'd drop by." She gestured toward the chair in front of her desk, piled high with files and other assorted papers. "Just put that stuff on the floor."

I did, then sat down, rubbing my clammy palms on the arms of the chair. "So..."

"So." She laid down her pen and folded her hands on top of her desk. "Yes, I know about you and Matt Dugan. I've known for a while, in fact."

"And you didn't think to mention it to me?"

"I saw no reason to. You don't make a habit of this sort of thing. Besides, Matt's over eighteen, and since I haven't heard any complaints of harassment from either of you, I decided it was best to respect your privacy."

"How did you find out?"

"I walked past your classroom one morning during your lesson. I saw the way Matt was looking at you, then I saw the way you touched his shoulder. Made it all pretty clear."

In more ways than one. "What sharp little eyes you've got."

She laughed. "Aaron, I've been dean of this school for over twenty years. This isn't the first time I've heard this story. For what it's worth, you and Matt appear well matched. You've certainly been a lot easier to get along with since you started seeing him."

"I should've known there was an ulterior motive."

"Well, since we're on the subject...I know I've already brought this up once, but do you think you could convince Matt to ask his parents for a donation? Or, at least, let us use their names in our

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publicity materials? I know his mother's retired, but his father wields a lot of clout in the music world."

Helen was nothing if not ballsy; I'd give her that. "If it's so damn important, why don't you ask Matt yourself?"

"I haven't spoken more than a dozen words to him since his admission interview. You're the one he trusts."

And passing the buck was always so much easier. "Wouldn't do you much good, even if I did ask him. Matt hasn't spoken to his father in years. He's not even speaking to me right now."

"Oh." Her smile washed away like rainwater gurgling in a gutter. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"I'm sure you are," I snapped, then got up and left.

I shoved my hands in my pockets and started walking. Somehow, I reached the cafeteria. I bought a cup of coffee, sat down at a small corner table and stared outside. After a couple of sips, I pushed it away in disgust. My empty stomach didn't need another reason to roil.

Despair reached out for me, wrapping me in its cold, comfortless arms. I'd felt this way during the worst days of Kevin's illness and prayed I'd never do so again. Last time, I'd barely hung on by my fingernails. This time, it would crush me.

But it didn't have to. Matt was right. I'd made excuses, thrown up roadblocks, when the only real roadblock was in my own mind. No one else gave a fuck about our age difference. And if I couldn't find some way to reconcile it, I'd lose him forever—if I hadn't already.

I was halfway back to my office when the nine o'clock bell rang, and the corridor flooded with students. Matt darted out of a classroom a few yards ahead of me and started walking in my direction. Then our eyes locked, and we both went still as ice.

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I could see the wheels turning in his head as he vacillated between running the other way or pressing on. At last his eyes took on that familiar determined, steely cast, his mouth growing taut with every forward step. He even nodded as he passed by, murmuring, “Hello, Professor.”

Without the slightest hint of irony or sarcasm. As if we’d never spoken to each other outside the classroom.

My hand moved of its own volition, my fingers wrapping around Matt’s arm, pulling him close. His warm breath floated over my skin. His heart thumped so fast, it drowned out mine.

And then I kissed him. Right there in the hallway, in front of everyone.

He put up a moment’s resistance, then wound his fingers in my hair, kissing me back. The crowd surrounding us exploded in applause.

I grinned like an idiot when we finally came up for air. “Looks like we’re out of the closet now.”

He stared at me, shaking his head. “Have you gone fucking crazy?”

“God, I hope so.” And I kissed him again.

CHAPTER 17

“Damn it!” Matt’s fingers shook so badly, it’d taken him five minutes to get his tuxedo shirt buttoned. His bow tie still dangled under his chin like overcooked spaghetti. “Aaron, get over here and give me a hand with this thing!”

Pre-concert jitters. I knew the signs all too well. The backstage area bustled with students putting on their formal wear and tuning their instruments. There were no individual dressing rooms, just a few scattered vanity tables and sheets strung across the wide space with clothesline. Ah, the excitement, thrills and utter fucking pandemonium of the senior class concert. Twenty-plus years since I’d graduated from this place and nothing had changed.

I got Matt’s tie knotted, then pinned on his white rose boutonnière. “Breathe, okay? You’ll be fine. You did a great job at

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the rehearsal this morning.”

“But that was without an auditorium full of people!” Now he’d started with that dancing-from-one-foot-to-the-other thing again. While it evidently helped him work off nervous energy, it made me want to smack him. “Remind me again why I wanted to be a professional musician?”

“I believe you said it was the only thing you were good at. And I happen to agree.”

“Think it’s too late to try plumber’s school?”

“Come here.” I wrapped him in my arms, stroking his hair. He quivered against me like a leaf in a storm. “We’ve still got a few minutes. Let’s take a walk outside and get some air.”

“Okay.”

We went out through the auditorium’s stage door and circled around to the front. It was a bright, beautiful afternoon, warm enough for my lightweight gray summer suit, yet not so much that it made my shirt stick to me. A long line of people waiting to get in snaked all the way back to the sidewalk.

“W-Wow,” Matt breathed. “Looks like a full house.”

I nodded, mildly surprised. In all the years I’d either studied or taught here, our year-end concert had never attracted this much of a crowd. Then again, the tickets were only five dollars. Cheaper than going out to lunch or the movies.

“I don’t see Mom anywhere. She should’ve arrived by now.” He started toward the front of the line, but I grabbed his hand and pulled him back. “I need to make sure she got in okay.”

“You’ll never make it through that way. C’mon, we can see if she’s in the audience from backstage.”

The orchestra had already begun to assemble onstage. The telltale groans and wheezes of tuning up made it hard to hear

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anything else. As we passed the dressing table, I scooped up the Strad and Matt's bow and pushed them into his hands. He took a couple of deep breaths and gave me a nod as we drifted out into the wings at stage right.

I peered out over the fifty-odd rows of seats, astounded to see the house close to packed, with more people still filing in. There was Carmela, her wheelchair parked in the aisle at the back of the auditorium, right next to her caregiver Marjorie's seat. I tapped Matt on the shoulder to point her out to him.

He looked relieved—for all of five seconds. Then his eyes narrowed, his jaw clenched and he went two shades paler. "Holy fuck. That's my dad down there in the front row!"

I wouldn't have recognized Steven Beckett from the tiny decade-old photo on the back of that Brahms CD. Aside from dark hair, Matt bore little resemblance to him. In fact, I realized with a jolt, he looked more like me. Same gray-flecked beard and husky build. Roughly the same age.

My stomach lurched. Black spots waltzed in front of my eyes. I could only imagine how devastated Matt felt.

His hand trembled in mine, as much from anger now as fear and nervousness. The house lights began to dim, signaling the imminent start of the performance.

Then he turned to me and said, "I can't do it. I can't go out there."

He was coming apart. Which meant it was up to me to hold him together. "Matt, c'mon. You've been working toward this day since you were five. You can't throw it all away just because he showed up."

"Y-You don't understand..." he whispered raggedly, clutching my arm so tight I thought it would snap off. "I fucking *hate* him."

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The thought of him being here makes me sick.”

A polite swell of applause sluiced through the auditorium as Gil strode out to the podium and bowed, then aimed a pointed glance in our direction.

Time for Matt to take the stage. But he didn’t move. His gaze flicked from the audience to Gil to me.

Oh, Jesus. This couldn’t be happening. Not after all the months we’d worked to get here. My heart pounded. My shirt grew clammy at the armpits. “Look, the lights will be in your eyes while you’re onstage,” I said in as calm and steady a tone as I could muster. “You won’t see the audience. So just ignore him. Pretend like he isn’t even there.”

He shook his head. “I-I can’t. I’m sorry.”

It took every last shred of my will to keep from slapping him. Instead, I grabbed him by the shoulders, leaning in nose to nose. “Sorry doesn’t cut it. You’ve got an audience out there waiting to hear you. You *cannot* disappoint them. I want you to take all that anger and hate, and pour it into the concerto. Show your father that you’re twice the musician he is. Now, *go*.”

And with that, I shoved him onstage.

For the next thirty minutes, Matt held me spellbound. Anger had lit a mighty fire in him, and he played with a passion and verve I’d never heard from him before, every phrase revealing fresh new colors. We’d been practicing the Sibelius non-stop for the past six weeks, but today it was as if I were hearing it for the first time. Beautiful, brilliant and incredibly moving. My heart raced. My eyes stung with tears.

He held the stage like a veteran performer, swaying with the music, completely absorbed in his playing. The audience was right there with him, swept along on a tide of voluptuous golden tone.

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They surged to their feet en masse before the last notes faded, roaring applause and bravos.

Matt stared out at them as if he'd just wakened from a dream. Then he bowed, nodded at Gil and walked offstage, right into my arms.

"Was it good?" he asked.

I burst out laughing. "What do you think that applause is for?"

"I don't care what they think. Do *you* think it was good?"

"Matt, it was—you were—amazing. Truly marvelous." I cupped his face in both hands and kissed him softly. "I couldn't be prouder."

We wandered backstage for Matt to change clothes, the opening strains of a Beethoven overture wafting behind us. He peeled off his sweaty tux and put on jeans and a T-shirt, then sat down with me to listen for a few minutes.

I shot an uneasy glance at my watch. Best to get going if we wanted to avoid an awkward confrontation. "Did you have your heart set on staying for the rest of the performance?"

"Not really. I've already heard it a half-dozen times in rehearsal. But don't you have some other students you want to congratulate?"

"I'm sure they won't mind not seeing my cranky face again. Let's get out of here."

We headed for the stage door, violin in Matt's hand and plastic-bagged tuxedo in mine, skidding to a halt at the sound of voices outside. *Shit!*

It was Steven Beckett, with a five-person entourage in tow—and a camera crew from one of the local news stations. Where the fuck had they come from?

Matt shot me a panicked look, but it was too late to retreat now.

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Beckett swept over with a big toothy smile, obviously for the camera's benefit. "Good to see you, son," he boomed, throwing an arm around Matt's shoulder. "Quite a solid, well-done performance. I was pleasantly surprised."

"Surprised?" Matt echoed. His lip curled. "I've only been playing most of my life."

"True. But you weren't anywhere near this competent the last time I heard you."

"What, when I was *twelve*?"

The camera crew swooped in with hawk-like precision, crowding me out. I moved off to the side and tried to keep an eye on Matt. My heart lurched at his strained, miserable expression.

"Goddamn you, Helen," I muttered, my cheeks flushing hot with barely-suppressed rage. If she'd been within eyeshot I would've marched over and wrung her fucking neck, witnesses be damned.

The crew got what they wanted and cleared out within a few minutes—but unfortunately, that didn't include Beckett. He started to make small talk with a couple of the people who'd come with him, an elegant blonde clad head to toe in Prada, and a tall, thin middle-aged man with thick glasses.

"Looks like you don't need me anymore," Matt observed sourly. "Story of my life."

Beckett shot him an irritated look. "We were discussing where to go for dinner. Of course you and your friend are welcome to join us."

"No, thanks. We already have plans."

"Well, before you go, I'm sure you remember my wife, Elena—"

"You mean, the woman you dumped my mother for?"

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Beckett stared at him. “I don’t appreciate your surly attitude, Matthew. Especially since I flew all this way on your behalf.”

Matt snorted. “Well, don’t look at me. I sure as hell didn’t invite you. And now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to dinner with the two people I did invite—my mother and my partner.”

“You might want to wait a few minutes. That TV crew’s probably interviewing her now.”

“*What?*”

“They thought talking to all three of us would make for a more interesting story—”

“And you told them it was okay? You know she hasn’t talked to the press in years! What the fuck were you thinking?” He bolted, and I followed, heading to the front of the building.

We found them in the lobby, shoving a microphone in Carmela’s shocked face. Gawkers snickered behind their hands. Matt shoved the Strad at me, then stepped between his mother and the camera. “Interview’s over. Get out.”

The reporter, a stick-insect brunette in four-inch heels, wasn’t about to be put off that easily. “This is a legitimate news story. You can’t interfere—”

“The hell I can’t. This is harassment. Pack up your fucking camera now, or it’ll end up in pieces.”

They persisted, but Matt stood his ground with all the dogged determination of a trained soldier. Finally, they packed up their equipment and decamped. He dropped to his knees beside Carmela’s wheelchair and murmured to her for a few moments, then stood up and spoke briefly to Marjorie. At last, he came over to me.

“Fucking vultures. They sent in an usher to tell her there was an emergency. They had her half-convinced I’d collapsed

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backstage or something. I'd better get her home."

I couldn't help beaming. "That makes the second time I've been proud of you today."

"Lucky me." He exhaled wearily. "We'll have to push dinner back an hour or so. Do you mind?"

"Of course not. Want me to ride along?"

"Better not. Her van's going to be pretty crowded with just the three of us and the chair." I handed him the Strad in exchange for a kiss. "Meet you at your place in a little while, okay?"

I ambled home at a leisurely pace, enjoying the afternoon sun. Terence greeted me at the door with a happy squeak. I put on a CD and settled on the couch with him in my lap, scratching his ears while I waited.

Two hours went by, then three. It was closing in on eight o'clock when Matt's tall, slender shadow darkened my front door. He used the key I'd given him a few weeks ago to let himself in.

He wore an odd expression—tired and still a bit worried, yet overlaid with an eerie calm that unsettled me more than his usual nervous mannerisms.

I rose, hoping my alarm didn't show. "Is your mother all right? I was getting worried."

"She'll be okay. A little shaky, but nothing a good night's sleep won't take care of."

"I'll have my lawyer call that station first thing tomorrow and put the fear of God in them. Don't worry—no one will ever see those interviews."

He didn't look as relieved as I thought he'd be. "Thanks."

"So...do you still want to go out, or should we just make something here?"

"I need to ask you something first."

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Oh, God. What was wrong now? “Okay,” I said, sitting again.

“I’ve been driving around trying to figure out who invited my dad. I asked Marjorie, and she swears Mom didn’t ask her to contact him. The only other person I can think of who could’ve done it is you.”

Pure shock zinged through me like a lightning bolt. “A-And what reason would I have?”

“Publicity for me, or for the school. Maybe you even thought you were doing me a favor. But you knew I didn’t want anyone to find out about my parents, so I’m a little confused.”

“I didn’t do it, Matt. That’s all you need to know.”

He studied me for a long moment. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing!”

“Then why are you acting so guilty?”

Good question. But if I told Matt about how Helen had pressured me to do what he’d just accused me of, I’d look twice as guilty. Worse, it would look like I’d taken part in a conspiracy.

Best to take the offensive. “You show up here accusing me of betraying you—with no proof, I might add—and you expect me to take it in stride?”

“I’m not accusing, I’m asking. But you haven’t said or done a damn thing that’s persuaded me I’m wrong.”

His intense blue stare made me look away. But the second I dropped my gaze to the floor, I knew it was the wrong move. I might as well have had “traitor” tattooed on my forehead.

“Please, Matt...” I whispered desperately, “I can explain—”

“Explain what? You knew I didn’t want him there, but you invited him anyway. Then you stood there the whole time that TV crew had their fucking camera in my face—and my mother’s

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face—and acted like you didn't know what was going on. Now you're lying to me again."

"I'm not." But he still didn't believe me. In fact, now he was looking at me like I'd just confessed to murder. "All right. Helen begged me to ask you to invite your father, but I said no. I thought that was the end of it. I never would've dreamed she'd do anything like this."

"Neither would I. She's always struck me as an honest, above-board kind of person. Not like a teacher who'd have an affair with his student, then try to keep it a secret."

That fucking stung. Judging from the icy glint in his eyes, he knew the barb had found its mark. My mind spun as I tried to come up with an explanation that wouldn't make me sound even guiltier. At last, all I could do was shake my head.

"Was any of this real, Aaron? Did you care about me at all, or was I just a way for you to vicariously relive past glories and score points with your boss?"

Did he really think so little of me? My throat clogged with tears, but I choked them back. "Apparently, there's no point trying to convince you otherwise."

"Fine," he said flatly, then turned toward the door. "We're done."

* * *

The next day was Saturday. I got up early and trudged to school to put my office in some semblance of order. I could've waited until Monday, but I wanted to get it over with so I could head down for Monterey for the next couple of months. I needed a peaceful, quiet place to brood and lick my wounds.

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I spent the next couple of hours boxing up files and clearing off the top of my desk. The score of the Sibelius concerto sat at the bottom of my inbox. Matt had brought it back weeks ago, once he'd committed it to memory. He'd made some notations on it in pencil. A sweep of my eraser would wipe it away, as if he'd never looked at it.

"Thought I heard you puttering around in here." Gil came in and slapped his armload of files down on my desk. "I figured you'd want these back sooner or later."

I glanced at them and groaned. "You would have to wait until I was almost done."

"Just throw 'em in a box and forget about them. It's mostly senior concert stuff anyway."

I grabbed a half-empty banker's box and started to do just that, but the pile slipped out of my hand, dumping unceremoniously onto the floor. I bent down to deal with the mess, waving off Gil's offer of help. It would all have to be re-sorted now, which would waste another hour or two of my time.

It was the usual assortment of paid bills and administrative paperwork. Bills from Kinko's for photocopying sheet music. Bills from a local instrument repair shop for woodwind reeds and strings for the violinists, violists and cellists. Gil's tux rental receipt. Audition score sheets for the students who'd tried out for the lead solo.

And an entire file on Matt, including his application, several pages of background, and a list of personal contact information. His father's address, private phone number and email account were at the top of the latter's first page.

I had to count to ten or I would've flung it back in his face. "Did Helen give you this?"

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He looked startled, but managed to recover quickly. Must've figured there was no point denying it now. "Sorry." He shrugged. "The file must've ended up in that stack by mistake."

"I'll bet. So you're the one who invited Beckett, and that fucking camera crew."

"And it did the trick. In the ten years I've taught here, that's the first time we've ever sold out a senior concert. A couple of Beckett's friends wrote us fat checks and then they called their friends. There are already at least twenty messages from potential applicants on the registrar's voicemail. Like it or not, Aaron, getting Beckett in that auditorium saved this school."

"And who gives a shit how his son feels, right? Or that you helped humiliate a seriously disabled woman?"

"Look, I'm sorry about what happened with Carmela, but let's look at the big picture here. Matt Dugan's going to have a world-class career, thanks in large part to you. Someday he'll look back on this and wonder what the fuss was about."

My hands curled into fists. "You're an idiot, you know that?"

"Don't look down your nose at me. It's all very well and good to embrace lofty principles when you're not living paycheck to paycheck. You don't need this job, but I do."

"So that's the reason you encouraged me to sleep with him."

"Not the only reason. Believe it or not, I was actually worried about you. You've seemed a lot happier these past few months. Obviously, you and Matt are good for each other."

The last part sliced through me like a razor blade. I couldn't listen anymore. "You need to go," I said, sitting down heavily.

"Aaron, c'mon, don't be angry. You know I didn't mean to—"

"Shut up. And be glad you're standing on the other side of that desk. One more word, and I'll reach across and rip your fucking

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head off. Now, get out.”

He turned tail and fled.

CHAPTER 18

A few days later, I said to hell with it and took a walk on the beach below my house. I'd been stomping around like an angry rhino since I'd arrived, slamming doors and frightening poor Terence under the couch. The place was too damn quiet now, like after Kev's passing. No music. No laughter. No oddly soothing bump and clatter of Matt whipping up dinner in the kitchen. Just cold, screaming silence. I had to get out before I started punching holes in the walls.

I slid around on the dry sand, shivering in the morning chill. The end of May, and I still wore a jacket. Typical Monterey weather—foggy and overcast until August, followed by a glorious Indian summer. At least that was something to look forward to.

Despite it being Friday, this particular strand of beach looked

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deserted. Took me a few shaky steps to get my legs under me, then I zigzagged down to the waterline and stared out at the choppy, slate-colored ocean.

I knew it was Matt the moment I turned and spied that small dot off in the distance. He strode toward me with his head held high, just like the day I'd met him back in January.

He stopped a few feet away, flashing me a cautious, crooked smile. "I thought walking on the beach gave you a backache."

"Only because I'm in lousy shape." I shrugged. "How'd you know I was here?"

"When you didn't answer the door at your apartment and your car wasn't in its spot, I took a wild guess."

"You've made a long drive for nothing. I'm in no mood to chat."

"I wanted to return the Strad to you." He had a soft leather bag slung over his shoulder. It looked like his backpack.

"What happened to the case I gave you?" I growled.

"One of the latches broke. It was pretty old."

I fought off the urge to add, "Just like me."

"Let's get it inside. The damp isn't good for it."

We trudged back to the house and into the kitchen. I made coffee, and we sat down at the table. Matt laid the case down and pushed it toward me.

I pushed it back. "You might as well keep it. We both know I'll never play it again."

"Aaron, this violin's worth half a million dollars. I can't accept—"

"Then consider it on indefinite loan. It was Kev's gift, so I couldn't bear to sell it. Besides, you play it ten times better than I ever did."

ALLEGRO VIVACE

“That’s not true! Your recording of the Tchaikovsky’s still a classic.”

“I had a few flashes of brilliance at the beginning, before everything turned to shit. Five good years maybe, and that’s being generous. Even at thirty, I never played as consistently well as you do right now.”

“Thank you. That means a lot.” His hands encircled his coffee mug, gripping it tightly. “I had lunch with my dad the other day. He told me you weren’t the one who invited him.”

“As I recall, I told you the same thing.”

“I know, I know. And I’m sorry. I really am. I shouldn’t have gone off on you like that.”

A few days ago, I would’ve given my right arm to hear him say that. Now I just shrugged. “No point dwelling on it now. What’s done is done.”

“Why do you keep doing that?”

“Doing what?”

“Acting like something doesn’t matter, when it does.”

“What do you want me to say? All right, I accept your apology. That doesn’t mean things are going back to the way they were.” I sprang up and went over to the counter to refill my mug.

Matt followed. “Why not? I still care about you, and—”

“And the first chance you got, you assumed the worst of me. I’m not your father, Matt. I wouldn’t betray or abandon you for the sake of personal convenience.”

“I know. He didn’t either. In fact, he told me a lot of things that didn’t jibe with what I thought was true.” He leaned against the center island. “So I asked Mom about it. Turns out, she and Dad were having problems long before she got sick. She wasn’t surprised when he didn’t come home from that tour.”

ALLEGRO VIVACE

I blinked. Not what I'd expected to hear at all. "What made him decide to tell you this?"

"Not what, who. His wife convinced him to try reconciling with me. I've got a nine-year-old brother I've never met, and she wants us all to be a family. So I guess she's not the heinous bitch I always assumed she was, either." He shrugged. "Dad can be an ass, but he's still my dad. Good thing I've had a lot of practice getting along with temperamental types."

He came over and tried to put his arms around me, but I pushed him away. "Don't."

"Oh, for God's sake, Aaron, do I have to get down on my knees and beg? How many times do you expect me to say I'm sorry?"

"Stop it, all right? Just *stop* it." I grabbed hold of the counter, praying he hadn't noticed how badly my knees shook. "You think I haven't figured out the real reason you're attracted to me? I'm the same age as your father. I even look like him."

He gaped at me. "So naturally that means I've got a daddy fetish? You really are reaching, aren't you?"

"I'm not interested in being anyone's second-rate replacement."

"And I'm pretty fucking tired of you behaving like a raging asshole because you're afraid of getting hurt again. I made a mistake. I said I'm sorry. But you just won't let it go because it's so much easier being angry and miserable!"

A red haze washed over my eyes, and that was it. I snapped like a dry twig. "Shut up, you little shit." I knocked him back, pinning him against the center island. "You have no idea what my life's been like. How dare you judge me? How fucking *dare* you?"

"Aaron, c'mon, let go. You're going to—"

"Everyone leaves." I tried to hold it back, but it was no use. All

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the grief and frustration I'd bottled inside for two long years poured out of me like a goddamned Biblical flood. Sobs boiled up, torn raw from the bottom of my throat. I felt my arms slide around Matt's waist. Felt Matt's hands slide up my back, into my hair. "Everyone..."

"I'm here," Matt whispered, kissing my forehead, my flushed, wet cheeks, and finally, my lips. "I love you, and I'm not going anywhere. What do you think I've been trying to tell you?"

"Y-You're young. You've got your entire life and career ahead of you. What do you want with a cranky old bear like me?"

He grinned. "Maybe I enjoy a challenge."

"Matt, don't. Stop. You can't really want this."

"I can, and I do. Let me show you how much."

He led me upstairs to the bedroom, pushed me back on the bed and undressed me slowly, dusting light kisses over my face, shoulders and chest. Then he climbed to his feet to strip off his shirt and slide his jeans down over his hips inch by sensuous inch.

"I'm right where I want to be. You can't chase me away, so stop trying." He stretched out beside me, then, with a smile, started to skim his hand over my chest and belly. "You believe me now?"

My shudder had obviously told him all he needed to know because he started kissing me again. He painted a hot trail down my belly with the tip of his tongue, then paused to tickle and tease my navel before dipping lower. I almost came the instant he took my cock in his mouth.

He played me like the Strad, with passion and consummate skill, turning my groans and cries into the world's sweetest concerto. I'd gone hoarse by the time he coaxed me to my final crescendo, then sprawled back on the mattress in a delicious, wrung-out heap.

ALLEGRO VIVACE

Matt rolled over next to me and slung an arm around my waist. "Any reason I shouldn't do that every night for the rest of my life?"

"Ask me tomorrow. For now, I'm taking a vacation from rational thought."

"How'd you like a real vacation?"

I cracked open one bleary eye. "You're going to make me use my brain whether I want to or not, aren't you?"

Matt laughed, sitting up. "Remember that tall, slender guy who came to the concert with my dad? Well, he's Dad's agent. He came along with him to lunch the other day, too. He wanted to talk to me about a concert tour in Europe this fall."

Nothing like floating on a sublime, blissful high, only to come crashing down to earth. "Th-that's wonderful," I whispered, grateful my voice was already so ragged he wouldn't hear it crack. "Audiences will adore you. I wish I could be there."

"What're you talking about? I'm not going without you."

"There is this tiny complication called my job. I'll be teaching this fall, just like every fall for the past ten years."

"Can't you get a leave of absence? We'll be back before Christmas. You can start teaching again in January."

The thought hadn't even occurred to me. Of course, now that it had, nothing in the world would stop me from going. Except... "You sure you want to spend three months cooped up in a hotel room with me?"

Matt grinned, and kissed me soundly. "Where's the downside in that?"

CAT GRANT

Cat Grant's been scribbling naughty stories since she was knee-high to a bug. She lives by the sea in glorious Monterey, California, with one demanding feline and entirely too many books and DVDs.

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