



Cat
Grant

Sonata
Appassionata

SONATA APPASSIONATA

...No sooner had we piled into a cab than he turned to me and said, "You and Tonio had an affair back in the day, didn't you?"

With a sigh, I replied, "Don't suppose there's much point denying it, is there?"

"Why would you even want to? For Christ's sake, Aaron, I know you weren't a monk before we met. Neither was I."

"I doubt you've spread yourself as far and wide as I have."

"I've been out since I was sixteen. Believe me, I've fucked plenty of guys."

My mind spun back to the night of Matt's Paris debut—to him sitting on the couch in his dressing room, Petrovsky's hand on his shoulder. "Can we please change the subject?"

He gaped at me. "What, you mean it's not okay for us to talk about our pasts?"

"I just don't like thinking of you with other men."

"Really? Because the idea of you with Tonio turns me on." He slipped his hand onto my thigh, then higher, his fingers brushing my hard-on. "Looks like I'm not the only one."

A slow, stabbing throb pulsed over my right eye. I'd had too much to drink. Between that, the noisy restaurant and now Matt's badgering, I'd finally reached critical mass. "Drop it, Matt. In every possible sense."

He jerked back as if I'd just slapped him. "Aaron, c'mon—"

"I'm not in the mood for this conversation. Let it go."

"Fine," he snapped, turning to stare out the cab window. "Whatever you want..."

ALSO BY CAT GRANT

Allegro Vivace

SONATA APPASSIONATA

BY

CAT GRANT

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SONATA APPASSIONATA
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*For my wonderful beta readers—
Lynna Banning, Kimberly Gardner and Aleksandr Voinov.
Thanks for making me look a lot smarter than I am!*

CHAPTER 1

London
September 14, 2010

British weather sucks ass. So does their food, unless you want to eat fish and chips or Indian food three meals a day. But they build great concert halls, and that's why I was here tonight—to make my professional debut. Now if I could just calm the fuck down. It's hard to play the violin with shaky hands.

I peeked out at the audience from behind the curtain, trying to adjust my tie at the same time. Wigmore Hall wasn't a huge venue—only about five hundred seats—but as far as I could tell, it was barely half-full. I wasn't sure whether to be relieved or disappointed.

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Aaron's hand slid onto my shoulder. "You okay?"

"Depends." I sucked in a deep breath. "Think they'd mind if we gave 'em their money back? It wouldn't exactly bankrupt us."

He took a quick look at what I was looking at, then chuckled. "Not a bad turnout for a debut. Most of the people at mine were friends and relatives."

No relatives here for me. My mom wanted to come, but her multiple sclerosis made traveling too difficult. Dad was busy preparing to conduct the opening concert of the Berlin Philharmonic's fall season. We'd see him when my tour brought me to Berlin at the end of October.

Tonight there was only Aaron by my side. Teacher. Mentor. Friend. Confidant. Love of my life. My rock and my refuge. Hell, I wouldn't even be here if not for him. If he hadn't taken a cocky young punk in hand and taught me what it meant to be a real artist—love of the music and a lot of hard fucking work.

I turned and wrapped my arms around him, resting my head against his big, burly chest. His beard tickled my cheek. He felt so solid and warm I never wanted to let go. It was all I could do to keep from sighing aloud when his fingers tangled briefly in my hair.

"It's time," he said finally. "Curtain goes up in a couple minutes."

He handed me my Stradivarius—well, actually, *his* Strad, on indefinite loan—and we stepped back into the wings, where Derek Matheson, leader of the Idyllwild String Quartet waited. The other members, along with a *basso continuo* player who was sitting in tonight, were already onstage, tuning up their instruments. Derek had been one of my classmates at the conservatory in San Francisco, but I was still surprised and flattered when he'd invited

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me to join his new chamber group as a guest soloist for their first recital here in London. I'd just about choked when I saw the poster out front, with "Matthew Dugan" listed *above* their names.

No pressure, right?

"Ready?" Derek asked, flashing me his patented melt-the-knees grin. It didn't work on me anymore, but he'd probably leave half the audience—women and men—in a swoon by the end of the evening.

"Does it matter?" I shot back.

"Not really, love." He winked. "There's no turning back now."

The curtain lifted; the house lights dimmed. Then Derek strode out, looking rakishly dashing in his tux, with that hint of sexy blond scruff on his cheeks. Ever the showman, he took his first bow with a flourish that made me laugh, accepting the audience's applause as if it were his due—and they hadn't played a single note yet.

He scooped up his violin, took his seat and cocked his head in my direction. That was my cue. I gave Aaron a quick kiss and walked onto the stage. The lights shone in my eyes, bleaching out everything except the other players and the first row or two of the audience. I bowed and took my place, standing in front of the group.

Derek nodded at me, and I nodded back. Then we launched into the opening notes of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*.

* * *

Matt played flawlessly—but, of course, that came as no surprise. I knew he'd had the makings of a star from the day he'd shown up at my office last January and tossed off a fiendishly

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difficult Bach *partita* as easily as most people comb their hair. He had a true feel for the baroque repertoire—a delicate touch that handled both the sweet, lyrical parts and the more dramatic and virtuosic passages with equal aplomb. Even in my best days, I'd never played half as well.

The chamber group setting suited him. I'd never cared much for the big-band sound for baroque or classical pieces, but this was perfect—a simple, stripped down arrangement closely mirroring Vivaldi's original orchestration, which gave each member of the group a chance to shine.

In the space of forty minutes, Matt took me through an entire gamut of emotions. My heart raced at the furious storm in the final *presto* movement of the summer *concerto*. It reminded me of Matt's own temperament—passionate, excitable, even a bit wild—not that I was complaining. When Matt looked up at me with those big blue eyes and flashed me his gorgeous smile, all other thoughts fled my brain.

Even the fact I was forty-five, and he'd just turned twenty-one.

The audience was on its feet before the final *allegro's* last few notes had faded away, applauding and shouting bravos. I was a bit taken aback—British audiences were usually much more reserved—then started in with my own applause. Matt shot me a relieved look, then took his final bow with the group and walked offstage.

He collapsed in my arms with a gusty sigh. “Thank God that’s over.”

I couldn't help chuckling. “I don't know why you were so nervous. You did great.”

“I never want to take it for granted. Even the best ones can have a bad night.”

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“You don’t need to worry about that right now. It’s your debut. Enjoy it.”

“Oh, I plan to.” There was that grin again. It always made the crotch of my pants feel a size too small. “Once we get back to the hotel.”

“Didn’t Derek say something about going out for drinks afterward?” I nodded at the stage, where the ensemble had segued into a Mozart chamber piece.

“They’ll be another hour, at least. I’d rather just get out of here.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Besides, I’m still pretty wiped. Guess three days isn’t long enough to get over jet lag.”

I thought about trying to convince him to stay—there might be a music critic or two out in the audience, and sometimes they liked to come backstage to meet the artists—but I decided against it. This performance was just a lark anyway, a warm-up to the real concert tour, which started in Paris next week. Best to let him rest up.

We went back to Matt’s dressing room, where he stripped off the new Armani tux I’d bought him for his birthday a month ago, then hopped in the shower to rinse off. Those blazing-hot stage lights could leave even the calmest performer soaking wet. I sat down and thumbed through a copy of *Gramophone* from the pile of music magazines on the table, looking up only when Matt came back in, a towel around his waist, dark hair dripping water from the ends.

He stopped right in front of me and let the towel drop, revealing an impressive hard-on. Oh, sweet God... there was already a shiny, perfect pearl of pre-come pooled at the tip of his

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cock. I had to battle the urge to lick it off. “What about going back to the hotel?” I asked.

“My little friend here has other ideas.” He gave himself a couple of long pulls, breath hissing between his teeth. He looked ready to pop. It’d be so easy to lean forward and suck the crown into my mouth...

Instead, I stood up, grabbed his street clothes from a nearby chair, and handed them to him. “Go get dressed.”

His half-hopeful, half-teasing expression crumpled. “Aw, c’mon, don’t you want to—”

“Not where someone could walk in on us any second.”

“Isn’t that half the fun?” With a grin, he rubbed up against me, grabbed my hand and placed it on his cock. Then he put his hand on my cock, kneading me through the soft wool of my pants. A few strokes had me rock-hard. *Jesus*. I bit the inside of my cheek.

“You know you want me,” Matt whispered, darting out the tip of his tongue to tickle my earlobe.

“I’ll want you just as much back at the hotel.”

“But I want you now.”

“Matt...”

“Aaaaaaaronnnnn...” He kissed me deeply, his tongue sweeping inside my mouth to tangle wetly with mine. “C’mon, won’t it be fun telling everybody how you fucked me on the couch in my dressing room the night of my debut?”

“First, I didn’t bring any condoms. And I doubt you did, either.”

“Oh.” Apparently he hadn’t thought of that. “Well, we can suck each other off, then.”

“Second, that’s not the kind of gossip you want spread around. You’re a professional musician now, Matt. And professionals don’t

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fuck in their dressing rooms.”

“Seriously? You’re telling me it *never* happens?”

Ah, that brought back memories—hot, steamy memories that did nothing to soothe the throbbing in my groin. “It hasn’t happened to me in a long time, and it’s not happening tonight.” I gave him a quick kiss. “Get dressed, so I can take you back to the hotel and fuck you properly—on a nice, soft, comfortable bed.”

He stuck out his lower lip. “Wow. Sounds thrilling.”

I considered telling him what I had planned for tonight, but better to make him wait. He wasn’t usually this impatient—hell, usually he was the one who had to slow *me* down—but evidently the excitement of the concert had ramped his libido into overdrive. I gave him a playful swat on the ass and sent him back to the bathroom to comb his hair and dress.

Didn’t take long for his spate of nervous energy to run out—he nodded off with his head on my shoulder on the cab ride from Wigmore back to the Dorchester. I’d booked us a deluxe room with a view of Hyde Park, but we’d been so busy with Matt’s rehearsals, we hadn’t had much of a chance to enjoy the amenities or the view.

I called room service from the cab and ordered a bottle of Cristal and a light supper. Matt and I had both been too damn nervous to eat before the concert, but now my empty stomach roared like a tiger with its ass on fire. I let Matt doze until the cab swung onto Park Lane, then gave him a nudge. He sat up, rubbing his eyes. I hadn’t noticed how puffy they were until now.

“Sorry about...you know,” he murmured. “Didn’t mean to be so pushy.”

I laughed. “Sure you did. Pushy’s your default setting. You know I don’t mind most of the time, but...”

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“But you’re right. It wouldn’t have been professional. Last thing I need is to get a rep as a slut before I even get a rep as a good musician.”

“Launching a career isn’t easy. Everything matters. Not just musicianship, but how you treat your colleagues. How you act when you’re out in public. People notice, and they don’t forget. You’re not Heifetz or Perlman—not yet, anyway. You can’t afford not to care what the rest of the world thinks.”

“Well, I care what you think. And if you think I need to tone it down, then...I guess I do.” He sighed. “Scratch one fantasy off the list.”

“Hey, I love you couldn’t wait to ravish me. But sometimes the waiting makes it that much sweeter.”

The cab pulled up in front of the Dorchester. We both piled out wearily and headed for the concierge desk, where we handed over Matt’s tux to be cleaned, then went upstairs.

It was a plush, comfortable suite, with a king-size bed and a small living room. They had redone the décor since the last time I’d been here, replacing bold cream-and-blue with a rather busy floral motif that wasn’t really to my taste. The Brits loved their gardens, but I preferred to keep mine outside.

Heavenly-soft Turkish terrycloth robes with the hotel’s insignia stitched on the right breast hung on the back of the bathroom door. We’d no sooner slipped them on than there came a soft knock.

Matt’s eyes went wide when the room service waiter wheeled in the cart with our meal and the champagne. I signed for it and sent him on his way, then we sat down in the living room to eat.

“I figured you wouldn’t want anything too heavy, so...” I lifted the plate covers. There was a mushroom, onion and cheese omelet and a Caesar salad. The omelet’s savory aroma already had my

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stomach growling. "Take your pick."

His glance darted from one to the other, and back again. "Why don't we put 'em both in the middle of the table, so we can nibble off either plate?"

"Fine with me." I poured us flutes of Cristal, and raised mine in a toast. "To your first professional performance...and many more to come."

To my surprise, Matt actually blushed. "Thanks, but I should be toasting you. You're the reason I'm here in the first place."

"I'll accept some of the credit, but don't dismiss all the hard work you've done."

"But you're the one who channeled it, turned it into this...gift. This chance at a real career." He shrugged. "Without you, I'd probably end up playing third chair in some crappy regional orchestra, or teaching music to a bunch of kids who don't know a bow from their elbow."

"With your talent, that was never going to happen. I think we both know that."

"Aaron." He reached across the table to take my hand. "Why can't you just accept the compliment? I'm grateful to you. I always will be. And by the way," he added, pressing a soft kiss to my palm, "I love you."

It always amazed me how easily he spoke those three small words. Most young men these days kept their feelings hidden, but not Matt. He was the most open person I'd ever met, displaying his heart proudly for all to see. I still found it humbling that he'd considered me worthy of his affections.

We quickly made short work of the salad and the omelet. Maybe it was because we were ravenous, but both dishes were actually quite tasty. Still, I sat back and let Matt polish off the last

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few bites of omelet, which he did with gusto.

“Guess there’s something besides fish and chips that British chefs can’t screw up.” He set down his fork with a grin. “I’ll still be glad when we finally get some decent food in Paris.”

“I’m looking forward to Florence. There’s a little *trattoria* not far from the Uffizi that makes the best damn veal piccata in the entire world. I hope it’s still there. It’s been about... God, twelve or thirteen years.”

“Wow, that long? Didn’t you and Kevin do any traveling?”

My late partner had many sterling qualities, but sadly, he’d also been deathly afraid of flying. “No more than we had to. A couple trips to New York every year to see his agent and some gallery owners. And then there was...well, the time we went to Toronto.” To get married, not long after Kevin’s cancer diagnosis. I still had our rings and wedding photos, tucked away in a box at my house in Monterey. Mementoes of a life shared, celebrated and mourned. But that was all over now. With Matt’s help, I’d finally moved past my grief.

He bit his lip. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to bring up sad memories.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I stood up, stretched and yawned. “But now I think I’d better lie down before I fall asleep in my chair.”

Matt grabbed the half-full bottle and our glasses, then followed me into the bedroom. I stretched out atop the comforter, still wrapped in my robe. Matt refilled my glass and handed it to me before climbing up beside me. He pressed the full length of his body against mine, his warm fingers slipping beneath the flap of my robe to rub and tickle my chest.

“This is the most perfect moment ever,” he murmured.

I chuckled. “So much for ravishing me, huh?”

“I thought you were too tired. Besides, we’ve got all day to

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ourselves tomorrow. And the day after that...”

Matt’s proximity was already having its usual effect on me—as if he didn’t know. My half-hard cock nudged the front of my robe. Finally I couldn’t stand it anymore. I got up and peeled the damn thing off.

Matt’s gaze immediately zeroed in on my erection, and he got this big, dreamy smile on his face. Then he grabbed my hand and pulled me back down next to him. “You forgot to order dessert,” he whispered right before his mouth came down on mine.

It was a hot, heady kiss, ripe with promise and three days’ worth of desperate need. We’d been too wiped out for anything but cuddling since we’d arrived. We’d never gone so long without fucking, or at least trading blowjobs before. So much bottled-up passion...

Which reminded me that I hadn’t forgotten to order dessert after all.

With an evil grin, I opened Matt’s robe, baring him from neck to knee. His own cock stood at attention, waving in the air like a one-fingered salute. I could tell he really wanted me to suck him, or jerk him off. Which was exactly what I wasn’t going to do.

Not yet, anyway.

I reached for my glass of Cristal and dripped a few precious, fizzy drops onto Matt’s chest. Then I licked them off slowly, dragging my tongue along Matt’s warm, salty skin, swirling it around first one tight, pebbled nipple, then the other. Matt groaned, gasped and finally let out a choked laugh. “T-Tickles.”

So I kept pouring down his torso to his navel. I liked the way it pooled in the hollow of his belly. Then came my mouth again, sucking and slurping, making sure I got every drop. His robe was soaked by now and probably the comforter underneath, too, but I

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didn't care. For what I'd paid for this room, it was worth it.

I had him writhing and tossing his head, his hands twisting in the covers by the time I reached his crotch. Usually he was the one who had me on the ropes. I might as well enjoy this lovely, poetic moment of reversal for as long as I could.

* * *

Aaron and I had done some pretty...well, creative things in bed, but this champagne bath was a definite first. It felt good, in a hanging-on-by-your-fingernails kind of way. At least, it did at first. But when he dribbled it onto my balls, then sucked them into his mouth, the brain-melting contrast of heat and cold almost made my eyes roll back in my head.

"Fuck! Aaron, you can't...please..."

But I didn't actually say, "Stop!" I couldn't. I didn't want him to stop.

So he didn't.

He took his sweet time working his way up to my cock. But by that point I was so far gone, I came a few seconds after his lips slid over the crown. Black spots waltzed in front of my eyes. I just barely kept from passing out. Jesus.

Aaron was still hard, though—and from the look of him, as desperate for release as I was. I grabbed his cock and started to jerk him off. A few hard pulls, and he shot all over my chest and belly. A little bit even landed in my mouth. I licked it off my lips, relishing its salty flavor.

He hit the mattress next to me like a bag of laundry. A sweaty, fucked-out, *happy* bag of laundry. We took a couple moments to recover before starting to laugh our asses off.

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“Promise me we’ll never go three days without doing that again,” he said.

I grabbed some tissues from the box on the nightstand and wiped us both off. Then I kissed him and snuggled in close. “You don’t have to tell me twice.”

CHAPTER 2

Matt and I spent the next day resting in our room, trying to shake off the last of our jet lag. We ordered room service and caught up on our lovemaking. We'd planned to stay in London another couple of days, but stuffy portrait galleries and overpriced restaurants had lost their appeal. So, the Monday after Matt's debut, we packed up our bags and caught the train to Paris.

Even the air smelled different here—lighter, less oppressive, despite the perpetually overcast weather. And the food... God, what a revelation! I nearly swooned at my first bite of *foie gras*. If England was where good food went to die, then Paris was where it went to be reborn.

More bites, additional groans of gastronomic pleasure. Matt shot me a bemused look over the rim of his wine glass. "Wow.

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You didn't sound that happy the last time you came in my mouth."

Luckily, I'd just finished, or that probably would've made me choke. Instead, I took a sip of the fine Bordeaux we'd ordered and eyed Matt's untouched plate. "Don't you like it?"

"I'm sure it's fine, but...well, we had a Cordon Bleu trained chef the whole time I was growing up. She made a different paté every night. I sort of got sick of the stuff."

"Oh." All of a sudden, I felt strangely deflated. I'd wanted tonight to be special, a feast to celebrate the real launch of Matt's career in a few days. But it was hard to celebrate when he wasn't interested in joining the party. "Sorry. Wouldn't have ordered it if I'd known."

"S'okay. Why don't you have it?"

Tempting though it was, I shook my head. "Better not, unless you want me to pack on twenty pounds before this tour's over. My pot belly's big enough, thank you."

"Aw, c'mon. I think it's cute."

Easy for him to say, with his lightning-fast metabolism. I stifled the sharp retort that rose to my lips and sat back to admire Le Celadon's lovely Regency-style dining room. Oak bookshelves lining the far walls, elegant cream-colored table linens, glittering chandeliers. Uniformed waiters darting to and fro, pristine white towels draped over their arms.

I'd come here when I'd first visited Paris early in my own career, and made a point of returning whenever I was in town. It had become something of a ritual for me, a way to spin the clock back to a simpler time in my life, if only for an evening. But maybe that was the problem. I had a history with this place...a history Matt didn't share.

There were so many events in my life that Matt hadn't

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experienced for himself—not yet, anyway. So many things he couldn't understand. The idea had never bothered me until now.

We left the restaurant around nine. It was a fine, brisk evening, the moon peeking in and out between drifts of heavy mist. We decided to walk back to our hotel, but when Matt took my hand, I flinched.

“What's wrong?” he asked.

I flexed my fingers and winced. Fucking tendonitis had flared up again. I sighed. “It's just a twinge. Must be from toting our luggage on and off the train.”

He shot me an “I told you so” look. “Next time we'll get a porter. No arguments.”

“Yes, *sir*.”

Matt tucked his hand in the crook of my arm and we strolled back down the Rue de la Paix to the Place Vendôme, until we reached the hulking edifice of the Hotel Ritz. Matt's shoulders slumped the moment he saw it.

“I wish Dieter hadn't booked us into this place,” he muttered. “It looks like a fucking museum.”

Dieter Horst was Matt's father's agent and the one who'd made all the engagements and hotel reservations for the tour. Truthfully, I wouldn't have picked this place, either. Our short stay at the Dorchester had soured me on useless luxury. All I needed was a comfy bed and a bathroom with a shower and lots of hot water.

“You want to move someplace else? I'm up for it if you are.”

“Nah, it's okay. Too much of a hassle.” He smiled wearily, leaning in for a kiss. “Some first night in Paris, huh? All we've done is bitch and moan.”

“It'll take a while to get used to being away from home. Then before you know it, it'll be time for us to go back.”

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"I wouldn't mind going back now. Nothing here's the way I remembered it. But then, I was twelve the last time I visited London or Paris."

His words gave me a start. "You'd give up your debut tour?"

"Well, it's not like anybody's beating a path to my door."

"Matt, you've got to give it time. Nobody here knows who you are yet. You have to show them what you can do. Once you've played a few concerts, it'll be a different story."

"You have a lot more faith in me than I do."

"What happened to that brash kid who sauntered into my classroom and demanded I give him private lessons?"

He smiled a crooked little half-smile. "That was all an act, and you know it."

"Then you'd better dust it off and put it back on because you're going to need it. Audiences respond to a confident performer. And on that note..." I cupped his face in both hands and kissed him softly. "Why don't we adjourn to our suite and give that big bed a workout?"

"I'll race you!" And with that, he sprinted for the hotel's front entrance.

I laughed and ran after him.

* * *

The French aren't rude. They're really not. They're just proud of being French. They hate it when foreigners mangle their language, which isn't a big problem for me—I learned it from our *au pair* when I was a kid. Mom and I spoke it at home every once in a while, just to keep in practice. But I still didn't want to come off as a typical, boorish ugly American at my first rehearsal with

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the Orchestre de Paris. Like Aaron said, I had a lot to prove.

Aaron was usually the stickler for punctuality, but this morning I couldn't wait to get downstairs, where a limousine sent by the orchestra waited for us. Taking a cab or even the Métro would've been fine with me, but apparently the limo was in my contract. *Whatever*. I just wanted to get there.

I stared out the window for the entire ride, but I don't remember a thing I saw. Then Aaron's hand closed over mine. "Looks like we're here."

The limo had brought us around to the Salle Pleyel's stage door. We climbed out and went inside. The doorman found my name on his clipboard, nodded and showed us to a small dressing room. I hung up my jacket, then opened my violin case and got out the Strad. A wipe-down with a soft cloth, a slight tuning, and it was ready to go.

Wish I could say the same for me. *Fuck!* My hands were shaking again.

"You'll be fine," Aaron said, wrapping his arms around me. "Jitters are a good sign. It means you've got lots of creative energy. Channel it into the rehearsal, and you'll knock 'em dead."

"If I don't keel over first."

"You won't." He kissed me, then headed for the door. "I'll go take a seat out front."

A few minutes later, a short, balding middle-aged man in a dark suit showed up. He introduced himself as Henri Morel, the orchestra's manager, and escorted me to the stage. The orchestra was already assembled, eighty instruments punctuating the air with groans and wheezes as they tuned up.

The conductor came over to shake my hand. It was Aleksandr Petrovsky. I knew I'd be working with him, but seeing him

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standing in front of me was still kind of a shock. He'd just been named the new music director here. The best orchestra in France was now being led by a Russian—who happened to be one of the world's most fucking amazing musicians.

I'd idolized the man for years. I had every recording he'd ever made loaded into my iTunes library. And now I was supposed to play for *him*?

He stepped up to the podium, rapping his baton on it to get the orchestra's attention before introducing me. Polite, noncommittal applause followed. It faded away in an instant. Talk about a tough room.

I took my soloist's spot a few feet in front of the string section and peered out across the auditorium. Aaron sat about a dozen rows back, far enough that I couldn't make out his expression. He waved to me, and the orchestra struck up the first notes of the Tchaikovsky violin *concerto*. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes and played.

Aaron and I had spent this past summer at his house in Monterey, working on new repertoire, including this *concerto*. It had been one of Aaron's signature pieces during his own career. He'd even made a recording of it. I'd listened to it over and over when I was a kid, until the music seeped into my blood and became part of me. That's when I knew this was what I wanted to do with my life.

We got only a few bars into the first movement when Petrovsky called a halt. God, what the hell had I done? I'd barely started, and already he hated my playing! I shot a nervous look at Aaron, but he just shook his head. Then I turned my attention back to the stage and heard the conductor correcting the woodwind players' tempo. False alarm.

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We picked up where we left off—and in another few bars, another interruption. This time the strings had made their entrance a hair too soon.

Start, stop, start, stop. It took us nearly an hour to make it through eighteen minutes of music. I'd rehearsed before—for the conservatory's year-end concert, for the recital with the Idyllwild group—but this bordered on torture. And Petrovsky hadn't said a word to me yet. Did I really stink that bad?

Aaron was no fucking help. He just sat there with his hand over his mouth. I couldn't tell what he thought.

The second and third movements went much faster, thank God. I blazed through the last few bars, mostly out of a desire to get it over with. No sooner had I finished, but I heard this strange bumping sound behind me. I turned around to find the string section knocking their bows against their music stands. They were applauding—for *me*.

Then the rest of the orchestra broke out in more conventional applause. A hot flush crept up my cheeks before I remembered to bow.

Petrovsky stepped down from the podium, smiling, his hand extended. "Well done," he said in English. He had a heavy Russian accent. It was kind of hot. "Well done indeed."

I turned back to the auditorium, waving for Aaron to come up to the stage. My hand froze in mid-air.

He was gone.

* * *

The cab had just deposited me in front of the Hotel Ritz when my phone rang. It had to be Matt. I debated answering for a

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moment, then hit “accept.”

“Are you all right?” He sounded half-hysterical.

Shit. I knew I should’ve left a note in his dressing room.

“Calm down, I’m fine. I just decided to...get a little air.”

Shocked silence. “So you took off without even telling me? What if I needed you?”

“You didn’t need me. You were doing fine.”

“I-I don’t...” He sucked in a breath. “Okay. Where are you now? I’ll come meet you.”

“Back at the hotel. I thought I’d rest for a couple hours before dinner. But there’s no need to rush back—”

“Fuck that. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

The line clicked off.

Wonderful. Now he was pissed at me. Exactly what I’d tried to avoid.

I went upstairs, changed into a robe and sat down on the couch to wait. Matt walked through the door shortly after, a strange, unreadable expression on his face. I wasn’t sure if he was more hurt, confused or disappointed.

He set the Strad’s case down on the coffee table, then took the chair across from me. “I still can’t figure out why you left like that,” he said.

At least he didn’t seem angry anymore. But that might change once he’d heard what I had to say. “Because you kept looking at me when you should’ve been paying attention to Petrovsky.”

“But he didn’t say a word to me for the entire rehearsal!”

“That doesn’t matter. You still could’ve learned a lot from what he said to the other players. You’ve never worked with him before. You don’t know what his style’s like. Every conductor is different. You have to learn how to read them.”

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He thought about that for a moment before nodding. "Okay. I see what you mean."

"I think it might be a good idea if I stopped coming to rehearsals with you."

His head snapped up. "Why?"

"Because all I'm doing is distracting you. You should be concentrating on the music, not constantly seeking my approval."

Now he looked like I'd just slammed a door in his face. "But...you know how much I value your opinion. Everything I know about playing the violin, I learned from you!"

That wasn't exactly true. His mother Carmela, once a celebrated virtuoso in her own right, had been his first teacher. She'd given him the rock-solid technique that I'd built upon and given a final polish. She was the real reason he'd come so far, not me.

"I'm not your teacher anymore," I replied gently. "It's time for you to go out there on your own and make the world fall at your feet. And I have no doubt you'll do exactly that."

He laughed and stared down at his hands for a moment. "They applauded me today at the end of the rehearsal. The entire orchestra. Petrovsky even praised me. But all I could think of was that I wanted to share it with you, and I couldn't."

Oh, dear God. He was still so inexperienced. He had no idea how rarely such respect was meted out. I slid my hand onto his shoulder. "You're sharing it with me now."

"It's not really the same, but...yeah, I get it now. It's not fair to expect you to be there every minute." Deep breath. "The concertmaster and a couple other string players came by my dressing room to invite me to dinner. Would've been nice if we could've gone together."

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"You should've gone. I wouldn't have minded."

"I didn't travel all this way with you just to abandon you every night!"

I smiled. "One night out of the past week. I think I can handle it."

"Is that your way of saying you're getting tired of me?"

"Definitely not." I suppressed a sigh. "Look, Kevin didn't come to my performances unless they were within driving distance. I managed to survive. You don't need me holding your hand when you've got one of the world's top conductors paying you compliments."

Matt shook his head. "I couldn't even believe it when I heard it. I mean, it's fucking *Petrovsky*! I've admired him since I was a kid, and now I'm working with him. Kinda hard to wrap my mind around it."

Such naked, sincere admiration. Matt used to talk about me like that not so long ago. A momentary twinge of jealousy pricked at me, but I shrugged it off. "He's a good contact to have."

"Probably. But I don't want to talk about him anymore." He made me scoot over so he could sit next to me on the couch, then leaned his head on my shoulder. "God, I'm tired. That Tchaikovsky *concerto*'s fucking exhausting."

I chuckled. "Well, it certainly is the way you play it. You need to pace yourself, or you won't last out the tour."

"Duly noted, Professor Parrish. Anything else?"

"Knock it off," I retorted, with a playful tap on the back of his head.

"Who, me? You're the one who said you weren't my teacher anymore." He stood up and stretched.

His shirt hiked up, showing off the well-toned oblique muscles

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at his right hip. I couldn't stop staring.

"You also mentioned getting a little rest before dinner. Care for some company?" he added with a grin.

Lately we'd fallen into the habit of smoothing over every disagreement with sex. It bothered me, but not enough to say no when he grabbed my hand and led me into the bedroom. Then he opened my robe and fell to his knees to suck me. I buried my fingers in his hair and urged him on.

* * *

Wednesday night was Matt's first performance here in Paris, and his real debut. His mother called to wish him well, and his father—or, I suspected, Elena, his father's wife—sent a gorgeous bouquet of yellow roses, white carnations and baby's breath. It looked like something you'd see at a wedding.

I'd expected Matt to be as nervous as a bridegroom, but he not only got a full night's sleep, he awoke clear-eyed and rock steady. He tackled his morning practice with a Zen-like calm, running through the entire *concerto* twice without missing a note. I heard it all, and I still didn't believe it.

But I swooped in to give him a congratulatory kiss anyway. "Who are you, and what have you done with Matt Dugan? He should be having a nervous breakdown by now."

Matt laughed. "I've practiced as hard as I can. I'll either wow them tonight, or fall flat on my face. No use worrying about it now."

An amazingly measured and mature response. I was impressed. "What sparked such a sudden about-face?"

"Petrovsky believes in me. You do, too. And you've both got a

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lot more experience at this than I do.” He shrugged. “I’ll just have to go out there and do my best.”

I insisted on getting out of the hotel for a little while that afternoon. We took a cab to the Left Bank and walked around, poking our heads in dusty, wonderful old bookstores. We stopped at a sidewalk café, sipping strong coffee while we people-watched and listened to a group of buskers murder a Mozart serenade on a nearby street corner.

We ended up at the Musée d’Orsay, wandering hand in hand through the galleries. I gravitated toward the more refined, stately painters, such as Manet or Degas, but Matt was fascinated by Van Gogh. I couldn’t pull him away from *Starry Night Over the Rhone*.

“I’ve never seen this one up close before,” he murmured. “Mom and I visited the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam when I was a kid. It left quite an impression. I’d give anything to be able to paint like that.”

“You do. Only you use a bow instead of a brush.”

He broke out in a wide smile. “I knew there was a reason I loved you.”

We made it back to the hotel around four, where I ordered us a room service dinner. Soup and salad, with cheese and fruit for dessert. Coffee, but no wine. We both needed to keep a clear head tonight. Matt showered while we waited for the food to arrive. He tried to coax me into joining him, but I summoned my willpower and declined. He needed to save his energy for Tchaikovsky.

I ate sparingly, though Matt’s appetite seemed as ravenous as ever. He even finished off what was left of my salad. This weird reversal in temperament was starting to make me jittery. Evidently, tonight I was going to be nervous enough for both of us.

We headed out around eight. The concert began at eight-thirty,

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but the Tchaikovsky wasn't on until the second half of the program, after the interval. We carried our tuxedos in garment bags fresh from the hotel laundry. We'd change clothes once we arrived.

It was sheer pandemonium backstage, musicians darting up and down the hallway. I almost got run over by a marauding cellist toting his instrument. Finally, we reached Matt's dressing room and barricaded ourselves inside.

Gradually, the noise outside faded away. Then came a roar of applause over the hall's in-house sound system, and the orchestra launched into Brahms' *Fourth Symphony*.

We sat and listened until the third movement. At last Matt gave me a nod and got up to put on his tux. He always needed my help with the bow tie. My fingers froze when I brushed the fluttering, racing pulse in his throat. So much for calm and collected.

His expression crumpled the moment he realized I knew. "I-I wasn't scared until we got here, but now..." He dragged in a shaky breath. "Fuck! What the hell am I doing?"

Now he was trembling. I pulled him into my arms and held him tight until he got it under control. "You're going to be fine. Don't look at the audience. Just shut your eyes and pretend you're still at rehearsal."

He nodded, licking his dry lips. "Okay. I can do that."

I got him a glass of water and hastily threw on my own tux. The orchestra's manager had arranged a ticket for me, so I could watch the performance from the audience. But now I wondered if that was such a good idea.

"If you want, I could watch from the wings," I said, taking his empty glass.

"No, that's all right. I'd rather have you be someplace I can see you."

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“Matt, listen. I don’t want you to look for me. If you need to look at someone, make it Petrovsky. Don’t worry about what I think. Don’t worry about what the audience thinks. Concentrate on the music.”

More applause over the sound system, then the thundering hordes outside the door started up again. Matt took the Strad from its case and gave it a final tuning. A few minutes later, the stage manager appeared to escort him to the stage.

I gave him a quick kiss and headed out to find my seat. It was about ten rows back in the center of the orchestra section. Perfect sight lines, marvelous sound. The orchestra was already tuning up. I gripped the arms of my seat and realized my hands had gone clammy. I got out my handkerchief and wiped them off—and my upper lip too. *Oh, God.* I’d never been this nervous at any of my own performances.

There was a fresh swell of applause as Petrovsky strode across the stage. Tall and fortyish, he cut an elegant, sexy swath in his designer tux, his dark, wavy hair and trimmed beard lending him an almost satanic air. I could practically smell the pheromones coming off him in waves, every member of the audience immediately riveted by his presence.

At his nod, Matt walked out—back straight, head held high. More applause as they both took perfunctory first bows, then Petrovsky stepped onto the podium, picked up his baton, and signaled the orchestra to begin.

They played a few introductory bars before Matt made his entrance. Sweet, delicate and lyrical, his opening notes floated above our heads and hung there for a moment before fading away like soft rain. Then came the theme of the first movement, played with passion and perfect control. I’d listened to him practice these

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notes innumerable times, but tonight they sounded brand-new—as if he'd composed the music himself.

I held my breath as he launched into the *cadenza*. Pure golden sound cascaded over me, faultlessly executed, infused with genuine feeling. From the way the couple sitting next to me leaned forward in their seats, I knew they were just as enthralled as I was.

The finale came at a breakneck tempo that would've left most violinists struggling to keep up, but Matt handled it with aplomb, a tiny smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Jesus, he was actually enjoying it! The final notes of the movement slashed down decisively, with rock-solid attack. Absolutely fucking amazing.

I had to sit on my hands to keep from breaking into applause during the brief pause between the first and second movements. Taking deep, cleansing breaths, I willed myself to calm down. Everything would be fine. He'd made it through the most difficult part. He could skate through the rest half-asleep, and the audience would still give him a standing ovation.

But, of course, he didn't. I'd never known Matt to skate through anything. His playing of the *andante*, tinged with sweetness and melancholy, had me blinking hard, trying to hold tears at bay. Then came the final *allegro*, a fount of sheer brilliance spilling out of him.

I was wrong—this was the most difficult part. And Petrovsky appeared to delight in making it even more of a challenge, whipping the orchestra into a dead lather. Matt played faster, never missing a note. They exchanged glances, and the race was on.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood straight up. This was like eavesdropping on a private conversation spelled out in music rather than language. It felt strangely intimate. As intimate as lovemaking.

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Matt got his standing ovation, and more besides. The audience clapped and cheered, calling him back for three bows before they finally let him off the stage. He took the last one with Petrovsky, their hands clasped in musicianly solidarity. Or so I hoped.

I had to fight my way backstage, elbowing through the throng of admirers gathered at the door of Matt's dressing room. Matt sat on the couch next to Petrovsky, the maestro's hand resting casually on Matt's shoulder...right where I usually put *my* hand.

Matt's face lit up the moment he saw me and he waved me over. I gave the crowd a quick scan, but didn't see anyone I recognized. I'd obviously been out of the game too long.

I threw my arms around Matt and kissed him—and to hell with the spectators. “See, I told you,” I murmured. “You had nothing to worry about.”

He looked like he was about to cry. Was it relief, or something else? “Thank you. For everything.”

“I didn't do a thing. It was all you up there.”

He shook his head and kissed me again, with intensity and passion. The entire room exploded in cheers and raucous applause. Even Petrovsky.

* * *

Aaron and I climbed into the limousine back to the hotel about an hour after the concert had ended. I stretched out and put my head in his lap. I felt giddy as a drunk, and I hadn't had a drop tonight. I'd never been so fucking exhausted in my life—or so wired.

Aaron's fingers tangled in my hair, but he didn't say anything. He hadn't joined in the conversation in my dressing room either,

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even after I'd introduced him to everyone. Maybe it was because he hadn't gotten to know them yet, but that had never stopped him before. If there was one thing Aaron loved, it was talking music with other musicians.

We dropped off our tuxes at the concierge desk and trudged upstairs. I headed over to the couch and collapsed. Then I heard this awful groan, and realized it came from me.

Aaron chuckled, plopping down in a nearby chair. "Feels like you just ran a thousand miles, doesn't it?"

"No shit. I'm either going to sleep like a corpse tonight, or not at all."

"I've got some pills, if you need them."

"Nah, I'll be fine. I'd better get used to this, right? Since they didn't exactly pelt me with rotten fruit." I sat up slowly. "I still can't believe I just shared a stage with Aleksandr fucking Petrovsky. It's going to take a lot to top that."

"Well, he certainly seemed to like you."

His tone sounded weird. Off. Even a bit jealous. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. You've got a good working rapport, that's all. Rather impressive for only a couple of rehearsals."

"I went to dinner with him and a few of the other musicians after the dress rehearsal last night. I called to tell you, remember?"

"You said you were going to dinner. You didn't say with whom."

"I didn't think it mattered. Besides, aren't you the one who said I should try to make friends with my colleagues?"

"Depends on how friendly you're getting."

All I could do for a very long moment was stare at him. "Aaron, I am not interested in Petrovsky—not like that, anyway."

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And I doubt he's interested in me. He's *married*, for fuck's sake!"

"You'd be surprised how many people in the classical music world are...flexible."

Now I laughed. "Maybe he's bisexual. So what? I still don't care. You're all I need." I reached over to take his hand, but he didn't entwine our fingers the way he usually did. In fact, after a second or two, he pulled away. "Aaron, what's wrong? What the hell did I do?"

"You didn't do anything. But I was in this business for over a decade. I know what's ahead of you. You played brilliantly tonight, but that's not always enough. Might help your career if you decided to...be nice to a few of the right people."

"Y-You mean, fuck my way to the top?" Christ, I couldn't believe what I'd just heard. I sprang from the couch as if I'd been poked with a needle. "If I wanted to whore myself out, I wouldn't have wasted the last four years studying music!"

"This is the way the business works, Matt. Eventually someone will proposition you. You'd better be prepared for it."

"This from a guy who wouldn't fuck me in my own dressing room a few days ago?"

"Dressing rooms are unprofessional. Hotel rooms...that's a different story."

I stared at him. "Did you ever..."

"How do you think I got the contract for that recording I made of the Tchaikovsky?"

Oh, God. Was that really what it took? "Well, I'm not sucking anyone's dick just to get a job. I don't care who asks me."

"That's what you say now, but you don't know what's down the road. For what it's worth, if you ever went that route, I'd try to understand."

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“Like tonight, when you thought Petrovsky was after me?”

“Matt, look—”

“Did Kevin understand?”

“That part of my life was winding to a close by the time I met Kev. But I spent eight years commuting between San Francisco and Monterey every weekend when I was teaching at the conservatory. He never asked what I did when we were apart, and I never asked him. It worked out fairly well for us.”

I dropped back down on the edge of the couch. “So, if I fuck someone else, you don’t want to know about it?”

“It’s your call. As long as you come home to me, that’s all I care about.”

I didn’t believe him for a minute, but I also didn’t want to drag this conversation out any longer. I leaned over to kiss him, and he let me. He tasted so damn good. Like love. Like coming home. I wanted Aaron’s face to be the last thing I saw every night for the rest of my life. I couldn’t imagine being with anyone else.

CHAPTER 3

Matt had another performance with the orchestra the following night. This time he barely got the jitters. He just shrugged and said, “If I did it once, I can do it again,” then marched out there and blew the audience away. I watched from the wings, puffed up with pride.

We spent the next couple of days lazing around our room, doing a little sightseeing and stuffing ourselves with decadent French food. Finally, with well-rested grins and well-fed stomachs, we climbed aboard a southbound train to Florence.

Sun-drenched and golden even in early autumn, the Tuscan city proved the perfect antidote to overcast Paris. Dieter had booked us into another luxury hotel, but instead we decided on a rustic little *pensione* not far from Il Duomo, run by a stout, middle-aged lady

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named *Signora* Castelli.

We had our own bathroom, thank God, with a sink and a claw-footed tub. The brass bed looked like something out of a bordello, with a bright red chenille bedspread to match. But it was the striking view of the Piazza San Giovanni and Baptistery, majestic despite the impending shadow of evening, that sold us. The *signora* smiled as she handed over the key, chattering away in rapid-fire Italian. I could only make out every fifth or sixth word.

Then Matt stepped in and took over the conversation. His Italian was a touch stilted, but our landlady had no problems following him. She answered all his questions, then gave us both a wink and a wave and left us alone.

Matt promptly flopped on the bed, bursting out in laughter at its loud creaking. "Oh, this'll be fun. Everybody in the place is going to hear us fuck." Grabbing my hand, he yanked me down next to him. The bed frame shrieked in protest. "If this damn thing can even hold us."

"We could always go check in at the Golden Tower if you want. Sateen sheets, nice, plush robes, room service..."

"Boring, boring, boring. Let's live a little. If we end up breaking the bed, at least it'll make a great story." He leaned in for a long, deep kiss. "By the way, I asked her about that *trattoria* you mentioned near the Uffizi. She said it's still there. Want to go grab dinner?"

As if on cue, my hollow belly rumbled. All we'd had for lunch were a couple of hasty sandwiches when the train stopped in Nice.

"I'll take that as a yes," Matt added with a grin.

We got up and headed out. I would've preferred to walk if we hadn't been so hungry, but the bus we caught down by the *piazza* whisked us there in a flash. Within a few minutes we walked

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through the Trattoria Luisa's front doors into a warm, welcoming dining room I hadn't seen in over ten years.

Aside from a fresh coat of paint, not much about the place had changed. Same sturdy wooden tables. Wrought-iron chairs that made a heavy scraping noise on the flagstone floor. Savory, mouth-watering aromas of garlic and coriander. There were no paper menus, just a chalkboard on the wall with the daily specials scrawled on it. But I already knew what I wanted.

The hostess showed us to a quiet corner table. My rusty Italian was still serviceable enough to order us fresh tomato and basil *bruschetta*, followed by linguine with prawns and the *trattoria's* signature dish, veal *picatta*. A bottle of 2008 Trebbiano Toscana, and we were all set.

It was one of those rare occasions where the food not only lived up to my memories, it surpassed them. The linguine arrived at our table still steaming hot, in a mild cream sauce with grated parmesan and a tangy hint of lemon. The veal melted on my tongue like a lover's kiss, chased down by the Trebbiano. I'd never tried this particular wine before, though several people had recommended it to me. I could see why. It tasted like sunshine in a glass.

We were both so famished, all conversation ground to a halt once we started eating. Finally Matt set down his fork, sat back and said, "Wow."

I grinned. "Pretty good, huh?"

"I'd better go out for a run tomorrow. All this rich food's going to make me fat."

"Don't worry." I winked. "I'll make sure you get a good workout tonight."

Now he grinned. "So is that what this is? The Aaron Parrish

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museum, fine dining and sex tour of Europe, with a little music on the side?”

“Enjoy it while you can. Your next tour’s bound to be a whirlwind. You’ll be lucky to see anything besides a bunch of hotels and concert halls.”

“From your lips...” he murmured wistfully.

“Look, you’ve just had a great triumph in Paris. The audience loved you, and French audiences don’t impress easily. You won’t get famous overnight, but it will happen. You’re too damn good for it not to.”

He smiled again. “If you think so, it must be true.”

We headed back to the *pensione*, ambling through the streets and *piazzas*, city lights twinkling through hundreds of windows. I loved this energetic, gorgeous city, with its wild dichotomy between the sacred and profane, its red-tiled roofs, magnificent cathedrals and *palazzos* full of art treasures and rich, amazing history. Just breathing its air made me feel a decade younger.

Beautiful men passed us in all directions. Some smiled. Some did a double take when they saw Matt and me walking arm in arm. I wanted to tell them all to eat their hearts out, but no doubt they already were.

We dragged ourselves up the three flights to our room. Matt had his hand down my pants before I got the door shut, yanking my shirt free. My cock went stiff at the first touch of his fingers.

“You said something about giving me a workout?” Now he pushed me up against the wall and shoved his tongue in my mouth. He tasted tangy and sweet, like the wine we’d had with dinner, and I drank him down just as greedily. My head started spinning. I had to push on his chest to get him to let me up for air.

“I want you inside me tonight,” he whispered.

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I nodded dizzily, dragging in deep breaths to steady myself. I wanted that, too. We'd only indulged in oral sex for the past few days. But tonight I couldn't wait to feel him under me, gripping me like the world's hottest, tightest fist.

Matt stepped back with a seductive grin, unbuttoning his shirt, letting it float to the floor. He kicked off his shoes, then it was on to his jeans, easing his zipper down centimeter by excruciating centimeter. A little shimmy and shake, and they slid from his hips, his cock popping free, already fully erect.

Suddenly I realized I should probably get undressed, too. But Matt pushed my hands away and did it himself, tugging my polo shirt up and over my head, unzipping my chinos. Then he slid his hand inside my fly, grasped my cock and began to stroke it. My breath froze in my throat.

Took a few moments before I could speak again. "If you don't knock it off, I'm going to come all over your hand."

Grin widening, he gave me another hard pull. "What's wrong with that?"

"Matt, c'mon... I'm not twenty years old anymore. I can't get it up at the drop of a hat like you can. You can have me this way, or you can have me fuck you. You can't have both."

"Well, in that case..." He gave me another hot kiss, then climbed lengthwise onto the bed, pulling a pillow under him to elevate his hips and ass.

So he wanted it from behind tonight. Which meant he wanted it rough and vigorous. Ah, well. Nothing like a challenge.

I got our supplies from the bathroom, then crawled onto the bed beside him. I slicked up two fingers, though I usually started with one. To hell with that. If he wanted a hard ride, I might as well give it to him.

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Matt's breath hissed out sharply as I pushed inside. "Jesus!"

"What's the matter? Does it hurt?" Try as I might, I couldn't keep the amusement out of my tone. He'd taken bigger things up his ass. A certain stainless steel butt plug sprang to mind.

"What the fuck do you think?"

Oh, God. Maybe this wasn't such a great idea after all.

But when I started to pull out, he shook his head. "Don't stop. I mean...yeah, it hurts, but it feels good, too."

I started moving slowly, scissoring and stretching my fingers, until Matt's whimpers turned to groans and he began to thrust back against my hand. The bedsprings creaked like an old lady's rocking chair, and we'd barely gotten started.

My cock pulsed, wanting to be where my fingers were. Then Matt lifted his head and said, "Aaron, c'mon. Now. *Please.*" I couldn't roll the condom on fast enough.

The bed shuddered as I straddled him. For a second I wasn't sure if it could take our combined weight in the center of it. But when my cock breached Matt's hole and slid home, I stopped caring.

His furnace-heat grabbed me and drew me in, over and over. The intensity of it left me reeling. A few strokes and I collapsed, draping myself over his back, my teeth sunk into the soft, salty skin of his shoulder. Every fiber of me on fire, I fucked him like a wild animal, hard, deep thrusts that left us both howling and the bed beneath us screaming for mercy.

My fingers dug into his hips, holding on so tight I knew he'd have bruises tomorrow, but I kept going until I heard Matt let loose a sharp, broken cry. His orgasm triggered mine, boiling out of me like an unstoppable tide. My brain swam. My ears rang. I thought I'd die.

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And yet here I was, lying at my lover's side with him grinning down at me. Sweaty, tousled and utterly debauched. Even in his tux, he'd never looked this gorgeous.

"There's one for the record books." He planted a kiss on my own sweaty shoulder. "I had no idea Italy unleashed such a beast in you. Maybe we should move here."

"Neither did I." I tried sitting up, but my back gave a strenuous objection. Everything ached. "Ohhh, God, I think I pulled something."

"Tell me where, and I'll massage it for you."

"I don't think it'll help, but..." I rolled on my side and let him dig his knuckles into the small of my back. It hurt like hell for a few minutes, but then, as my tight muscles relaxed, it actually felt good all over. I glanced down at my new erection and chuckled. Well, what do you know? Evidently miracles did happen.

Matt's grin turned evil the second he saw it. "I'm up for round two if you are."

The bed creaked, groaned and shimmied as I dragged him on top of me. Then came a sharp knock on the left-hand wall. Seems we had indeed treated our next-door neighbors to an impromptu serenade.

I looked at Matt, and he looked at me. We both dissolved in laughter.

* * *

I fell into a coma and didn't open my eyes again until the bright, golden morning sun flooded across the bed. Grabbing my watch from the nightstand, I wasn't terribly amazed to find that we'd slept almost till noon. But Matt wasn't in bed with me. He

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stood naked at the window, peering down into the *piazza* while he chatted on his phone. I enjoyed the view for a minute or two, until he saw I was awake. He said goodbye and hung up, flopping onto the bed with a huge smile on his face.

“How’s your mother?” I asked. She was pretty much the only person he called.

“Oh, it wasn’t Mom. It was Derek. He called to tell me that BBC Radio broadcast the Idyllwild recital the other night. It got such a great response, they want to issue it on CD.”

“That’s terrific!” I threw my arms around him. “What did I tell you? It takes a while to build up momentum.”

“I know, I know. You were right. You usually are.”

“So when’s the recording coming out?”

“Soon as the contracts are in order, I guess. They’ll send them to Dieter, and I’ll sign them when we get to Berlin. At least now I’ve got something to look forward to there.”

I frowned. “You’re not looking forward to visiting with your father?”

“Yes and no. I mean, I’m glad we’ve patched up our differences, but it’s going to be weird seeing him with his new family. Elena’s been sweet to me, but she’s still the woman Dad left Mom for. It’s hard not to think about that.”

Matt’s mother, Carmela, and her husband, conductor Steven Beckett, had a famously turbulent marriage. For ten years, they’d been the classical music world’s Brangelina, living a lavish jet-set lifestyle throughout Europe, their frequent public contretemps splashed all over the gossip pages. Carmela was a brilliant musician, but not easy to get along with, even on her best day. Her multiple sclerosis, which had brought her career to an abrupt end and left her confined to a wheelchair, had also rung the death knell

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of their marriage.

I could empathize with Matt's ambivalent feelings about his father. But I could also see Beckett's side. Nursing someone through a serious illness was no picnic. I'd seen Kevin through three long years of chemo before he finally passed. It was the most difficult thing I've ever done. If I'd known then what lay ahead of me, I doubt I would've had the strength to go through with it.

I skimmed my hand down the length of Matt's back. His skin felt warm from the sun, silky as rose petals. Good God, how the hell did I get so lucky?

"I suppose we could always skip Berlin," I said. "You've only got one chamber recital scheduled. Probably wouldn't be too hard for them to find a replacement."

It got exactly the reaction I'd hoped for. Matt sat up abruptly, wagging his head. "No way. I'm not canceling an engagement just because I'd rather not see my dad. Professionals don't do that." He gave me a sly glance. "That's what you're always telling me, anyway."

"That I do." I leaned down to kiss him. "Glad it's finally sunk in."

"You don't fool me. I knew it was a test." He kissed me back, then rolled off the bed and headed for the bathroom. "I'd better get ready. Rehearsal's in an hour and a half."

This time I decided to go with him. I was dying to see Florence's stately old opera house, the Teatro della Pergola, again. I'd played concerts in both the main hall and the four-hundred seat Saloncino upstairs, a former ballroom converted to a recital hall. Its acoustics were heavenly. Matt had no idea what a treat he was in for, having his first Italian recital here.

The accompanist was onstage when we arrived, flipping

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through a stack of scores. When he glanced up at our approach, I got the uneasy feeling he was looking right at me. Then I realized I recognized him.

“Tonio,” I said, breaking out in a broad smile. “Antonio Moretti. There’s a face I thought I’d never see again.”

He smiled back, sauntering down to the edge of the stage to shake my hand. He had a pianist’s grip—firm and steady, with gorgeous, well-muscled hands. Talk about bringing back memories! Sweaty, sultry memories that sent my blood racing.

“Good to see you, Aaron,” he replied in perfect, American-sounding English with just a hint of an accent—a holdover from several years of study in New York. With the exception of some gray sprinkled through his shoulder-length hair, now pulled back in a ponytail, he looked pretty much the same. Average height, slender, but solidly built. Wire-rimmed glasses. Jeans, black turtleneck. Late forties by now, though no one would’ve ever guessed. “So this is your protégé?” he added, offering his hand to Matt. “Or perhaps I should say, your famous protégé. Your reputation precedes you, young man.”

Matt let out a nervous laugh, his gaze bouncing from Tonio to me and back again. “I have a reputation?”

“I heard your radio broadcast the other night. Quite impressive.” He straightened up. “Well, come on up, then. Let’s get to work.” With that, he strode to the piano and sat down.

I’d expected Matt to charge up onstage, but instead he hesitated, shooting me a wary glance. “Is he...”

“You’re in excellent hands. Tonio’s one of the finest accompanists in Europe.” It was only the truth, after all. My first recital here would’ve been a disaster if not for him. My bow had broken halfway through the performance. Tonio ran downstairs

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and sweet-talked one of the opera house violinists into loaning him a spare. Saved the whole damn evening.

“If you say so.” He gave me a quick kiss and headed for the stairs at stage right.

I sat at the rear of the hall, so Matt wouldn’t be tempted to look at me. But this time I needn’t have worried. Tonio kept him on his toes all afternoon, running through the entire program. Haydn. Mozart. Beethoven. The recital hall was a near-ideal venue for showing off Matt’s interpretive gifts with the baroque and classical repertoire. However, it also left the soloist incredibly exposed, with no huge orchestra to help disguise flubbed notes.

It was a challenge, but, of course, Matt rose to it admirably, every note ringing out strong and true. He and Tonio worked well together, complementing each other with an ease that made me downright envious. They were sharing something that, thanks to my bum hand, Matt and I could never share—a collaboration of equals.

Then the piano faded away, and there was just Matt, playing one of Bach’s solo violin sonatas. He worked his way through selections from all three sonatas, finally segueing into the first movement of the *partita* he’d played at his conservatory audition last January. Bold chords. Sweet, throbbing *arpeggios*. A bravura piece, but he made it sound like a love song.

My eyes stung. I blinked hard, rose and made my way back to the stage, where Matt was wiping down the Strad before laying it back in its case.

“I didn’t know you’d decided to play the *partita*,” I said.

Matt grinned. “You liked it? I thought I’d play it as an encore. If I actually get one.”

“You should prepare more than one,” Tonio interjected.

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Now Matt snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious.” Tonio cocked his head at me. “You tell him.”

“Tonio’s right. Besides, wouldn’t you rather have the encores prepared and not need them, instead of the other way around?”

“And I’m supposed to learn these new pieces in two days? I don’t even know what to play.”

“Why don’t we discuss it over supper? All three of us, of course,” Tonio added, with a wink in my direction. “I know a little place not far from here.”

I wasn’t as ravenous as last night, but I could certainly eat. Matt didn’t seem terribly enthused or opposed to the idea. Finally I shrugged. “Fine with us.”

It was one of those hole-in-the-wall places the locals frequented—where everybody knows your name, and bellows it at the top of their lungs. The shabby décor left something to be desired and made me grateful for the small lamp casting shaky, anemic light over the table. Tonio assured us the food was worth it, and proceeded to order for all of us. At least they brought the wine promptly.

We had to lean across the table to carry on a conversation over the din. Tonio’s eyes widened when he asked Matt where he’d studied, and he mentioned Juilliard. “I went there as well. What did you think of it?”

Matt shrugged. “I liked their violin program just fine. It’s New York I’m not too fond of.”

“Why not?”

“I’m a West Coast kind of guy. Manhattan’s too intense for me. Plus... Well, my mom was having some health issues.” He reached for my hand. “Besides, if I hadn’t moved home, I never would’ve met Aaron.”

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Tonio smiled. “The best reason of all.”

We clinked our glasses together and drank.

They brought us prosciutto with melon first, then angel hair pasta with mussels in a light, creamy Alfredo sauce. Then came the main course—sea bass alla Fiorentina, golden and flaky, with a dash of marinara sauce and wedge of lemon. Not the fanciest meal I’d ever had, but definitely one of the most satisfying, and even worth putting up with the noise.

The place had cleared out a bit by the time they took our plates away, so we could enjoy our coffee in relative peace. Somewhat the worse for wine, Tonio and I started to reminisce. Matt leaned his chin on his palm and listened, giving us his full, rapt attention.

“This one was quite a wolf in his day,” Tonio announced, poking a finger at my chest. “He left a trail of broken hearts from London to Rome.”

Oh, terrific. I could feel the hot flush creeping up my neck, into my cheeks and all the way to my hairline. “He’s exaggerating.”

“Ah, well...perhaps. But not by much.”

“How did you two meet?” Matt interjected.

“Tonio was the accompanist at my first recital here. Twenty years ago, wasn’t it?”

“More like twenty-one. October, 1989, if I recall correctly. You played Beethoven’s *Allegro in G* as an encore.” Now he pointed at Matt. “That would be an excellent selection for you.”

“Well,” I said with a forced chuckle, “I’m glad one of us doesn’t have Alzheimer’s yet.”

“When you’ve played as many concerts as I have, the truly remarkable ones do stand out.”

“Nice try. But I’m still not picking up the check.”

Tonio just laughed, flashing me a mouthful of teeth.

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A couple hours and several shots of Amaretto later, I did end up paying the check, not that I really minded. It was a small price for an evening out with an old friend—albeit an old friend who still possessed the power to make me supremely uncomfortable.

Apparently Matt had noticed, too. No sooner had we piled into a cab than he turned to me and said, “You and Tonio had an affair back in the day, didn’t you?”

With a sigh, I replied, “Don’t suppose there’s much point denying it, is there?”

“Why would you even want to? For Christ’s sake, Aaron, I know you weren’t a monk before we met. Neither was I.”

“I doubt you’ve spread yourself as far and wide as I have.”

“I’ve been out since I was sixteen. Believe me, I’ve fucked plenty of guys.”

My mind spun back to the night of Matt’s Paris debut—to him sitting on the couch in his dressing room, Petrovsky’s hand on his shoulder. “Can we please change the subject?”

He gaped at me. “What, you mean it’s not okay for us to talk about our pasts?”

“I just don’t like thinking of you with other men.”

“Really? Because the idea of you with Tonio turns me on.” He slipped his hand onto my thigh, then higher, his fingers brushing my hard-on. “Looks like I’m not the only one.”

A slow, stabbing throb pulsed over my right eye. I’d had too much to drink. Between that, the noisy restaurant and now Matt’s badgering, I’d finally reached critical mass. “Drop it, Matt. In every possible sense.”

He jerked back as if I’d just slapped him. “Aaron, c’mon—”

“I’m not in the mood for this conversation. Let it go.”

“Fine,” he snapped, turning to stare out the cab window.

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“Whatever you want.”

* * *

Fuck. I hated fighting with Aaron. We didn’t say a word to each other the rest of the way back. Then he stomped up the stairs ahead of me and practically kicked the door open. I closed it as quietly as I could—after our little performance the other night, I didn’t want to get the neighbors any more pissed at us—and then stood there until Aaron sat down on the edge of the bed.

“I still don’t understand why we were arguing,” I said finally, sinking to my knees in front of him, “but I’m sorry I made you so upset.”

A deep sigh and then his hand came up to cup my cheek. “I know you are. I’m sorry, too. But when I see all these men paying attention to you, I can’t help feeling jealous.”

“Well, that’s flattering. But you should know by now that you have nothing to worry about.” I pressed a soft kiss to his palm and closed his fingers over it. “I’ve got eyes for only one guy, and I’m looking right at him.”

“Now who’s the flatterer?”

He tried giving me that patented stern, professorial tone, but the relieved look on his face told another story. I stretched up to kiss him full on the mouth, arms looped around his neck. To my own relief, he kissed me back, my heart thumping double-time at the feel of his fingers twisting in my hair, reminding me who I belonged to.

But when I dropped my hands to his fly and started unzipping it, he shook his head. “Don’t.”

“What’s the matter? You don’t like the way I apologize?”

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“Not when it’s all we ever seem to do anymore.”

I stared at him. “I don’t believe this. You’re actually saying *no* to make-up sex?”

“It feels...wrong. Cheap. Like I’m taking advantage.”

“Look, I promise if I start to feel degraded, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Matt...” Another sigh, then he patted the mattress beside him. “C’mon up here.”

Not where I’d rather be, but I didn’t want to end up sparking another fight either. So I climbed up next to him, laying my head on his shoulder. “You don’t have to play so hard to get, you know,” I murmured. “I’m pretty much a sure thing.”

At least that got a half-chuckle out of him. “I’ve been trying to avoid saying this, but...I think it might’ve been a mistake for me to come along on this tour.”

My head snapped up. “Why? Aren’t you having a good time?”

“My point exactly. You should be concentrating on your performances and trying to build your career, not worrying about me. If I’d known what a distraction I’d be, I would’ve stayed home.”

Oh, Christ. Hadn’t we been through enough of this bullshit already? “Aaron, I’m not distracted—not anymore, anyway. I had a great rehearsal with Tonio this afternoon. I listened to everything he said, and I learned a lot. He’s a great musician. Just like an Italian version of you.”

“There you go with the flattery again.”

“I mean it. Why do you think I find him so hot?”

He looked down at his hands. “So we’re at the hero-worship stage already, are we?”

“Yeah, he’s an attractive guy. But I see dozens of them every

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day. Doesn't mean I'm going to jump their bones the first chance I get. I'm one hundred percent, head-over-heels in love with *you*. Why can't you accept that?"

"You're still so young. You've got your entire life and career ahead of you. Don't you want to be free to enjoy it?"

"You think being free means fucking anybody I want? I've already done that. I went to a lot of parties my first couple of years at Juilliard. Hooked up with more guys than I can remember. It didn't make me happy. You do."

"You're a very stubborn young man," he said slowly. "Thank God."

He wrapped his arms around me and we kissed, falling back onto the mattress. Then the bedsprings started in with their usual shrieky-creaky act. We both broke out in giggles.

Finally Aaron said, "Guess the neighbors aren't going to be too happy with us again."

"I assume that means I can continue with the making-up portion of our evening?"

He grinned. "Go right ahead."

CHAPTER 4

The Saloncino was sold out for Matt's recital. Even I thought Tonio had to be joking when he came back to Matt's dressing room to tell us. We rushed to the wings and peered out at the packed auditorium. Matt stood there as if in a trance, turning at last to give me a goggle-eyed stare.

"Tell me the truth," he said. "You bought out the house and gave the tickets away for free, didn't you?"

I laughed, slapping him on the shoulder. "Afraid not. You did this all yourself."

"But...everyone out there couldn't have heard the Idyllwild concert."

"Word of your performances in Paris must've reached here by now. Florence is a big music city—especially chamber music.

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Fresh young talent always piques their interest.”

He let out a gusty sigh. “Hope I don’t disappoint them.”
“You won’t.”

There was literally not one seat left, so tonight I had to watch from the wings. Matt and Tonio took the stage at the stroke of eight, promptly launching into the G major Mozart sonata. The audience took a collective breath, holding it until the end of the first movement. Then, spontaneous applause—a few people at first, but it soon engulfed the entire room. In twenty-odd years, I’d seen this kind of response only a handful of times.

They pressed on, receiving an equally enthusiastic ovation at the conclusion of the *sonata*. They took a bow and walked offstage for a few moments to catch their breaths and have some water. The audience not only kept on applauding, they’d now begun whooping and stomping their feet.

Matt took the cup gratefully when I handed it to him. “Guess they like me, huh?”

“Why are you so surprised?”

“Six months ago, I was still at the conservatory with you yelling at me every day. I didn’t think anyone in his right mind would actually pay to hear me perform. Tonight I’ve got a full house cheering for me. It’s kind of a shock.”

Tonio came up and tapped him on the shoulder. “Save it for later, maestro. We’d best get back out there before they start tearing the seats apart.”

The remainder of the first half flew by in a blur. Two more Mozart *sonatas*, followed by Haydn. Then the conclusion, Beethoven’s lyrical, but incredibly tricky, Kreutzer *sonata*. They played it like a pair of old pros who’d been practicing together for years, every phrase shaped with delicacy and finesse. The audience

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applauded for five solid minutes at the end.

They'd scheduled a twenty-minute interval, long enough for Matt to stagger back to his dressing room and collapse on the couch. I started rubbing his shoulders, alarmed when I felt tight, tiny knots of tension in his muscles. I thought he'd finally learned to conquer the worst of his stage fright, but evidently he'd only internalized it. I almost said something, but stopped myself just in time. It could wait. He didn't need any more stress right now.

The second half of the program was devoted to Matt's greatest strength—Bach. Matt took the stage alone this time and played all three of the solo *sonatas* one after another. The audience hung on every rich, lilting note, jumping to their feet at the conclusion of the third *sonata* in C, whistling and roaring bravos.

They called him back for two encores—the Beethoven *Allegro in G*, and, at last, the Bach *partita* he'd played at rehearsal. If Matt and I had a song, this was it. My heart nearly burst with joy when I heard him play it tonight, each note glittering like a precious jewel.

He took his final bow, then remained onstage for a few more moments, letting their appreciation wash over him, twin spots of high color blazing on his cheeks. A last nod, and he strode offstage, right into my arms.

We went back to his dressing room, where I helped him out of his sweaty tux. There was no shower, so he had to make do with a quick sponge bath in the bathroom sink before throwing on his jeans and a plain white dress shirt. He left it open at the throat, exposing a tantalizing triangle of creamy skin. I wanted to plant my face right there and lick the rest of the sweat off him.

Tonio appeared in the doorway, now dressed in his street clothes, his face split by a wide grin. "Congratulations, maestro," he said, coming over to shake Matt's hand. "You may have a

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career at this yet.”

Matt grinned back, obviously relieved despite his exhaustion. “Thanks. That means a lot, coming from you.”

“I told the doorman to hold back the thundering hordes. Figured you’d want to make a clean getaway.”

“Yeah, I would.” He stretched and stood up, wobbling on his feet. “Now if somebody could carry me out to the cab...”

“Actually, my apartment’s not far from here, if you two would like to come over for a drink.”

I was about to answer, but Matt beat me to the punch. “Why not? Maybe the fresh air will help revive me.”

When he glanced at me, I gave a reluctant nod.

We took the service exit, which led us out to an alley behind the opera house. I held Matt’s hand as we walked along, and amazingly, he did appear to come back to life after a few minutes in the brisk mid-October breeze. Tonio’s apartment lay a few blocks over, in a charming old white brick building with wrought-iron railings on the balconies.

Like most of these aging edifices, it didn’t have an elevator, so we had no choice but to drag our tired asses up four flights to Tonio’s floor. There were only two apartments, one on either side of the hallway. The front door opened directly onto the living room, with an overstuffed leather couch and two matching armchairs. A shiny black concert grand stood in the far corner, shelves of music scores lining one entire wall. The bathroom and bedroom were presumably down the hallway. A long, glass-topped dining table stood at the opposite end of the room, near the door leading into the kitchen.

“Make yourselves comfortable,” Tonio said, gesturing toward the living room. “What would you like to drink? I have just about

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everything, even American liquor.”

I pondered a double scotch, until Matt piped up with, “Do you have any Trebbiano?”

“As a matter of fact, I put a fresh bottle in to chill last night. Good choice, by the way. Shall I bring three glasses?”

What the hell—I was in no mood to be picky. Matt and I nodded, then plopped down on the couch to relax while Tonio went to fetch the wine.

It wasn’t the same vintage we’d sampled at the Trattoria Luisa the other night, but it was still pretty damn good. Light and citrusy, it tingled on my tongue and went down smooth as butter. Unfortunately, it had been so long since we’d last eaten, the alcohol sailed right to my head.

Matt’s, too. Half a glass, and he already had that dopey, glassy-eyed look of the cheap drunk. Oh, well. He’d worked hard this week. He deserved a chance to unwind.

“Where’s your next stop in the tour after Firenze?” Tonio prompted, already pouring himself a second glass. He always did have a hollow leg.

“Zurich, then Cologne,” Matt replied. “Our last stop’s Berlin. But to tell the truth, I kind of wish we could go home now. The last couple of weeks have been so great, I keep thinking the other shoe’s bound to come crashing down sometime.”

“Always with the glass half-empty,” I chided.

“I just don’t want to get my hopes up before there’s any reason to. What happened with Mom taught me that, no matter what I achieve, it could all disappear in an instant.”

Tonio’s brow wrinkled. “I’m sorry, but your mother is...”

“Carmela Branciaga. She got sick about ten years ago, and—”

“Ah, yes, I’m aware. I was sorry to hear of her illness.

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Nevertheless, she's still left a formidable legacy to live up to."

"No kidding."

"It's a legacy you've done more than proud, and you know it," I interjected.

"So everybody keeps telling me," he murmured, slumping against my shoulder, eyes drifting shut. Within a minute or two, he'd nodded off.

Tonio chuckled. "He really did give it his all tonight. You're a lucky man, Aaron. He's beautiful, passionate, talented...quite extraordinary. I envy you."

"Thank you," I murmured, genuinely touched, then stung by a sharp, swift pang of irrational jealousy that took me a few seconds to shake off. This was ridiculous. Tonio was a friend. Of course he had no designs on Matt. "But...well, if you don't mind me prying, what happened with you and Massimo? I thought you two were pretty serious."

"Oh, that was ages ago—ten years, at least. He put up with a lot from me, but when I got married, that was it."

My glass froze halfway to my lips. "You got married? To a woman?"

"Strictly for convenience's sake. I got tired of my family pressuring me to give them a grandchild. Giovanna was a rehearsal pianist at the opera house. We became friends. She had an affair with a married man and found herself pregnant. I thought marrying her would be a relatively simple way to solve both our problems. It turned out to be anything but."

"What happened?"

"She fell in love with me and became quite irrational about it. I never lied to her. I told her from the beginning I wasn't attracted to her in that way, but it didn't seem to matter. So...I lost Massimo,

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and my daughter.” A framed photo sat on the nearby table. He picked it up and handed it to me. It was Tonio, with a little girl about seven years old. “Her name’s Laura. That was the last time Giovanna let me see her, on her birthday a few years ago.”

“You keep a picture of a child that’s not even yours?”

“I’m the only father she’s ever known. She bears my name. I still support her, and I always will. It’s hardly fair to punish the child because her mother’s crazy.” He shrugged. “I’ve long since accepted that I’ll never have the kind of happiness you and Matt have. It’s no big deal, as they say. It just...is.”

No big deal? Good God. That was the saddest thing I’d ever heard. When he got up to go in the kitchen for a fresh bottle, I eased Matt back gently on the couch—still fast asleep—and followed him.

I stopped in the kitchen doorway, watching him wrestle with the corkscrew. “Sorry I haven’t been a better friend. I should’ve stayed in touch.”

“Why are you apologizing? You’ve done nothing wrong. Am I supposed to loathe you for having something I don’t?” He turned away quickly, but I still saw the glint of wetness in his eyes.

I went up to him and put my hand on his shoulder. Then he put his hand over mine.

The spark we’d had between us twenty years ago was still there. I felt its pull, and if not for guilt pricking at the back of my mind, I might have heeded it. But we’d had our time, Tonio and I. The man I loved waited in the other room. My place was with him.

CHAPTER 5

Matt repeated his recital program the following week in Zurich, and in Cologne a few days after that. He did his usual fine job, despite being saddled with a pair of competent but unremarkable accompanists. The audiences appeared polite, but unresponsive. They didn't call him back for a single encore in Cologne. Matt tried to put on a brave face, but I could tell the experience had shaken him.

We arrived in Berlin via train on the twenty-fifth. The weather had turned damp and gloomy, which didn't help our demoralized, worn out mood. Besides, I'd never been terribly enamored of Germany. I adored its music, but found the country itself cold and passionless. We took a cab directly to the Excelsior Hotel. Another overpriced four-star luxury suite, but this time neither Matt nor I

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had the strength to argue. I wanted a soft, non-creaky bed, a hot shower and a quiet dinner in our room.

There was a message waiting for Matt at the front desk when we checked in. His face fell the moment he opened it. "It's from Dieter. He wants me to come down to his office and sign the contracts for that Idyllwild CD right away." He sighed. "It's waited this long. Can't it wait one more fucking day?"

"Well, he has been holding onto them for a few weeks now," I pointed out.

"I know, but... Jesus. It's for a tiny little record label. Won't make any of us rich."

We rode the elevator up to our suite, took off our coats and tossed our luggage on the bed. Matt eyed the fluffy down comforter with longing, then heaved another, deeper sigh. "Guess we'd better go down there and get it over with. All I want to do tomorrow is stay in and rest."

When I didn't say anything, he shot me an expectant look. Finally I said, "If you don't mind, I'd rather not go."

"Why not?"

"Because agents don't like it when artists drag their significant others into business meetings. You're the one who's signing the contract. You don't need me there for that."

"Well, it's more of a case of wanting you there than needing you, but it's okay. I get it. You're tired." He gave me a quick kiss before heading for the door. "Go on and order dinner. I won't be gone long."

He ended up being gone nearly two hours. I'd begun to contemplate giving him a call when he came through the door, a strangely thoughtful, subdued look on his face. He took a shower and changed into his robe, then sat down across from me and

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picked at the salad I'd ordered for him.

"Was there a problem with the contracts?" I prompted.

"Not with the Idyllwild one. But Dieter had another one for me to look at, too. From Deutsche Grammophon." He sucked in a breath, and so did I—from utter shock. DG was one of the world's biggest classical music recording companies. If they wanted to sign Matt, his career was made. "One of their artist and repertoire guys heard me play in Paris. Evidently he's a friend of Petrovsky's. I guess I must've impressed him. They're offering me a contract to record the Tchaikovsky and a couple other *concertos* besides."

"Oh, my fucking God!" I got up to throw my arms around him, but Matt didn't hug me back. He didn't kiss me back either. "What's wrong? Isn't this what you wanted?"

"There's a catch. I'm not sure I can live with it."

"It must be pretty bad if it's making you reconsider a contract with DG."

"The A&R guy was in my dressing room with all those other people that first night in Paris. He saw us kissing. So they've put a stipulation in the contract saying I can't be seen engaging in any public display of affection with another man. Which basically means, I have to go back in the closet."

I wished I was surprised, but I wasn't. "That's not uncommon. There was a clause to that effect in my recording contract, too."

"And you signed it anyway?"

"It's all a matter of compromise, Matt. How badly do you want this contract?"

"Not enough to lie about who I am. I know I'm not the only gay musician out there. If we'd all just band together and say no to this institutionalized homophobia, we could freeze it in its tracks."

"And then you'd find engagements few and far between."

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Classical music audiences are generally pretty conservative. So are recording companies. They don't want anything fucking up the bottom line."

His snort told me exactly what he thought of that argument. "I can't believe you're defending them."

"I'm not. I'm just telling you how it is. This business hasn't changed significantly in decades. You can either work within the system, or...well, you won't get much work." We fell silent for a few minutes after that, until Matt's cell phone rang. He checked the number and groaned. "It's my dad. I'd better take it." He hit "accept," then got up and started pacing. Talking to his father always made him antsy. They had a short exchange, then Matt lowered the phone and said, "They're inviting us for dinner tomorrow night. I guess we should go?" At my resigned nod, he spoke into the phone again. "Yeah, that's fine. We'll see you around seven."

He hung up and dropped back into his chair, rubbing both eyes with the heels of his palms. "Shit. So much for relaxing."

"We've still got tonight and most of tomorrow. But no practicing, okay? You've done enough of that in the past month to last you another six."

"Never thought I'd hear you tell me to slack off." He cracked a wry grin. "Sometimes I wish we could turn the clock back six months, when all I had to worry about was school, practicing and taking care of Mom. And finding time to see you."

Smiling, I reached over to tousle his hair. "Glad I made the list."

"All I want to do with my life is play music and be happy with you. When did that get so fucking complicated?"

Jesus, I've never seen him this tired. Those circles under his

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eyes looked like a pair of shiners. He'd been pushing himself hard these past few weeks, harder than I'd ever seen him work before. In time, he'd learn to pace himself better. But now he needed to get some rest, or he'd be no good for anything tomorrow.

Taking him by the hand, I led him into the bedroom, peeled off his robe, and helped him slide between the cool, crisp sheets. He tugged me down, rolling onto his side so I spooned up behind him. A certain part of me heartily approved of this idea.

"Feels like something's up," he murmured, wiggling his ass against my erection. "We should take care of that."

"Not tonight." I brushed a kiss across his shoulder. He tasted like soap, with the faint salty tang of fresh sweat.

Didn't take long for Matt's breath to slow, his weight settling heavier into my arms. Curiously enough, I was still wide awake. I usually dropped off before he did. But tonight I was content to simply lie here, listen to him breathe and feel the soft thump of his heart.

* * *

Dad insisted on sending a limo for us, though Aaron and I could've easily walked to his apartment. Actually, it was the penthouse of an elegant, upscale modern building not far from the Kurfürstendamm. There was a concierge in the lobby, and a fucking *waterfall*. I'd expected a butler to answer the door, but instead it was Elena. Her face lit up when she saw us. But when she threw her arms around me, I stood there like a damn statue, with no clue how to react. I finally hugged her back, but it still felt awkward.

She was an attractive lady—tall, blonde, blue eyes. Nice,

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expensive clothes, though I didn't recognize the designer. Walking upright on her own two legs. Mom's polar opposite. Suddenly I understood why Dad fell for her.

I took a quick glance around the foyer, my eyes bugging out. It looked like the entry hall of a fucking palace. Marble floor. Vaulted ceiling. An antique table with a huge bouquet of yellow roses sitting on it. A carpeted staircase that led up to the second floor. *Jesus*. This made the house I'd grown up in back in San Francisco look like a skid row dump.

She gave us a tour of the first floor, starting with the sun room—which wasn't very sunny at seven in the evening at the end of October—and then the living room. The TV was on, blaring some loud, colorful kids' show. Right in front of the TV sat a kid. Elena called to him, and he came running over.

"This is Viktor," she said to me in English. She spoke it well, with hardly any accent. "Your brother."

I'd tried to prepare myself for this, but it was still kind of a shock. He was about nine years old and wore Harry Potter pajamas. Blond and blue-eyed, just like his mother. Apple-cheeked. Adorable. Didn't look a thing like me.

I didn't say or do anything until Aaron finally nudged me. Then I bent down to offer him my hand. "Hi. I'm Matt."

He shook it, smiled and said, "Good to meet you. I've been looking forward to it ever since Mama said you were coming."

"Wow." I smiled back, truly impressed. "Your English is a lot better than my German. I'm glad to meet you too. Oh, and this is my...friend, Aaron."

Viktor nodded and shook Aaron's hand. Then, at his mother's prompting, he gave me a hug before scampering back to the TV. Elena rattled off a few sharp words to a middle-aged lady who was

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sitting on the couch knitting. She must've been the nanny.

Then she turned back to us. Was it me, or did her smile look a bit strained this time? "Shall we go join your father for dinner? Viktor's already had his."

We followed her down the hallway. Aaron clasped my hand, giving it a squeeze. "You okay?"

I barely had time to shrug before we entered the last room on our right. It was twice the size of the living room, the walls lined with shelves containing music scores and books on music history and theory in at least five different languages. A full-size concert Steinway stood over by the window, with a cello beside it. Family photos hung on the wall. I wasn't in any of them.

And right ahead of us, a sturdy oak desk littered with papers. There was Dad, glasses pushed down on his nose, studying an open score.

Until now, it hadn't dawned on me how much he looked like Aaron. Mid-forties. Salt and pepper hair and beard. A bit thick around the middle. Yeah, there were some uncanny similarities, but big deal. Still didn't change the fact I loved Aaron more than anything. How I felt about Dad...that was another story.

He flipped the score closed, then marched around the desk to give me a hug. My eyes started stinging.

"Good to see you, son. I've read about your triumphs in Florence and Paris. Sounds like your first tour's been quite a success."

Wow. He actually sounded sincere. I shot Aaron a glance. "There've been a couple of rough spots, but I can't complain. It's almost over, anyway."

"Only a couple? You should've seen my first tour with the San Francisco Symphony. I'm amazed any of us survived." He'd

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affected that forced jovial tone he always used in uncomfortable situations. It grated on my nerves, although I knew he couldn't help it. Then he turned to Aaron, his hand outstretched. "Professor Parrish. Thank you for coming."

Aaron grinned. "I wasn't about to turn down a dinner invitation from the director of the Berlin Philharmonic—or Matt's father."

"Speaking in both capacities, I'm glad to have you here." He cleared his throat. "Why don't we go in? Studying scores all afternoon is hungry work."

The dining room lay directly across the hall. Oak paneled walls, table long enough to seat at least twenty. The chandelier looked like a cascade of diamonds. I guess the kind of people Dad usually entertained would find it impressive, but it didn't feel like a very warm, welcoming place for a family reunion.

The food was good, but my stomach was so twisted up in knots I didn't eat much. I didn't hold up my end of the conversation, either. Dad and Aaron chatted about goings-on in the music world, other artists, their favorite pieces of music. Every now and then Elena would interject a comment. Now I remembered she was a musician, too. Which explained the cello in Dad's study.

Suddenly it dawned on me that everybody had stopped talking and was looking at me. "Sorry." I flashed a sheepish grin. "Guess I was off on Mars again."

Aaron gave me a "what's the matter with you?" look. Dad just took another sip of his wine and asked, "So what are your plans for this spring?"

Where the hell did that come from? "I don't really have any."

"You mean Dieter hasn't set up any engagements for you?"

"He said he was working on it when we met yesterday, but nothing's carved in stone yet."

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“Keep after him. He needs to get those dates booked while your glowing reviews are still fresh in everyone’s mind.”

“I’d like to take some time to recover from this tour before I start thinking about the next one. Besides, Aaron’s leave of absence is up soon. I’d rather not travel without him.”

Dad just looked at me. His mouth opened. Then it closed. He looked at Elena, but she didn’t say anything, either. Finally he reached for the bottle of Riesling at his elbow, refilling his glass. “Have you given any thought to changing your name back to Beckett?”

There was a conversational gambit I hadn’t expected—but probably should have. I’d had my name legally changed when I turned eighteen, back when Dad and I were still estranged. I’d hated him so much for what he’d done to Mom, I didn’t want anyone to know I was his son. Now I didn’t want them to know for a completely different reason.

“I like Dugan,” I replied. “It’s short, sweet and easy to spell. Easy to remember, too.”

“No one here in Berlin seems to have a problem remembering *my* name.”

I bit back a sigh. This would be tricky. I didn’t want to bruise Dad’s tender ego, but I wasn’t about to give in just to avoid it. “I want to do this on my own. The Beckett name carries a lot of...well, high expectations. So does Branciaga, and I’m not calling myself that, either.”

“It could be more of a help to you than a hindrance.”

“I know, I know. But I still want to do this my way. Stand on my own two feet. I hope you understand.”

He thought about it for a moment, then nodded slowly. “I do. Of course, I won’t say it doesn’t hurt a bit, but you’re an adult

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now. I'll respect your wishes."

We took our dessert and coffee in the living room. Evidently the nanny had already put Viktor to bed. Dad put on his latest recording of the Brahms second with the BPO, and we all listened. It was a fine performance, but my mind kept wandering. At least it kept me from having to make stupid small talk.

Afterward, we said our goodbyes and piled gratefully into the limo. But when I tried to put my head on Aaron's shoulder, he stiffened. "How come you didn't say anything about the DG contract?"

God, did we really have to talk about this now? "I still haven't decided if I'm going to sign it."

"It's an amazing opportunity. Don't turn it down because of me. And if Dieter books you some tour dates next spring, I want you to take them."

"Why? So I can spend weeks in a fucking hotel room all alone?"

"That's the way the business works, at least until you've made a name for yourself. It's no picnic, but we all have to do it. You can't put your career on hold for the sake of my schedule."

"Why don't you just quit the conservatory? You don't need to work, not with all that money Kevin left you. Hand in your resignation, and we can travel together all year."

His jaw went tight. "It's not about the money. It's about self-worth and integrity. It's about having a purpose. You know I love you, Matt. But I'm not giving up my job to become your full-time boyfriend."

"Oh." Talk about a slap in the face. "In that case, forget I asked."

He tried to put his hand on my shoulder, but this time I was the

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one who shrugged it off.

“Matt, c’mon—”

My eyes were stinging again. *Shit!* Luckily, the limo had just pulled up in front of the hotel. I jumped out and sprinted for the lobby. Aaron would be out of breath by the time he caught up with me, but at this point, I didn’t fucking care.

I went straight up to the room and flopped on the couch, bracing myself for a giant shitstorm once Aaron came through the door. Five minutes ticked by, then ten.

My head throbbed. My eyeballs felt like a pair of boiled eggs, and I hadn’t even cried yet. I wasn’t ruling it out, either. *Jesus, where the hell is Aaron?* Was he okay?

Instant guilt washed over me. I reached for my phone and dialed Aaron’s number. He picked it up on the second ring.

“I’m sorry,” I said before he could get in a word. “Where’d you go?”

“For a walk. Thought it might be best to clear my head before we talked again.”

I’d expected him to still be angry, but he wasn’t. He sounded more tired and relieved than anything else. “I’m ready if you are. And I promise not to yell this time.”

He chuckled. “All right. Give me a few minutes.”

I went into the bathroom and splashed some cool water on my face, stripped off my clothes and put on a robe. Then I sat back down on the couch and waited.

Aaron showed up a few minutes later. He took off his coat and sat down next to me, wrapping his arm around me. “Feeling better now?” he asked.

“I guess, but...” I sighed. “I thought taking this trip together would be fun, but all we do is fight. It’s fucking exhausting.”

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“It’s easy to get along when you don’t see each other every day. Being with someone twenty-four-seven...that’s the hard part. Sometimes I wonder how Kevin and I got through all those summers in Monterey.”

“The two of you fought like this?”

“Oh, hell yes. We used to have horrible knock-down drag-outs. Then we’d cool off and realize we got so mad because what we were arguing about actually mattered. If we didn’t give a shit, we wouldn’t have bothered. Honestly, I’d take an all-out screaming match over indifference any day of the week.”

“So would I. But I’d rather not keep having them every day of the week.”

We both laughed. I buried my face in his shoulder, groaning as his hand slid up into my hair and began gently massaging my scalp. God, it felt so fucking good.

“Look,” he said softly, “we didn’t have this problem last summer. You’ve been under a lot of stress these past few weeks. Learning how to perform in front of an audience isn’t easy. I’m guessing that once we get home and fall back into our normal routine, everything else will return to normal. too.”

“Five more days.” I breathed. “I can’t wait.”

He pressed his lips to my forehead. “Neither can I.”

CHAPTER 6

Matt's phone woke us up around eight the next morning. I grabbed it off the bedside table, squinting at the display. I didn't recognize the number.

But Matt did. "It's Dad. Why would he be calling me this early?"

"It might be an emergency. You'd better take it."

With a sigh, he sat up and hit "accept." "Hey, Dad. Is everything okay?" His eyes went wide. "You're kidding me. When did this happen?" Then, "I'm sorry to hear that, but..." And then his jaw dropped. "You can't be serious. The concert's tomorrow night! There's no way I can be prepared in time!"

What the hell was going on? I reached over and pulled the phone away from his ear. "Prepared for what?"

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“The soloist for the BPO’s concert tomorrow night just cancelled. He’s got the flu or something. Dad wants me to step in.”

I couldn’t believe it. Most violinists worked their entire careers for a chance to play with the Berlin Philharmonic. “So what’s the problem?”

“It’s the fucking Brahms *concerto*. I’ve never played it in public before!”

“Matt—”

“I can’t do it. He’ll have to find someone else.”

I plucked the phone from his hand, hoping his father hadn’t heard him. “Steven? It’s Aaron. Matt and I need to talk. He’ll call you back in five minutes.”

Matt stared at me as I hung up. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Look, I know you think you can’t pull this off, but I know you can. We practiced this piece over the summer, and you did a fine job. You’re ready to perform it for an audience.”

“We only practiced the first movement, and I don’t remember it well enough to play it without the score in front of me.”

“Then you’ll have the score in front of you. These are special circumstances. People will understand.”

“Weren’t you the one who told me a professional never shows up unprepared?” Matt shook his head. “The Brahms is Mom’s signature piece. I can’t go out there without knowing it cold.”

I handed the phone back. “Sounds like we’ll be doing a lot of practicing between now and tomorrow night.”

Matt looked at me, then back at the phone. Then he dialed his father’s number.

Steven had the score delivered via courier within the hour, and we got to work. Matt hadn’t forgotten as much as he thought he had. He made it through the first movement without stumbling

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over too many notes, and did a passable sight-reading of the second and third.

But passable wasn't the same as good—or even good enough. Matt set aside his bow with a groan. “That was embarrassing.”

“Give yourself a break. At least now you know what you need to work on.”

“Only the whole fucking *concerto*. Remind me again why I let you talk me into this?”

“Because your father asked you.”

He poured himself a fresh cup of coffee, downing half of it in one gulp. “I'm probably the only violinist within easy shouting distance.”

“I doubt that. He could've called any soloist in Europe, but he chose you. Maybe this is his way of apologizing for the past ten years.”

“There were photos of Elena and Viktor all over his office, but not a single one of me. He's practically erased me from his life.”

“If that were true, he wouldn't have invited us over last night. He's trying, Matt. You have to meet him halfway.”

“So this isn't so much me learning a new *concerto* as it is...therapy?”

I laughed. “You have to admit, it's a lot more fun than sitting in a shrink's office.”

“For you, maybe.” He finished his coffee, rolled his neck to work out the stiffness and picked up his bow again. “Okay, on with the death march.”

He played it through three more times, improving greatly with each pass. We took a short lunch break, then he charged back at it full-bore. By six that evening, he had a hard time sitting up in his chair, but he could play the whole damn *concerto* without looking

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at the score. Even I was amazed.

He would've pressed on despite his apparent exhaustion, until I got up and took the Strad out of his hands. "That's enough," I said firmly. "You can put the finishing touches on it in rehearsal tomorrow."

"But I'm not there yet," he protested. "I've got the notes, but not the interpretation. I don't know what it all *means*."

I laid the Strad carefully in its case, then took Matt by the hand and led him into the bedroom. He fell face-first across the mattress without any prompting, a hundred-and-seventy pounds of wrung-out dead weight. I climbed up beside him, rubbing my palm over his back, gradually working my way up to his neck.

The skin there felt velvety-smooth against my fingertips, and very, very warm. But the muscles beneath were like steel cords, rigid with tension. I tried giving him a massage, but the moans and groaned it elicited didn't sound like the pleasurable kind. So I stopped, lying down beside him to murmur in his ear.

"How many times have you listened to your mother's recording of the Brahms?"

He turned his head to look at me, his expression puzzled. "I dunno. A lot. Why does it matter?"

"When she plays it, how do you feel?"

"Sad, I guess. Regretful. Angry. It was the last recording she and Dad made together, so...yeah, I'd say that's apropos."

"There's your interpretation." I grinned. "See, that wasn't so hard."

He grinned back. "Thanks. I couldn't do this without you, you know."

"Sure you could. It just wouldn't be as much fun."

We lay there together for a few more minutes, until Matt finally

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rolled onto his back. “I’d tell you to order dinner, but I’m too fucking tired to chew.”

“You should have something. Maybe a little soup?”

“Okay.” He tried to sit up, but he didn’t quite make it. “Hope I don’t lie here all night worrying.”

“I’ll give you one of my sleeping pills—no arguments. You need to be well rested for tomorrow.”

“Whatever you say, Professor.”

* * *

I was afraid Aaron’s pill would give me a hangover, but I woke up clear-headed and ready to go. Still nervous as hell, but there was nothing we could do about that.

For once, I was glad to head off to rehearsal by myself. If I fell on my face in front of the best fucking orchestra in the world, I didn’t want Aaron to see it. Dad came back to my dressing room to escort me to the stage himself. He even shook my hand.

“Thank you, son. I can’t tell you how grateful I am that you’ve agreed to do this.”

He was thanking *me*? I didn’t know whether to laugh, or just stare at him. “Um, the orchestra doesn’t know I’m your—”

“I didn’t breathe a word. All they know is you’re an up and coming young American violinist who’s helping us out in a tough spot. The show must go on, right?”

“Well, I hope I don’t make you regret your choice.”

He smiled and patted me on the shoulder. “I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

The orchestra applauded politely when Dad introduced me. One-hundred-twenty-eight of the world’s most accomplished

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musicians, many renowned teachers and soloists in their own right. Any of the violinists could have played the Brahms better than me. I'd been pretty fucking intimidated standing in front of Petrovsky and the Orchestre de Paris, but now I felt like a village priest visiting the Vatican for the first time.

It didn't get much better than this—or much worse.

Dad stepped up to the podium and called the rehearsal to order. He started by giving the orchestra some instructions, then switched to English to repeat them to me. I could feel the hot flush creeping into my cheeks. *Oh, terrific.* This was going to take all afternoon if he had to say everything in two different languages. I needed to learn German once I got home.

I jumped the gun on my entrance, and Dad brought the orchestra to a halt. They all stared at me, probably thinking, *Who the hell is this poseur? Get him off the stage!* Dad looked like he was about to say something, but my mortified expression must've told him I knew I'd fucked up. He lifted his baton and we began again.

We stopped a couple more times within the first twenty bars so he could correct my tempo. My nervousness was making me rush through it. I closed my eyes and concentrated on breathing. Tried to remember how Mom used to play this piece. She'd told me once that violinists should study how great singers sang and try to mimic them. Long, steady breaths, liquid and lyrical. Make it sound like it could go on forever.

I had to fight my way to the end, but somehow I made it through the first movement. The second and third were relatively easy by comparison—at least, Dad left off stopping us every few bars. No idea if that was a good sign or not. Maybe by this point he'd figured out I was a lost cause and decided to put us all out of

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our misery as quickly as possible.

No applause from the orchestra once we were done—not that I'd expected any. A few of them gave me a nod, but the rest started packing up their instruments without sparing me as much as a second look. Fine with me. I practically ran back to my dressing room. I just wanted to get out of there.

* * *

I pasted on my best smile as Matt trudged through the door and dropped into a chair like a sack of soggy flour. “How’d it go?”

“It went. At least they didn’t laugh me off the stage.”

“It can’t be as bad as you think.”

“I don’t know what to think. Nobody talked to me, except Dad. And even he didn’t say that much.” He glanced at his watch. “Think I’ll take a nap. Would you mind ordering dinner around five? Just soup and salad. Anything heavier and I’ll probably throw up.”

He went into the bedroom by himself, while I stayed on the couch, trying to read the newspaper. After about forty minutes, I could still hear him tossing and turning, so I got up to check on him.

He’d gotten undressed and slipped between the sheets, but he still didn’t look very relaxed. His face was all red and blotchy. When I stepped closer, I saw that he was crying.

“I-I can’t do this, Aaron,” he whispered. “I’m going to get up on that stage and make a fucking fool of myself.”

I was on the bed in an instant, my arms wrapped tightly around him. “You always say that, but something happens when you’ve got an audience in front of you. Something magical that only

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happens with truly gifted musicians. You play brilliantly. All your fears just seem to melt away.”

“Are you kidding? I’m still fucking terrified. But by the time I get out there, I just...I don’t know. I go on autopilot or something. But this time, I’m not sure if it’ll kick in.”

I’d never seen him this afraid before. Now I could’ve smacked myself for convincing him to accept this engagement. “Why don’t I order a bottle of wine with our dinner? Maybe that’ll help you relax.”

“I know something better.” He turned over in my arms and kissed me hot and deep, sliding his tongue into my mouth.

I almost gave in, until common sense got its hooks in me and pulled me back. “We shouldn’t. You need to save your energy for the performance.”

“I’ve got energy coming out my ears. That’s the problem!” I tried to roll away, but he looped his arms around my neck and refused to let go. “C’mon, Aaron. Fuck me. *Please*.”

“Matt—”

“Pound me into the fucking mattress. You know you want to.”

Then his hand drifted down to cup my rapidly rising hard-on, and there was no point denying it. Arousal coursed through me, shooting through my veins like lightning.

“C’mon,” he whispered, hot and moist, right next to my ear. “Give me that big cock.”

Didn’t need to ask twice. I hopped to my feet and yanked off my pants, kicking them aside just in time for Matt to swoop in with a condom. He rolled it on with his mouth, swallowing me down to the root. His slick heat felt fucking incredible. When I looked down and saw his lips stretched wide around my cock, it was almost too much.

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He kept sucking until I had to grab a handful of hair and pull him off me. “I guess you want this over with in a hurry, huh?”

“I don’t fucking care.” Already panting, he scrambled back on the bed, rolled onto his back and spread his legs. “Just get inside me.”

He wasn’t going to get it as quickly as he wanted, not if I had anything to say about it. This was supposed to be relaxing, not a damn road race. One lube-slicked finger, then two, gently opening him until they sank in all the way to the knuckle. Then I leaned down to dust soft kisses over his torso, swirl my tongue in his navel.

Matt chuckled, his hand on the back of my head, nudging me lower. The crown of his cock was right there in front of my face. I slid my lips over it and sucked it down, its salty-bitter flavor exploding onto my tongue. Matt adored sucking me off, but I couldn’t recall the last time I’d indulged him. I needed to make a point of doing this more often. It was a pleasure too delicious to reserve for special occasions.

I coaxed him to the brink, then pulled off, squeezing his cock at the base to hold back his orgasm. Matt’s breath hissed between his teeth. “Aren’t you going to finish me off?”

“When I’m ready.” I answered his look with an evil grin and a tiny jerk of my fingers, still buried in his ass. “You said something about wanting me to fuck you?”

“Yeah. Anytime this year would be fine.”

Matt could be a smartass when the mood struck him. It was one of the things I loved most about him. But now his flushed cheeks and the look of utter desperation on his face made my cock throb so hard, I was afraid I’d burst the condom. Fuck my fingers—I couldn’t wait to fuck *him*.

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I lifted him up, sliding a pillow under his hips to make the angle easier, then draped his legs over my shoulders. A quick kiss to the soft inner skin of his knee, and I pressed the head of my cock against his hole and pushed inside.

Matt gasped, fingers digging into the comforter, head thrown back in a full-throated moan. He pulsed around me, so hot and tight I nearly lost it on the first stroke. We'd been fucking since last spring, but it still amazed me how easily his body accepted me. Like we'd been made especially for each other.

He wanted a good pounding, so that's what I gave him—hard, punishing thrusts that pushed him off the pillow and up the mattress. He had to grab the headboard to keep his head from crashing into it. Which meant he didn't have a spare hand to jerk himself off. Not a problem. I could take care of that, and still fuck the hell out of him.

I grabbed his cock and started to pull. A few strokes, and he shot all over my fist. I let him lick my fingers clean. His soft, slick tongue and the hard nip of his teeth put a hitch in my breath. He sucked hard on my fingers, mimicking what those lush lips of his had done to my cock a few minutes earlier.

Too much, too overwhelming. Couldn't take any more. I moved faster, thrust harder, sliding both hands under Matt's ass, holding him there until I finally came.

The room shimmied a bit and then the lights went dim. Next thing I was aware of, I was lying face down next to Matt. I rolled over to look at him, letting out a groan. *Jesus*. We were both soaking wet.

"You all right?" I murmured finally. "I think I got a little carried away."

He dragged open one eye, giving me the world's laziest, fucked

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out grin. “That’s what I call relaxing.”

“Glad it did the trick.”

“And to think you’ve been holding out on me these past few weeks.”

“Sorry about that. Pre-performance sex always used to leave me drained. Looks like it just takes the edge off for you.”

“No kidding. It’s fucking fantastic—literally.” He sat up slowly, yawning. “What time is it?”

I still had my watch on. “A little after five. You go take the first shower, and I’ll order dinner. Still want soup and salad?”

“Actually, I’m pretty damn hungry. Another great side effect of fucking one’s brains out.” He leaned over to give me a kiss before rolling out of bed. “Order me whatever you’re having. And get that bottle of wine, too.”

After a month-and-a-half of European food, I was pining for a plain old American-style meal. Fortunately, the hotel kitchen offered an international menu. I ordered a couple of steaks, medium rare, with steamed vegetables and a bottle of cabernet. It arrived five minutes after I stepped out of the shower.

Matt really was starving, but luckily he managed to pace himself. The performance didn’t start until eight-thirty, but going onstage with a well-stuffed stomach was never a good idea. He ate half his steak before pushing his plate away, and I restricted him to one glass of wine. Any more would turn his fingers to spaghetti.

The orchestra sent a limo for us around seven. We went straight to Matt’s dressing room when we arrived at the concert hall. Matt put on his tux and spent the next half hour or so tuning up and running through the *concerto*’s more challenging passages.

I was amazed at how good he sounded. Over the years I’d heard plenty of mannered, fussy performances of the Brahms, but

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Matt's take was refreshingly energetic and vital. I'd played the violin for most of my life, but even at thirty I hadn't possessed the mastery of the instrument that Matt had now. I couldn't help feeling a twinge of envy.

Half an hour before curtain, he started pacing. So much for good sex taking the edge off. "I'm okay, I'm okay," he kept repeating, though by now it was clear he wasn't. "I mean, what's the worst that can happen? The audience boos me offstage, or my bow breaks, or—"

"Or maybe none of that happens," I interjected. "And frankly, I'd be very surprised if it did. You're as prepared as you'll ever be. You wouldn't be here if you hadn't earned it."

"I wouldn't be here if I wasn't the conductor's son," he replied a touch bitterly.

"Doesn't matter. That audience has paid to hear a good performance of the Brahms. Concentrate on giving them that, and forget everything else."

"I know what a great opportunity this is," he replied, reaching for my hand. "Believe me, I'm not going to blow it."

We sat together in companionable silence until a soft knock came at the door. It was the stage manager. "Five minutes, Mr. Dugan," he said in heavily accented English.

"Okay." Sighing, Matt scooped up the Strad, then bent down to give me a kiss. "Off to face the firing squad."

I squeezed his hand, but didn't say anything. There was nothing left to say.

In all the excitement of getting Matt ready to play tonight, I'd forgotten to ask him to get me a ticket. But sitting back here listening on the hall's PA system worked out just fine. I couldn't take watching his face while he played. It'd make us both too

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damn nervous.

There was applause, then a second or two of silence before the orchestra began the introduction. Beckett took a rather leisurely, even stately tempo, far more relaxed than on the recording he'd made with Carmela. They played for close to three minutes before Matt made his entrance.

The moment I heard his opening notes, I knew he was going to be fine. Commanding was the first word that came to mind. Strong, then sweet, even lilting. He played the fucking thing like he'd been tossing it off in his sleep for years. And he'd learned it in a *day*.

In forty-five years, I'd heard dozens of musicians, both students and professionals. I could count the number of true geniuses I'd witnessed on one hand. I knew now that Matt was one of them. Playing the violin was as easy as breathing for him, but he kept trying like hell to make it difficult, just so he wouldn't get bored. He had no fucking clue how good he really was.

And he'd chosen *me* to teach him. The second-rate fiddle player with the gimpy hand who'd made one lousy recording before the lights went out on his career for good. Salieri to his Mozart. *God*. Matt was so far beyond me there was no comparison. How long would it be before he realized I had nothing left to offer him?

For forty minutes I sat there with tears streaming down my face. When the audience burst out in thunderous applause and roars of bravo at the end, I had to grip the arms of my chair to stop my shaking.

After taking their bows, Beckett and several of the other musicians escorted Matt back to the dressing room. Beckett looked like he was holding back tears of his own. He slapped Matt on the back, then pulled him into a giant hug. Matt gave me a puzzled,

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wide-eyed look before hugging him back.

"That was truly extraordinary," Beckett said. "You're one of the most naturally gifted musicians I've ever had the privilege of hearing. I suppose I have someone we both know to thank for that." He was talking about Carmela, of course.

Matt grinned shyly, a bright pink flush spreading across his cheeks. He looked about ten years old. "I owe tonight's conductor a debt of gratitude, too."

"Not as much as I'd like, but I'll take it." He turned to me, clasping my hand. "Not bad, eh, Professor?"

"I thought the orchestra could use some work, but the soloist was fine."

Beckett laughed. "An honest critic! I knew there was a reason I liked you."

Everybody sat down to chat for a few minutes. One of the cellists brought in a bottle of wine and some paper cups. The wine flowed. Laughter and unwinding ensued.

"I'm glad the audience wasn't too disappointed to get me instead of Itzhak Perlman," Matt said. "I was pretty nervous about it."

"The way you play?" the first chair violinist said in English. "What do you have to be nervous about?"

"It always happens before a performance. I can't help it."

"Supposedly Horowitz had terrible stage fright," Beckett said. "Didn't stop him from becoming one of the world's greatest pianists."

"Well, since I'd rather not get an ulcer before my next birthday, I'd like it to stop."

Everybody laughed. The musicians hung around a few more minutes, offering toasts and congratulations, before filing out.

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“Thanks,” Matt said, shaking their hands in turn. “Next time I’m here, I’ll be speaking German.”

Beckett stayed to give Matt a final hug. “You did a great job, Matt. Truly impressive.”

Matt nodded. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

“You know, I think you inherited your nervousness from me. I used to get jittery as hell before my clarinet recitals in high school and college. Of course, I wasn’t an artist on my instrument, like you are. That’s when I figured I’d be better off leading the band than playing in it.”

“Sounds like we both made the right choices.”

He stepped toward the door. “Start studying the Beethoven, if you haven’t already. I plan to have you back as soon as we can schedule it.” With a wave to us both, he darted out.

Matt stared at the door, then at me. “Wow. That’s what I call an interesting evening.”

We both laughed. Matt came over to throw his arms around me, kissing me soundly. It was a perfect, joyful moment. I wanted to freeze it and keep it forever.

CHAPTER 7

Compared to his appearances in Zurich and Cologne, Matt's last recital two days later was a cakewalk. He had a better accompanist—and luckily, a much more responsive audience. The Brahms hadn't been broadcast on radio or the Internet yet, but apparently word had gotten out about Matt's triumph with the BPO the other night. Even standing-room tickets were sold out.

We climbed aboard a Lufthansa jet to San Francisco the following afternoon. I was amazed to discover Dieter had booked us first-class tickets. We'd flown over in coach.

Matt couldn't believe it either. "Looks like we've moved up in the world," he said as the flight attendant seated us, then scurried off to fetch our complimentary champagne.

"Get used to it. You'll probably be traveling this way from now

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on.”

He snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“Major symphony orchestras all pay for their guest artists to fly first-class. The best restaurants, five-star hotels. Six or seven figures in the bank every year, if you’re lucky.”

“I can’t even imagine what it’s like to get paid that much.”

“Sure you can. Look at how your father lives. A couple more years, and that could be you.”

“I don’t think I’m ready for that.”

“You’d better get ready. Once everyone hears the BPO concert, you’ll have your pick of engagements.”

We dozed through most of the thirteen-hour flight and arrived around ten the next morning. Drizzle floating into our faces, we schlepped our luggage to the nearest cabstand. Ah, damp, foggy San Francisco, where most of the summers were cold as winter anywhere else, and most of the autumns weren’t much different from summer. Still, it was home, and I’d missed it, especially over the past few days.

The taxi dropped Matt off first, in front of his mother’s cream-colored Victorian in Pacific Heights. He heaved a sigh as we pulled up. “You won’t see much of me for the next week or so. Mom’s caregiver hasn’t had a day off since I left.”

“Try to get some rest. You won’t be a lot of good to your mother if you keel over.”

“Don’t worry. I plan to spend the next couple days face-down in my pillow whenever Mom doesn’t need me.” He grinned. “I’m kind of looking forward to getting back into my old routine. Practicing in my own room. Sleeping in my own bed. Eating my own cooking.”

“Sounds wonderful. I’ll probably be opening my own can of

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soup.”

“Look, we should be recovered from jet lag by Friday. Why don’t you come over for dinner? I know Mom would love to see you. I’ll whip up something special, and we can tell her all about the trip.”

I smiled. “I’ll put it on my calendar.”

A quick kiss and then he sprang from the cab, dragging his bag behind him. I waited until he’d made it up the front steps before telling the cabbie to drive on.

I thought I’d be relieved to walk through my own door, but the sight of my empty apartment was too damn depressing. I plodded upstairs and dumped my suitcase on the bed, then headed in for a shower.

The hot water stung my skin and managed to revive me enough to get a few things done before I collapsed. First up—unpacking my bag. Luckily, there weren’t that many dirty clothes to put in the hamper. Despite all my bitching about the useless luxury of four-star hotels, I loved their twenty-four hour laundry service.

Clean sheets on the bed next, then the dusty carpet got a quick vacuuming. I’d left my cat Terence with a neighbor, but I didn’t feel like dragging my butt upstairs to get him right now. Besides, my stomach had begun growling. First class airplane food wasn’t awful, but it was still airplane food. I’d taken one look at the entrée they’d offered me and passed. And of course, there was nothing in my fridge except a thin coating of frost.

I found a box of macaroni and cheese in the cupboard. Amazingly, it hadn’t expired yet. So I heated it up, filled myself a bowl and sat down on the couch, chewing absently. At least it made my stomach stop churning.

As I glanced around the room, I couldn’t help feeling the

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slightest bit let down. Only a couple of days ago I'd been in Berlin with Matt, constantly on the go. But now here I was, back in my old mundane life, in my shabby old apartment—alone.

Matt had hinted around at wanting us to move in together, but I'd always put him off. There wasn't enough room here for both of us. Only one bedroom, and the bathroom was the size of a postage stamp. Matt needed a practice room, and I wanted an office. I'd grown pretty tired of spreading my school paperwork out on the coffee table.

We'd need to find a new place—one we could make ours. I liked the idea, but with Matt's career ramping up, he wouldn't be spending much time in San Francisco anymore. Or with me.

I knew what that meant. May-December romances weren't that uncommon among gay men, but most didn't last six months. Matt and I were already way beyond that curve.

The trip had made one thing very clear—sooner or later, Matt would leave me. He already had other men paying attention to him. Better-looking men. More influential and well connected. All he had to do was flash those big blue eyes of his in the right direction, and he could have whatever he wanted. In time, he'd figure out that wasn't me.

* * *

Better rested and with an actual spring in my step, I arrived at Matt's house around five on Friday. I parked my red and black '65 Corvette in the driveway and climbed out, heading up the stairs. The front door opened before I reached it and out came a tall, blond young man, a backpack slung over one shoulder. He looked vaguely familiar.

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“Hello, Professor,” he said with a smile. My blank look must have told him I didn’t remember his name, because he added, “I’m David Marshall.” When it still didn’t ring a bell, he elaborated. “One of Matt’s conservatory classmates. We both graduated last May.”

“Oh.” Now I remembered...sort of. I’d seen him walking across the quad with Matt a few times. “Good to see you’re keeping up with old friends.”

“Yeah, well, every little bit, you know. Have a great dinner. That roast Matt’s making smells fantastic.” He headed down the stairs with a wave.

I stood there watching until he reached the corner before I continued on to the front door. I gave it a knock, then walked right in. Matt and I didn’t stand on ceremony anymore.

The smell inside was indeed fantastic—savory mingled aromas of onions, garlic and a host of other spices, all conspiring to make my stomach roar. Now I wished I hadn’t gotten so wrapped up in working on my lesson plans for next term. Once again, I’d skipped lunch.

I strode across the foyer and down the hall to the kitchen. Matt stood at the center island, clad in jeans, T-shirt and a red-and-white striped apron, mixing up something in a bowl. He was so absorbed in what he was doing he jumped when I came over to kiss him.

“Sorry,” I said. “Good thing you don’t have a knife in your hand.”

“No kidding.” He grinned and kissed me back. “You’re looking more relaxed today.”

“You, too.” I stuck my finger in the bowl. It was some kind of batter. *Chocolate. Yum.* “Looks like you’re going all out tonight.”

“Why not? I haven’t had the chance to cook in a while. I’ve

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missed it.”

To be honest, I had, too. “Why didn’t you invite your friend David to stay?” When he gave me a puzzled look, I added, “We passed each other on the stairs just now.”

“Oh. Well, he had other plans. Besides, he was only here to tutor me in German.”

“You didn’t tell me you wanted to learn German.”

“Really? I thought I did.” He finished mixing up the batter, then poured it into a large bundt pan. “Got to be prepared for our next trip to Berlin.”

“He gave you a lesson while you were cooking?”

Matt laughed. “What, so you don’t think I can multi-task? Actually, it was a lot of fun. He taught me the words for everything I’ve got in the fridge. If nothing else, I should at least be able to order dinner.”

“He didn’t sound very German to me.”

“He’s not. He’s from Los Angeles, but he speaks German fluently. French and Italian, too.” He put the cake in the oven before turning back to me. “Why all the questions?”

“No reason. I was just curious.”

With a sigh, he grabbed me by the front of the shirt and pulled me toward him. “He’s a friend, that’s all. Stop being so jealous.”

“Sorry. Can’t help it.”

“It’s very cute, but it’s also getting very annoying. So knock it off, okay?” He leaned in to kiss me soundly. He tasted just like his batter—chocolaty and bittersweet, with a hint of Madagascar vanilla. “Why don’t you join Mom in the living room? I’ve got a few things to finish up in here, then I’ll be right in.”

I’d only taken a few steps back down the hall when I heard the unmistakable twang of a bow drawn across violin strings. A quick

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knock on the living room door, and I entered to find Carmela with the Strad tucked under her chin, carefully playing the first movement theme of the Brahms *concerto*.

She wasn't having an easy time of it, but I could still see—and hear—remnants of the great artist she'd once been. Even seated in a wheelchair, her back was straight, her posture dignified. She held her instrument with a light but firm touch, the neck in her left hand, bow in her right. But she only made it through a few bars before her fingers started shaking, and she had to stop.

I stepped in to take the Strad from her and put it back in its case. "Haven't heard you play anything in ages."

"It's not often that I can," she replied, motioning for me to bend closer, so she could kiss my cheek. "Most days these things"—she held up her hands—"feel like a pair of hams strapped to my wrists, but this morning I woke up with actual sensation in them. Still feels like I'm wearing gloves, and my control comes and goes, but..." A smile, accompanied by a shrug. "I suppose I should simply take what's offered and be grateful."

"Well, you sounded fine."

The roll of her eyes told me she wasn't having any of that. "I'd tell you not to lie, but my ego couldn't take it. Come, sit down and tell me about the wonderful time you and Matt had in Europe. I've already heard his version."

"What did he tell you about Berlin?" I took a seat on the Danish modern couch, then reached over to take her hand. It felt warm, but thin and very frail. Her face looked thinner, too, her dark hair shot through with numerous strands of gray. We were both in our mid-forties, but a decade of chronic illness had started to wear her down. "I'm guessing he soft-pedaled the part about learning the Brahms in one afternoon."

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“Of course he did, but I’m not surprised. He’s always behaving as if his achievements don’t matter.” She sighed. “But the upshot is, he and Steven have reconciled. I’m glad.”

“I am, too. It definitely ended on a positive note for both of them. No pun intended.”

We chatted about the rest of the trip, with an emphasis on Paris and Florence, until Matt wandered in, wiping his hands on his apron. “My ears are ablaze. Must mean you two are gossiping again.”

“Aaron just told me the Orchestre de Paris applauded you at rehearsal,” Carmela said, turning a gimlet glare on him. “You neglected to mention that.”

“I, uh...” He shot a “help me out here” look in my direction, but I shook my head. He’d dug himself into this hole; he could dig himself out. “I guess I skated over a few details.”

“He also said you got standing ovations in Paris, Florence *and* Berlin. You didn’t tell me about any of that, either.”

“Like I said...a few details.”

“Oh, so obviously these were trivial incidents that meant nothing to you?”

“Mom—”

“I don’t understand. You go out on your very first concert tour, you have all of these great successes, and you don’t even want to tell me about them?”

“I did... I mean, I do, but...” He dropped his gaze to the floor, as if the cream-colored carpet held the secrets of the universe—or, at least, the secret to getting his mother to back off. “You had such an amazing career. Nothing I’ve done yet can compare with that. I didn’t want to sound like I was bragging, especially since...well, I’ve still got so far to go.”

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“That’s no reason not to celebrate what you’ve already achieved. It’s not bragging if it’s true.” She let go of my hand, and held hers out to him. Matt came over and knelt next to her chair. “You don’t need to tell me how good you are. I’ve listened to the broadcast of the London concert. I heard you play the Sibelius last May. You have the talent and the drive to succeed in this business. I know you do. I only wish you did.”

He glanced from me to Carmela and back again. “Between the two of you, I’m going to get a swelled head.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” I said with a wink. “We’ll bust you down to size.”

“I know *you* will.” We all laughed. Finally, Matt stood up. “Well, let’s go eat the dinner I just slaved over before it burns to a crisp.”

Carmela rolled down the hallway to the dining room, but I darted into the kitchen with Matt to help him with the food. He hadn’t asked me to, but anything to get it on the table quicker. The roast smelled heavenly, sitting on a red-and-white serving platter with onions, carrots and potatoes tucked around it. Real beef gravy made from the drippings. Green salad with homemade mustard vinaigrette. A chocolate bundt cake, cooling on the counter.

All Matt’s signature dishes. All incredibly delicious—and incredibly fattening.

I picked up the platter with a groan. “Are you trying to kill me?”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Two months of overindulging on rich European food, and now this. I should be on a diet.”

He laughed. “In that case, consider this our last hurrah until Thanksgiving.”

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“Thank God. Good thing we don’t live together, or I’d probably weigh three hundred pounds.”

That was the wrong thing to say. I realized it the moment the words were out of my mouth.

Matt’s expression faded from smiling to half-stunned in two seconds. “Yeah, that’s a real good thing.” Then he scooped up the gravy and salad and walked out.

I’d looked forward to a nice, relaxing meal, but this was anything but. I tried to keep the conversation going, but Matt restricted himself to short, terse replies and concentrated on helping his mother. Carmela usually had a difficult time handling silverware, though her fork hadn’t slipped from her grasp once this evening. I could tell she’d immediately noticed the tension between Matt and me, but, thankfully, she didn’t say a word.

Matt got up to clear our plates when we were finished. I waited a few seconds before following him into the kitchen.

“Look, Matt, I’m sorry,” I said, once the door had swung shut. “I didn’t mean to make it sound like I’m glad we’re not living together. It just...came out that way.”

Matt shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. Don’t worry about it.”

“It does matter. I don’t want you to think—”

“*Stop*, okay? I don’t want to get into another fucking argument with you.” He rubbed a hand over his face. “You’ve been like a different person ever since we left on the trip. I’m sick of all this fighting. You said it’d stop once we got home, but here we are, still at it. We’re turning into my fucking parents.”

Oh, God. The last thing I wanted was to remind him of his awful childhood. “I’m just tired, that’s all. Still haven’t recovered from the trip. Takes a while for old guys like me.”

I’d meant it as a joke, but neither of us laughed.

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"I'm sorry, I really am," I said finally. "For everything."

"I know. That's the problem."

And on that note, I figured it was time to go.

* * *

Mom kept bugging me to call Aaron and patch things up properly, but I decided to wait a few days to let things settle. With taking care of her and the house, German lessons every other day and studying a couple new *concertos*, my plate was already pretty damn full. I just wanted to relax and ease back into my normal life.

I practiced in the living room most mornings, while Mom listened. I liked sitting in front of the window, although in the middle of November it was more gloomy than sunny. Today I'd decided to start tackling the first movement of the Beethoven. God, that Kreisler *cadenza* was a fucking bear. I'd just dived into my third try when my phone started doing the vibrate-boogie across the coffee table.

Mom skewered me with a sharp look. "Why didn't you leave that in your room?"

I should have, but...well, it might've been Aaron. I was hoping he'd call me first. But it wasn't his number on the display. In fact, it wasn't a number I recognized at all. It looked like a European number, with all those extra digits and a country code. Even after a month-and-a-half over there, I never did manage to get all those fucking prefixes straight.

Maybe it was Dieter—or Dad. Either way, I'd better take it. I set aside the Strad. "Hello?"

"Matt? It's Derek. How you doing, love?"

Wow. This was a surprise. I hadn't heard a word from him

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since that phone call in Italy about the Idyllwild CD. “Pretty good. How about you?”

“Not so good, I’m afraid. Took a nasty spill the other day and broke my right arm.”

“Holy shit!” That was a serious injury for a musician, especially a violinist. “But you should heal okay, right? Or do they think it’ll affect your playing?”

“It looks like a clean break, but I suppose we’ll see.” Now he sounded bummed. Well, fuck, I would’ve been borderline suicidal.

Now Mom was giving me this “hang up the damn phone and get back to work” look. I got up and went out into the hall. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Actually, that’s what I called about. The group’s got some engagements booked for the first couple weeks of December, but now there’s no violin. We wondered if you’d mind sitting in.”

For a few moments, I was so stunned I couldn’t say anything. “I-I’m flattered by the invitation, but that’s only three weeks off. I’m not sure I can be prepared in time.” Yeah, I’d learned the Brahms in a day, but no fucking way was I putting myself through that kind of stress again. Besides, that was just one *concerto*, not an entire program of chamber music.

“You already know most of the pieces we play. We plan to repeat the *Four Seasons*, and then there’s some Mozart, Haydn and Bach—all exactly your cup of tea. The CD’s selling quite well through Wigmore Hall’s website, by the way. In fact, the group was hoping to do signings after the concerts.”

Jesus. This was a bit overwhelming. “When do you need me?”

“Ideally, no later than November twenty-ninth. The first concert’s at the Wigmore on December fourth. We’d like to fit in one or two extra rehearsals if possible, since this will be your first

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time as an actual member of the group, rather than a guest artist.”

The twenty-ninth was a Monday—the Monday after Thanksgiving. *Oh, great.* Getting on a plane that weekend would be a ton of fun.

But still, the idea of working with the Idyllwild group again was kind of exciting. I’d enjoyed the quieter, more intimate energy of performing with a small ensemble. They played baroque and classical, music I truly loved. And besides, they’d been kind enough to help launch my tour. The least I could do was lend a hand when they needed it.

“Okay,” I said finally, “I’ll do it. Give Dieter a call with all the details, so he can get the contracts out to me. And email me a list of the specific pieces, so I can start preparing.”

“Thank you, Matt.” Derek sounded as if he’d been holding his breath. “I know you must have better offers, and God knows we can’t pay you much, but—”

“Don’t worry about that. Just send me a plane ticket and book me into a decent hotel, and I’ll see you on the twenty-ninth.”

“That sounds eminently fair. Thank you again.”

The line clicked off.

Talk about a change in plans. Just thinking about everything I had to get done before I left was starting to make me dizzy. I leaned against the wall and stared down at my phone. Then I dialed Aaron’s number.

CHAPTER 8

Matt called to apologize for our latest fight, and I apologized back. We both laughed about it and agreed to leave it in the past. I hated being angry with him. I'd had a fist-sized knot in my stomach ever since I'd left his house that night.

We also agreed to scale our visits back to once a week until our lives calmed down a bit. With Matt's family obligations and practicing schedule, and my frantic running around trying to prepare for next term, we were both strapped for time. I'd never take two months off again if I could help it. It'd probably take me at least four to catch up.

He kept hinting around about some big surprise, but he wouldn't give me any clues. I'd have to wait until Thanksgiving. Well, okay. Whatever it was, I'm sure it'd be worth it.

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Thanksgiving afternoon I swung into Matt's driveway, intending to park there. But it was already occupied by a sleek black Escalade. Matt hadn't mentioned anything about replacing his mother's van. Was this the surprise he'd been hinting about? Seemed odd he wouldn't just tell me about it.

I parked around the corner, then walked back quickly, charging up the front stairs two at a time. I'd reached the halfway point when I glanced down and noticed a uniformed driver sitting behind the huge SUV's wheel. Was someone else joining us for dinner? Matt hadn't said anything about that either.

I stepped through the door to the sound of voices echoing from the living room, laughing and chattering away in French. I immediately recognized Matt and Carmela, but there was another voice, too. One I'd heard before. A man's voice, with a heavy Russian accent.

And there sat Aleksandr Petrovsky on the far end of the couch where I usually sat, regaling Carmela with a story that had her doubled over in fits of giggling. Matt sat next to him, his blue eyes riveted, obviously hanging on every fucking word.

Petrovsky took his time getting to the punch line, milking each and every detail for all the attention he could hog. Of course, when he finally got there, Matt and Carmela both roared. Petrovsky just grinned, accepting it as his due, like applause after a performance.

None of them even noticed I was there until Carmela finally looked up. "Why are you lurking in the doorway, Aaron? Come here and say hello to Aleks!"

Well, I had no choice now. Plastering on a smile, I walked in and held out my hand to Petrovsky. "How are you, maestro? Good to see you again."

"And you as well." He stood up, his own smile fading slightly.

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Was it my imagination or did he look the tiniest bit irritated? “I should be off to the airport. Please forgive my intrusion on your holiday. The next time I travel to the United States, I will be sure to buy a calendar.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Carmela said as he bent to kiss her hand. “You’re welcome here anytime.”

“Definitely,” Matt added. “C’mon, I’ll show you out.”

They chatted in the foyer for a minute or two until I heard the door open and close. Then Matt came bouncing back into the room. “That was a lot of fun. I had no idea he knew so much embarrassing gossip about people. I’d better watch my step.” He leaned in to kiss me. “Where’s the pie? Did you put it in the kitchen already?”

Shit. I knew I’d forgotten something. “Yeah, I did—in *my* kitchen. I must’ve left it on the counter. I’ll go home and get it. Shouldn’t take more than half an hour there and back.”

“The turkey’s going to dry out if we don’t get it on the table pretty quick. I guess it’s not the end of the world if we don’t have pie. Is it?” he added, looking at his mother.

Carmela shrugged. “I don’t care one way or the other.”

Suddenly it was as if all the air had been sucked out of the room. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s okay. Give me another ten minutes to finish getting everything ready.”

I’d been so distracted by Petrovsky, I hadn’t paid attention to the amazing smells in the air. The smoky aroma of roast turkey with dressing. Sage, celery and garlic. Apples and cranberries. Evidently Matt had outdone himself in the kitchen again.

Carmela and I chatted for a few minutes, but she seemed distracted now, even a bit deflated. I suppose I was a poor

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substitute for the mad Russian. When Matt called us in for dinner, I sent up a thousand prayers of gratitude.

Besides the turkey and dressing, we had mashed potatoes, candied yams, steamed asparagus, homemade cranberry sauce with apples, a green salad, and two different varieties of white wine. I stared at the table, goggle-eyed. "And you thought we'd need pie, too, after all this?"

"It is traditional," Matt said, filling a plate for Carmela. "Besides, we've got more than usual to celebrate this year."

"Is this the big surprise you've been teasing me with for the past three weeks? Well, go ahead. Spill."

"Not yet. I'm saving it for after."

Sighing, I cast a quick glance at Carmela. She had a rather sour look on her face. Was that because Matt hadn't told her yet, either, or because he had?

I took some turkey, dressing, salad and cranberry sauce and started stuffing my face. Everybody else seemed absorbed in their meals too, and no wonder—it was delectable. But eventually I had to come up for air.

"So," I asked, reaching for my glass of pinot grigio, "what was Petrovsky doing in San Francisco?"

"He's married to Colette Duplessis, the mezzo," Carmela supplied. "She's making her debut with the San Francisco Opera. *Samson et Dalila*. He flew in to see her opening night."

"And, of course, he had to stop in to see his friend Matt on the way home. Never mind the fact that it's Thanksgiving."

Matt gave me a look. "He's Russian, and he lives in France. He didn't know today was a holiday here. Besides, you heard him apologize."

"What for? You looked perfectly happy to see him."

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“Why shouldn’t I be?”

I shrugged. “No reason.”

“It actually wasn’t me he came to see. He wanted to meet Mom.”

Now it was my turn to give him a look. “Really? What happened to not wanting your colleagues to know who your parents are? Standing on your own two feet?”

“Aleks already knew about my background. He and Dad have been friends for years. When we had dinner in Paris, I told him to drop by anytime he was in town. He took me up on it. End of story.”

“Oh.” I picked up my fork again. “All right.”

That cast a pall over the rest of the meal. We chatted about mundane matters for the next half hour or so, then Matt and I got up to clear the table and bring in coffee.

It was finally time for Matt’s big news. Sucking in a deep breath, he glanced from me to Carmela and back again. Then he reached into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out an envelope, folded in half. It had Virgin Atlantic’s logo on it. He pushed it across the table to me. It was an airline ticket to London, leaving Sunday afternoon.

“I’m going to perform with the Idyllwild group for a couple of weeks,” he said.

I stared at the ticket, then back at Matt. “And you’re just telling me this now? Matt, I can’t drop what I’m doing and fly to London. I’m in the middle of—”

“The ticket’s for me. I’m going by myself. You’ve been telling me for weeks now that I can’t put my career on hold for your sake. I’ve finally decided to listen.”

I should’ve been proud. I should’ve been happy. Instead, I felt

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as if I'd just been hit in the face with a baseball bat. "But...you've already had such success with major orchestras. I don't understand why you're going back to being a guest soloist for a chamber group."

"I'm not. Derek injured himself a couple weeks ago. I'm stepping in as lead violin."

Appearing with them as a guest was one thing, but for a musician of Matt's caliber, this was a demotion. It was like going back to fucking grammar school. "Are you *serious*?"

"That's what I said," Carmela cut in, her tone dripping contempt. "Dieter practically had a heart attack when he found out. This is not a step forward for you, Matthew—in fact, quite the opposite. It could end up hurting your career."

I nodded. "I agree. And honestly, after all the work we've done to turn you into a top-flight soloist, I can't believe you'd even consider an engagement like this."

Matt stared at both of us, his expression hardening. "Because Derek's my friend, and he asked me."

"I had friends, too," Carmela said much more gently than before. "But if I'd accepted every engagement they offered me, I never would've made a name for myself."

"Maybe I don't want to make a name for myself. Not as a soloist, anyway."

I looked at Carmela. She looked at me. We both looked at Matt. "What do you mean?" I asked finally.

"Look, Aaron, you know how scared I get before I go onstage. I can't take it anymore. It's too much pressure. Maybe working with a small group rather than a huge orchestra will suit me better."

"Everyone gets stage fright," Carmela said. "Even the great

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ones. *Especially* the great ones. It's all part of the price we pay. It may take a few years, but eventually you'll grow out of it."

"A few *years*? I'll be dead of a stroke before then!" Matt shook his head. "I'm sorry. I appreciate everything you've both done for me, but I can't go through another tour like the last one. I've already signed the contract. I'm going to London, and that's that."

A surge of white-hot anger, barely held in check all evening, suddenly raced through me. I sprang to my feet, practically flinging the ticket back in Matt's face. "I don't know why you even bothered discussing it with us, if you're going to run off and do whatever the fuck you want anyway."

I took off down the hallway. Matt ran after me, catching up with me before I reached the front door.

"What the hell's the matter with you tonight?" he demanded. "You've been in a mood ever since you got here."

"Why don't you ask your *friend*, Aleks?"

His mouth dropped open. "Is that what this is really all about? I didn't even know he was coming. He just showed up."

"After you invited him."

"What, was I supposed to ask your permission first? I don't get it. First you tell me to make friends with my colleagues, then you have a fit when I actually spend time with them. Make up your fucking mind!"

"Spend time?" I spat. "Is that what you call it?"

He stared at me for a long moment, then latched onto my arm with a death-grip and dragged me into the living room, slamming the door behind us. "All right," he said, "let's get this out in the open. You honestly think I'm fucking Petrovsky—here in my mother's house, with her right down the hall? Do you really think I'm that cheap or that reckless?"

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“You aren’t, but he is. I’ve heard rumors.”

“So what? He’s famous. Famous people get gossiped about. Doesn’t mean it’s true.”

“Matt, he’s been courting you from the day you two met. I know the signs. First he praises your talent, then he takes you out to dinner. Now he’s trying to ingratiate himself with your family.”

With a sigh, he plopped onto the edge of the couch. “Aaron, how many times do I have to tell you I don’t want to be with anybody else? And believe me, I’ve had opportunities. Plenty of them.”

Well, that fucking hurt. “And you’ll have more opportunities in the future. Sooner or later, you’ll give in. That’s just the way it is.”

“You really believe that? You really think I’ll cheat on you?”

“It always happens when people spend a significant amount of time apart. You think I don’t know the real reason you insisted on dragging me along on that tour?”

“And that’s the real reason you don’t want me to go to London. After telling me over and over that I have to put my career ahead of you.” He stood up, shoving his hands in his pockets. “You know what I think? I think you want me to be unfaithful, so you can break up with me with a clear conscience.”

Smart, emotional, intuitive. No wonder he was such a great musician. His attack was always spot-on. “Maybe I do.”

“Okay.” He shrugged, biting his lip. His eyes had turned shiny-moist. “That’s it. Looks like there’s nothing else left to say.”

I nodded, plodding to the living room door like a sleepwalker. My feet felt like a pair of lead weights. Any moment I expected him to call me back, but he didn’t.

Through the foyer, then the front door, then downstairs. I made it to my car, climbed in and drove off. I was halfway home before

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I'd started shaking so badly I had to pull over.

CHAPTER 9

I didn't get a lot of sleep over the next couple of days. I didn't get out of my bathrobe, either. Didn't do much of anything except pet Terence when he crawled into my lap yowling for attention. By Sunday, I'd managed to get some class prep done, too, mostly for the sake of distraction. Five minutes later, I couldn't remember a thing I'd read.

Monday morning around ten there came a knock at my door. I couldn't imagine who it was—the only person who ever came over was Matt, and he'd already left for London.

I yanked open the door to find Marjorie, Carmela's caregiver, standing there. Down the steps, right in the middle of the walkway, sat Carmela in her wheelchair.

She gave me a look that could flay skin at fifty paces. "Would

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you explain to me why my son's been in tears for the past three days?"

Took a second or two for my sluggish brain to jump-start itself. But then her words finally sank in, accompanied by a ray of hope. "You mean...he didn't go to London?"

"Of course he went. He signed a contract. If he'd tried to back out, I would've boxed his ears from here to London myself." Her jaw tightened. "You still haven't answered me."

"This isn't the kind of conversation I'd like to have on my front porch."

"Fine, then. Come down here and carry me inside. That's the only way I'm getting up those steps."

She probably weighed a hundred-twenty pounds soaking wet, still heavy enough to give my back problems. But there was a small courtyard with a table, chairs and a small pond tucked between my apartment building and two others. It'd probably be deserted at this time of morning on a weekday. It lay around the corner on a completely level path.

I looked down at my sloppy attire, briefly considering running upstairs to change. *Oh, what the hell.* Carmela had already seen me. I didn't care if anyone else did.

I came downstairs and pointed the way. Carmela nodded, flicked the control on her chair and rolled along behind me at a sprightly clip. Marjorie walked back to the van.

I pulled out one of the wrought-iron chairs and sat down. It was nice out here. Calm. Peaceful. The pond made this soothing gurgling sound. There were at least a dozen goldfish swimming around in it. Funny, but I'd never noticed them before.

The weather was pleasant, for a change. It had rained last night, leaving the air with that fresh, crisp, scrubbed-clean scent. A patch

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of blue had opened up overhead, fluffy white-blue clouds circling around it. Amazing what you missed when you didn't leave your apartment for days on end.

"Hope I'm not distracting you from your cloud-gazing," Carmela cut in.

Firmly jolted back to reality, I let out a sigh. "Well, since you seem intent on chewing me out, why don't you go ahead and do it?"

"I cannot believe you, Aaron." Her face had gone red, her nostrils flaring. She looked like she was about to start breathing fire. "That you would accuse Matt of infidelity without a single shred of proof—"

"What, you mean he *told* you?"

"He didn't need to. I heard every word the two of you said—or shouted, more like—even through the living room door."

"Then you already know the story. What more do you need me to explain?"

"Your insecurity. Your damned *stupidity!*" Now she trembled with rage. A few deep breaths and she finally got it under control. "I know the age difference has been a difficult hurdle, but I thought you'd gotten past it. You both seemed happy when you left on Matt's tour. I don't understand what happened."

"Reality happened. The outside world happened." I took my own deep breath. "Our relationship worked when we were teacher and student, but we're not anymore. Now Matt's got a potentially world-class career ahead of him, and I'm just holding him back. He should be taking the music world by storm, the way I always dreamed of doing."

"Instead of playing first chair in a small chamber group, which seems to be what he prefers," she said softly. "We ganged up on

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him the other night. We shouldn't have done that. It's his career. We should abide by his decisions and stop pushing him into becoming a soloist simply because that's what we were."

"But... Christ, Carmela, it kills me to see him wasting all that potential. Matt could be another Heifetz, another Mutter. Another...Branciaga."

She smiled. "I'm flattered. But we're not the ones who have to get up on that stage. If it's that much hell for him, it's not worth it. Not for all the money or applause in the world."

"I suppose not. Too bad I can't tell him. I doubt he'd listen to anything I have to say now."

Her expression hardened again. "I still don't understand where you got the idea Matt was cheating on you. I can't imagine he's ever given you cause."

"He didn't. But Petrovsky showed a lot of interest in him when they played together in Paris. Matt kept insisting it was only professional interest, but when I saw him sitting there on your couch, I saw red. And not just because he's Russian." I forced a laugh. "I know Matt would never lie to me about that. I guess my imagination got carried away."

"Matt loves you very much, Aaron. I've never seen him so happy with anyone—at least, up until these past few weeks. He had quite a few boyfriends before you, but to my knowledge, he was never unfaithful. The problem was usually the other way around."

I cast a wistful glance up at the sky. "Well, he doesn't have either problem now. He's free as a bird."

* * *

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My flight got into London around six in the morning on the twenty-ninth. I'd slept a little on the plane, but I was still pretty wiped when the hotel shuttle dropped me off. I checked in and trudged up to my room. As hotel rooms went, it was fine. Not super-fancy like the Dorchester, but not a dump either. A bed, a shower, a sink, a chair. Everything I needed, except someone to talk to. Someone to wrap me in his arms and tell me I'd be fine.

My first rehearsal with the Idyllwild group was scheduled for tonight at eight. Enough time to get some rest, then get in a little practicing. I stripped down to my briefs, peeled back the thin covers and took a dive right into my pillow.

That was the last thing I remembered until I cracked open my eyes again. My watch read a quarter till four. A quick shower, then I sat down to run through the violin parts on two Mozart string quartets, a Haydn sonata, a Boccherini string quartet and the solo violin part of the *Four Seasons*. A lot to cover in one rehearsal, and I wanted to be ready.

The hotel's room service menu was non-existent, so I darted across the street to a pub. Turned out, they had pretty decent shepherd's pie. A pint of bitter on tap sounded tempting, but I stuck with water. I was still too tired to indulge if I wanted to be any good for playing tonight.

Went back to the hotel to grab the Strad, then hailed a cab to take me to Derek and his girlfriend Marya's place in Crouch End. It was a funky little cottage at the end of a narrow street. Looked like the witch's house from *Hansel and Gretel*. I could even see the fireplace glowing through the front window.

Derek greeted me with a big wide grin the moment the door swung open. "Hey, you made it!"

"Just barely." I was about to hug him until I saw his arm in a

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sling. “How you doing?”

“It’s healing. The doctor doesn’t think I’ll have any problems, but...touch wood.” He shrugged. “Come in and say hello. Everyone’s here.”

The living room was as cozy as it looked from the outside—in other words, small. They’d had to push the couch and coffee table off to one side to clear enough space for four chairs and music stands, placed in a circle in the center of the room. Marya played the cello, Nigel the viola, Colin the double bass. And then there was me, stepping in for Derek.

Marya walked up and gave me a kiss on the cheek. She was this adorable blonde pixie with sparkling green eyes and an infectious smile. Just being around her made me want to smile, too. “I can’t tell you how glad we are to have you here, Matt. Sorry we have to rehearse in such a cramped space. We’re not quite solvent enough yet to hire a practice studio.”

“Looks fine to me. All we need are four walls, chairs and sheet music, right?”

“Well, we all know you’re accustomed to more posh venues these days,” Colin said in his lilting Welsh accent, looking up from wrestling his bass out of its case.

Oh, terrific. Was I going to get razzed about my so-called brilliant career all night?

I kept smiling and took my seat. Soon the air was filled with the usual groans and twangs of four stringed instruments tuning up. Sounded like we were ready.

We began with one of the Mozart quartets. Started off a bit rough, but by the end of the first movement, we’d found our collective rhythm and settled into it comfortably. I loved the violin part’s delicacy and lyricism. The entire piece was perfectly

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balanced, requiring a light touch. It would crumple under the more dramatic approach needed for a piece like the Brahms. Maybe that was why I was so drawn to the classical repertoire. Of all the music I'd played lately, this was the most challenging.

It was like a conversation, trading phrases back and forth. Sometimes the violin took center stage, and sometimes it merely supported the other instruments. I liked not being constantly stuck in the spotlight. Here no one stared at me, as if they were waiting for me to fuck up. We were just four musicians working together as a team.

We finished the quartet with a flourish, bursting out laughing. I think most of it was relief—at least, mine was. Even Derek, who'd been sitting in the corner listening, chimed in with, “Well done, all of you.”

Then we segued into the Haydn.

As the rehearsal went on, I realized I wasn't looking at the music anymore. I didn't need to. I knew it so well, it poured through me like a river. I could finally let myself relax. The music and my fellow musicians carried me through, natural as breathing.

I felt a little sad when we finally finished. I stole a look at my watch as I packed away the Strad and did a double take. Three-and-a-half hours had gone by. Felt like five minutes.

We folded up the music stands and pushed the furniture back, then sat down for tea. Everyone seemed happy with how the rehearsal had gone. My shoulders ached from all the backslapping I got.

“Take it easy,” I said, inching away from Colin, the worst offender. “Maybe we should wait till after the performance to start congratulating each other.”

“When you're a bunch of poor unknowns like us, you take all

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the praise you can get.” Nigel peered over his glasses with a grin. “Of course, you don’t have that problem.”

I rolled my eyes. “C’mon, knock it off. I’m no different from anybody in this room.”

“That’s not what the *Times* said,” Marya put in. “Or the Paris and Berlin papers.”

“Don’t worry,” Derek added with a wink. “We know you’re just like us—a penniless bohemian at heart, albeit with nicer clothes and better reviews.” I knew he was joking, though I’d still noticed a hint of sadness in his tone. No wonder. I’d be pretty depressed at having to watch from the sidelines while someone else took my place.

The rest of the week’s rehearsals went pretty well, too. It wasn’t until Friday’s dress rehearsal at the Wigmore that it dawned on me—I hadn’t been nervous in days. Even now, standing on a stage where I’d been paralyzed with fear a few weeks ago, I felt...okay. Calm. Relaxed, even. I knew what I was about to play. I knew my fellow musicians would support me if I faltered. For the first time, I had nothing to be scared of.

Of course, that was easy to say now, with no audience in the house. Tomorrow night would be my real trial by fire.

* * *

Mozart to start, then Haydn, just like in rehearsal. The audience seemed to enjoy it—at least, their applause sounded enthusiastic. The auditorium was roughly two-thirds full. Not fantastic, but not disappointing either. I had a case of butterflies when we started, but they’d stopped fluttering by the time we finished the Haydn. I took a breath and focused on Marya, Nigel and Colin. Then we

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launched into the Boccherini.

The cello part was most prominent in this piece, and Marya played it with stunning skill and beauty. At the end, the audience heaved a long collective sigh before breaking out in wild applause—the ultimate compliment. Marya’s fire-engine blush lasted for the entire twenty-minute interval.

And now, time for my acid test—Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* arranged for string quartet and *basso continuo*. On the upside, I’d played it with the Idyllwild group before, and we’d rehearsed the hell out of it this past week. I knew the music in my sleep. On the downside, so did the audience. It was one of the most well loved pieces in the entire baroque canon. Plus, I’d already recorded it. Which meant this performance had to be at least as good—or better.

Okay. Acknowledge the pressure, then set it aside. Walk out there. Take a bow. Sit down. Start playing.

Forty minutes had never flown by so fast. We played like demons, carved from the same hive mind, whipping through the more tumultuous passages with furious joy, wringing every last drop of sweetness from the *adagios*. We practically *breathed* as one. I held my bow as if it were alive, the violin strings throbbing beneath my fingers.

And I wasn’t afraid, not for a second. Not until we reached the end, and the audience jumped to its feet, and I knew I had to stand to take my bow. My knees went weak. I couldn’t get up. But then Marya took my hand and pulled me from my chair. I walked to the edge of the stage with her and Nigel and Colin, and I was okay. Better than okay.

There was only one thing that could’ve made this evening more perfect—and I’d left him behind in San Francisco.

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* * *

Once we'd had the chance to shower and change, the four of us went out to the lobby to sign CDs. I froze in my tracks when I saw the crowd. Had to be at least a hundred people.

My hand got a cramp after the first fifty, but everyone else kept signing, so I did, too. It was such a fucking amazing feeling, gazing into the happy, excited faces of people who'd just heard us perform. I'd never actually *seen* the audience when I'd played any of my tour dates. The stage lights had been too bright.

This was what I'd been so afraid of? Ordinary people who'd come out on a freezing December evening and paid good money to hear us play? People whose lives we'd brightened simply by doing what we loved best? God, how could I be such a fucking idiot?

"This is fantastic," Marya crowed, bouncing in her chair. "Who knew we had so many admirers?"

I grinned. "No kidding. I could get used to this."

"I thought you already had," said a voice in French—a low-pitched, sexy voice with a familiar Russian accent.

I looked up. My jaw nearly hit the table. "Aleks! What're you doing here?"

"I had this evening off, so I decided to fly over and hear your concert. Well worth the trip, by the way."

"Thanks. I appreciate you taking the time. I know how busy you are."

"Anything for a friend." He smiled. I'd never paid much attention to his teeth before. They were long, and really, really white. "If you're free afterward, I haven't had supper yet. Care to join me?"

I'd only had a bowl of soup and an apple tonight, and that was

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two hours before the concert. I was so scared that I'd be scared, I didn't want to chance barfing all over my tux. But now... Yeah, I could eat—especially if Petrovsky was paying. I was tired of pub food.

"I'd like that." I glanced over what was left of the crowd. Only a few more people. "If you don't mind waiting? This shouldn't take much longer."

"Of course not. Enjoy your success. I'll wait for you over by the coffee kiosk."

We finished up within half an hour. Naturally, the group couldn't wait to meet Aleks, so I had to introduce them. We made idle chit chat for a few more minutes, then Aleks and I headed out.

He had a car and driver waiting for him. We climbed in back and off we went. Aleks didn't even bother telling the driver where to go. A few minutes later, we pulled up in front of the Athenaeum Hotel and headed right for the dining room.

I'd kind of hoped we'd go somewhere smaller and less fancy, but it was his dime. He murmured a few words to the maître d', who promptly seated us at a quiet corner table. A bottle of hundred-proof Stolichnaya appeared within five minutes. Aleks offered me a shot, but I passed. I'd tried the stuff before. It was like drinking battery acid. Then he waved the waiter over and ordered for both of us, without even asking what I wanted.

"So, are you enjoying your time with this chamber group?" he asked once the waiter had brought us our *salade Niçoise*. I picked the anchovies off mine and concentrated on the seared tuna and artichoke hearts.

"Yeah, it's been very illuminating...and liberating. I like being part of a group. Makes me a lot less nervous than standing out there in front of an orchestra by myself."

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“Performing before an orchestra makes you nervous? I never would’ve guessed.”

“Well, thanks, but...yes, it does. I thought I was going to vomit before I went onstage in Paris.”

“And then you went out and gave that exquisite performance of the Tchaikovsky. I’m doubly impressed.”

“Thanks again. But you probably shouldn’t expect me back anytime soon.”

“Ah, that’s a shame. I’d hoped to have you repeat the Brahms in the spring.”

“I don’t know if I’m ready for that yet. I may not be for a while.”

“After all the hard work you’ve put in? What does Professor Parrish think about this decision?”

Like I needed to be reminded. “Same thing you do, probably.”

“Really? And what do I think of it, since you already seem to know?”

“That I’m wasting my time. Squandering my potential.”

He shrugged, and knocked back another shot of Stoli. He’d already had three, and his speech wasn’t even slurred. “Yes. As a matter of fact, I agree.”

“Sorry. I’m not changing my mind.”

“I assume you’re not changing your mind about the Deutsche Grammophon contract either?”

That made me sit straight up. “How the hell did you know about that?”

“There are very few secrets in this business. Artists of our caliber occupy a rarefied, insular world. Almost incestuous. Your parents must’ve shielded you from the worst of it.” He popped an olive in his mouth and chewed. “I called DG after our first

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rehearsal and told them they should send someone to hear you play. In fact, I'd hoped to conduct one of your recordings. But now it seems that's not to be."

"There's a clause in their contract that I just can't live with."

"I know which one you mean. It was in mine, too. I had them strike it out."

I stared at him. "I doubt we're talking about the same thing."

"The one about no public displays of affection with other men?"

Holy shit. "Th-That's the one." I dropped my gaze to my plate for a few seconds. "So, um... not that it's any of my business, but what did your wife think about you...striking out the clause?"

"I would never be so indiscreet as to be seen kissing a lover in public. Colette knows that. Anyway, it's not really an issue for us. We have an arrangement."

"Oh." It came out like a fucking mouse's squeak.

He laughed. "I can see you're shocked, but it actually works quite well. Colette and I have been married ten years. We spend a large portion of any given year apart. During those times when we're not together, we have permission to amuse ourselves. When we're in the same city, we remain monogamous. Very civilized, very simple."

The waiter came by with our entrées. It was some kind of salmon dish, drowned in a watery-looking cream sauce. I usually liked salmon, but tonight its smell made me queasy. I pushed my plate away.

My hand still throbbed from signing all those CDs. I rested it on the table, stretching my fingers to work out what remained of the stiffness. After a few bites, Aleks set down his fork and reached over, placing his hand on top of mine. It was warm and

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strong. I should've felt reassured. Flattered. Aleks was a sexy, intelligent man—and yes, I was attracted to him. Part of me was, anyway. The rest of me just wanted to get the fuck out of here.

“A single phone call, and I can take care of that DG contract for you. I can get you any engagement you want. You're an incredibly talented young man, Matt. You should have the world on a plate. I can give it to you.”

Time froze. The room around me screeched to a halt. My brain whirled as if it'd been run through a blender. So this was it. I was being offered a choice—one I thought I didn't even want five minutes ago. But I did want it. I wanted it so fucking badly it made my whole body ache like a broken tooth.

Sleep with Aleks, and I could have the career I'd been working for since I was ten. No reason I couldn't. I wasn't scared anymore. If I could perform with the Idyllwild, I could perform on my own. All my protests were bullshit. I'd held those Paris and Berlin audiences in the palm of my hand without even trying. And I could do much more now.

But if I said yes, it wouldn't be because I liked him. No way was I getting involved in a serious affair of the heart with a married man. No messy emotional attachments. It'd be a business transaction, pure and simple. Which would make me tantamount to a whore.

Just thinking about it made me feel filthy. Sordid. Cheap. The same way I'd felt when Aaron had flung his suspicions in my face.

Oh, Jesus. Aaron. He was right all along. He'd seen this coming, and I hadn't listened. I'd been so stupid. So fucking arrogant and blind. All I wanted now was to fall into his arms and beg his forgiveness—if he didn't slam the door in my face first.

“Does this kind of approach usually work?” I asked finally, still

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staring at Aleks' hand engulfing mine. So much for no public displays of affection.

Aleks shrugged. "The world is full of ambitious, handsome young musicians. I've had a role in launching many such careers."

"Good." I pushed back my chair, tossing my napkin on the table. "Then you shouldn't have any problem getting another dinner date."

"Matt—"

"Thanks for your offer, Aleks, but I'd rather do this my way. Don't call me again, and don't drop by my house. And in case you haven't figured it out, I *definitely* won't be coming back to Paris anytime soon."

Aleks sat back in his chair, his lips slightly parted. He actually looked a bit stunned. I guess people didn't say no to him very often. "Your choice, of course. But I think you'll come to regret it."

"I doubt that," I said. Then I turned and walked out.

CHAPTER 10

One morning I woke up, trudged downstairs to feed Terence, then went to the fridge to scrounge up something for my own breakfast. There was nothing inside but an expired carton of milk. I slammed the door shut with a grunt. That's what I got for living on takeout and cold cereal the past few weeks.

I showered, dressed, turned up my coat collar against the morning chill and plodded three blocks down to the supermarket. Nine in the morning on a Friday and the place was packed. I almost got run over twice trying to walk through the parking lot. *What the hell?*

Then I saw the list of specials on the sandwich board in front of the store. Butterball turkey. Ham. Rib roast. Eggnog. *Shit.* It was Christmas Eve. Without teaching every day—or Matt—to keep me

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grounded, I'd completely lost track of time.

Inside it was an even bigger madhouse, the aisles jammed bumper to bumper with shopping carts. I picked up milk, bread, eggs and a few more staples, then got out as quickly as I could. It was only when I got home that I realized I hadn't grabbed anything for dinner, unless I wanted to eat scrambled eggs and toast. Well, I wasn't about to go back. The little Italian joint around the corner would have to do.

I puttered around the apartment, trying to keep busy for the rest of the day. Trying to keep my mind off tomorrow. I'd stopped making a big deal out of the holidays after Kevin had passed, but this year I'd actually been looking forward to celebrating Christmas again. Of course, that was before Matt's and my blowout at Thanksgiving.

I hadn't even bothered getting out my decorations. And, amazingly, I hadn't received a single card. People without partners tend to be ignored at the holidays. Whatever. By now I was used to it.

By five o'clock, I was pretty damn hungry, so I headed out to the Italian place. It was nice and toasty inside, the air filled with the buzz of voices and tantalizing aromas of garlic and pasta sauce. I had to wait about fifteen minutes while they made room for me at a tiny table near the front window. It must have started raining again. Everybody outside rushed to and fro with their jacket hoods up, frantically trying to finish their last-minute shopping. At least there was one upside to not having any plans.

I ordered the cheese lasagna and a glass of cabernet and then sat there staring out the window, my gaze focused on nothing. My wine arrived. I sipped; I watched. About twenty minutes later, my lasagna made its appearance. I took a few bites, its flavor barely

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registering. Oh, well. I had to fill my empty belly somehow, so I pressed on.

The restaurant's front door hovered at the edge of my peripheral vision. People had been parading in and out ever since I arrived, though I hadn't paid that much attention. But suddenly something familiar caught my eye. I looked up and over—and there was Matt.

He wore that same dark blue rain slicker I remembered from that night he'd kissed me outside Twin Peaks, the one that was almost the same color as his eyes. Covered in rain, just like that night. Even the ends of his hair were wet. He reminded me of a soaked puppy, dripping all over the damn floor.

Then he flashed me that huge, brilliant grin of his, and my heart skidded to a halt. He strode over, grabbed a chair from a recently vacated table, and sat right down. Of course, he didn't bother to *ask* first.

"I dropped by your apartment, but you didn't answer the door," he said breathlessly. "Good thing the bus stop's on this block, or I wouldn't have seen you through the window."

Then I noticed the big, beribboned bouquet in his hand. Red roses, baby's breath and sprigs of holly. "What's that for?" I asked, once I could form words again.

"Peace offering. Sex bribe. Christmas present. Take your pick." He kept smiling as he unzipped and shrugged off his wet jacket. "I brought you back one of the Idyllwild CDs from London, too."

Ah, a timely reminder. "How was your trip?"

"Great. Best concerts I've ever done—and that includes Paris and Berlin. I can't wait to go back."

"I'm glad. You deserve every success."

He reached over to take my hand. I let him do it, but I didn't

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entwine our fingers, probably because I was still a bit in shock. After all those awful, unfair things I'd said, all the paranoid doubt and mistrust I'd hurled at him, I couldn't believe he was really here.

"I shouldn't have given you such a hard time about working with that chamber group. It's your career. You have to manage it as you see fit."

"That's what I told Dieter last week, although I think he was relieved when I said I intend to mix it up a bit. Jacqueline du Pre played chamber music as well as *concertos*, and it didn't hurt her career. Perlman does it. So does Zukerman. No reason I can't do it, too."

"Sounds like you've given this some thought."

"I had a lot of time for that while I was in London. After I was done with the concerts, I flew over to Berlin for a few days to see Dad and finalize some business stuff. Like signing the DG contract."

My fork was still in my other hand. It hit my plate with a clatter. "Then...you're okay with that no-PDA clause?"

"Hell, no. I had them strike it out. Or rather, Dad did." He grabbed my glass of water and took a sip. "His contract with them is up at the end of next year. He told them to forget about resigning him unless they took care of his son. They caved."

"What happened to doing it all on your own?"

"There's determination, and there's plain old pigheadedness. I've finally figured out the difference. There's nothing wrong with accepting help from people who've got my best interests at heart. Dad wants to take a more active role in my life. It's time I let him."

"I'm glad to hear you say that. I'm sure your mother was, too."

"Yeah, she was. This has been a good year for us all, despite a

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few rocky patches.” He looked down at the roses, fingering the red ribbon tied around them. “I owe you an apology for... Well, a lot of things. I should’ve listened to you more—especially about Petrovsky. You were completely right about him.”

“O-Oh.” I’d barely had the chance to get over my shock, and now he hit me with this. “Was I?”

“He came over to London to hear my first concert and took me out to dinner. That’s when he made his move.”

My heart plummeted. “I hope you both got what you wanted from the encounter.”

“What’re you talking about? Do you really think I’d come see you on Christmas Eve to tell you I’d fucked someone else?”

I stared at him. “You weren’t even tempted?”

“Sure I was—for about thirty seconds. That’s when I realized I meant nothing to him, except as one more scalp for his belt. I don’t need Petrovsky or anything he has to offer. All I need is myself, and you.” He gave my hand a gentle squeeze. “Think you can forgive me for being such a fucking idiot? Because without you, my life’s kind of...empty.”

Flattering, but not exactly what I’d expected to hear. In fact, it even alarmed me a bit. “That’s an overstatement, don’t you think?”

“Not really. I mean, I love my mom, but I can’t spend the rest of my life taking care of her. She knows it, too. It’s time for me to get out there and do what I was meant to do. And I know you can’t travel with me all year, but your face is the first one I want to see when I get home from all my future tours. Whether that happens or not... Well, it’s up to you.”

Laughter began bubbling up out of me—relieved, joyful laughter. I suddenly felt fifty pounds lighter. “No pressure there, right?”

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Flashing that gorgeous smile, Matt scooped up the roses and fell to his knees before me. Every head in the restaurant snapped around to gawk at us. Every drop of blood in my body rushed immediately to my face. I didn't give a damn.

"Aaron Parrish, I love you, and I want the whole world to know it. I loved you when you yelled at me and kicked my ass and made me practice so hard I couldn't see straight. I loved you when you put up with my stupid, juvenile fears and told me everything would be fine. I love it when you take me to bed and make me come. I want to do it every day for the rest of our lives."

A deep breath, then he plunged ahead. "I want to live with you. And when they finally get around to changing the idiotic laws in this state, I want to marry you."

If I'd been stunned before, now I was completely bowled over. "What about what *I* want?"

He grinned. "As long as it's the same thing, we're good."

"It is," I said softly. I took the roses from him, then leaned down to claim his lips in a kiss. He tasted fresh and clean, like the rain. Like life. Like love.

The room sent up a collective gasp, followed by a roar of whoops and applause. Matt and I burst out laughing. Then he sprang to his feet and took a bow.

"What happened to your stage fright?" I asked.

He pulled me up into his arms and kissed me again. "I got over it."

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.

To learn more about Cat and her writing, please visit her website at

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* * *

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