

Reverie

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REVERIE

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*For Vanessa, who told me I could.
For Tom, who told me I should.
For Janet, who told me I would.*

Part One: Julia

1

If it's true you don't get a second chance to make a good first impression, then I'm in serious trouble here. I'm late, I'm out of breath, and I look like a wild, sweaty mess as I sprint the final length of the hallway to the concert hall; the concert hall where my audition should have started nearly ten minutes ago. All around me, clusters of musicians are loitering in my path.

"Excuse me!" I gasp as I dart in and around them, skirt hiked-up and long strands of red hair plastered to my damp face. All the while, there is what looks like a small coffin strapped to my back.

"James? Julia James?" I hear my name being called from somewhere in the distance.

"Here!" I yell, not bothering to excuse myself as I become entangled in a gaggle of pianists.

"Last call for Julia James, cellist, McInnes Conservatory!"

I'm closer to the voice now.

"Here! Wait, I'm here!" I bellow with as much volume as I can muster.

I spot the girl with the clipboard twenty feet in front of me, but she steps inside the auditorium doors before I can get her attention.

No. No way I'm going to get this close and blow it now. I dig deep and summon the extra burst of energy I need to propel myself through the heavy doors before they can bang closed in my face.

"I'm here!" I yell, too loudly, I realize, as three sets of eyes swivel in my direction from the judges' table. But that doesn't stop me. Clipboard Girl has to duck into a row of plush red seats just to avoid being mowed down as I head straight for them.

An older man peers at me curiously over his horn-rimmed glasses. God, I must look a disaster.

“Miss James?” he asks a little skeptically.

I nod, too breathless to speak for the moment.

“You’re late Miss James,” says the woman next to him. She puckers her mouth in distaste while she scowls at me.

“Yes, ma’am,” I begin, still wheezing. “I apologize. You see, I couldn’t get a cab and I had to run here...”

Sourpuss leans forward across her table of judgment.

“Miss James, if I were you, I wouldn’t waste what’s left of my audition slot making excuses.”

Seriously? If this woman had any idea what kind of a morning I’ve had... But, she doesn’t know, and I’m quite sure she doesn’t care.

“Yes, of course,” I say, swallowing my irritation.

I drop the casket-esque case where I stand, and pop it open to reveal my cello and bow. I grab both more roughly than I should, and scramble up the stage steps. The enormous platform, which usually holds over a hundred musicians at a time, is empty, save for a single folding chair and a music stand. They are dead center, and my shoes clomp noisily as I make my way across the floorboards to sit down. I can feel the spotlights hot and bright above me, no doubt accentuating my disheveled appearance. But that, I realize, is the least of my problems. In my haste to get up on stage, I have left my music folder down with my case. Damn! If I try to go back and get it, they’ll probably end the audition altogether.

What am I going to do now?

I take a deep breath and try to suppress the wave of panic that is rising within me. I’m just going to have to play something from memory.

It’s okay. I’m okay. I can do this.

With that thought, I close my eyes and give the slightest nod of my head as I set my fingers free to dance across the fingerboard. In my right hand, the bow is an extension of my arm. I swing it effortlessly over each string, digging in; grabbing hold, pivoting and leaping like a gymnast on the uneven bars. I coax and tease and pull the notes from my instrument, fingers rocking back and forth from string to string.

The Prelude from Bach’s Cello Suite No. 1 feels as if it is pouring out of me and spilling into the theatre. It is only when the very last note has died away that I’m able to open my eyes again and, when I do, they are all staring at me. And I mean staring. Like in disbelief over what they’ve just heard. I’m not quite sure what to do next, so I just stare back at them silently, waiting. Finally, Glasses Guy clears his throat and speaks.

“Thank you, Julia. Thank you very much. I hope the rest of your day is a little less hectic.”

I stand up and speak in a voice that sounds tiny in the vast, empty space of the concert hall.

“Thank you all for your time. I apologize again for being late.”

I pick up the cello, which is almost as tall as I am, and take it back off the stage to return to its case. As I do, I can still feel their eyes on me, and it’s freaking me out. I can’t get back up the aisle and through the double doors fast enough. I breathe more easily back out in the corridor, but I really need a minute to decompress, so I turn in the opposite direction from where I came in. When I find an empty bit of hallway, I set the cello case down and stand with my back against the wall. Slowly, I let myself slip down into a sitting position on the floor, closing my eyes and trying to steady my frantic pulse.

“That bad?” asks a winded voice.

I open my eyes and he’s standing there, bent over, palms on knees as he tries to catch his breath. My best friend, Matthew Ayers, is looking at me expectantly.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, momentarily forgetting my own problems. “You’re supposed to be in rehearsal! You didn’t blow it off to come hear my audition, did you? Matthew, you just got that job...”

“Just hold on a second, will you?” he says, straightening up and holding up a hand to stop me.

It’s funny how all of our lives, people have been surprised to find out Matthew is a viola player. It’s like they think that classical musicians are supposed to be pasty, geeky and dull. Well, that’s certainly not the case with this particular classical musician. Someone who didn’t know him would probably believe he’s one of the best tennis players in the world before they’d believe he’s one of the best violists. He’s tall and muscular with thick, light brown hair that seems to be perpetually disheveled. Matthew is forever raking his hands through it in a losing battle for control. There’s nothing fancy, or pretty, or overworked about Matthew Ayers. He’s handsome in that easy, casual way.

Right now, he seems to just fold in on himself as he slips down to join me on the floor. When we are eye-to-eye, his amber to my emerald, I’m flooded with a sense of relief. I don’t know why he’s here, I’m just glad he is.

“I didn’t skip rehearsal,” he reassures me. “I just asked if we could skip the coffee break and wrap it up early instead. They were fine with that, so as soon as we were done, I hauled ass down here to try and catch your audition. I actually snuck up into the balcony, but you were already gone. One of the pages said you

went this way. She also said you nearly mowed her down,” he adds with a slight smile to his lips.

“Yeah, well, I was late and she was in my way,” I grumble.

“How late is late?” he asks with a hint of concern.

“I barely made it in there. That page was starting to cross my name off the list as a ‘No Show,’ but I ignored her and went straight to the judges’ table.

“Did they let you play?”

“Yeah. But I only got five minutes.”

His brows shoot up in disbelief.

“God, that’s barely enough time to get tuned!”

“Who tuned?” I cry. “Matthew, that five minutes included apologizing, unpacking and getting my butt on the stage. And, to make matters worse, I didn’t bring my music up with me. The only piece I could think of to play was the Bach Prelude.”

He considers this for a few seconds.

“Okay, well, that’s not such a bad thing is it? I mean, you kill that piece every time you play it.”

I shrug and roll my eyes.

“I don’t know. I played it well enough, I guess, but it was only like three minutes. Is that enough time to compete for a spot in the Kreisler International Music Competition? I mean, everyone else got here on time, and was able to play whole movements for the committee. I don’t know that they’re even willing to judge me based on what I did,” I say dejectedly.

He drapes his arm across my shoulders and I sink into his broad chest. This is a safe place for me.

“I had a feeling something was wrong when you didn’t pick up your cell this morning, so I called the lobby. Marcus told me he wasn’t able to get you a cab in the rain and that you were going to try and run the twelve blocks here.”

“Still, you shouldn’t have come,” I protest.

He shrugs.

“I was worried about you. I just wanted to make sure you got here okay.”

I shake my head, not sure if I should be touched or furious. In the end, I give him a kiss on the cheek and am rewarded with the sweet smile that makes those amber eyes crinkle. We grew up together in some pretty tough circumstances, and there is no one on this earth that I trust, admire, and love more than Matthew. For him, it would have been an easy move out of the friend zone and into ‘lovers’ territory. Not so much for me, though. I lost too much, too early on. If our relationship becomes romantic and things don’t work out, we

could lose everything. And I'm simply not willing to jeopardize the only stable, loving relationship I have ever known. It's been a constant source of conflict between us for years.

"Come on. Let's go get something to eat. If I know you, you were probably too nervous to have your breakfast, and now you're starving," he says.

I smile sheepishly, I'm always starving.

He gets to his feet and offers me a hand up before grabbing my cello case and swinging it easily over his shoulders. As we walk back down the hallway that I sprinted not a half-hour ago, I have the luxury of taking in a lot of what I missed the first time. Musicians are everywhere, chattering excitedly, pacing nervously. There are a lot of us, and not just cellists. This year, the Kreisler categories include piano, violin and French horn, too. We've all worked so hard to get to this point, and it's just the beginning. Even if I'm lucky enough to make this cut, there are semi-final and final rounds still to come.

"Look," I say, pointing inside one of the warm-up rooms as we pass. "There are Jeremy and Cal from the horn section. I should have known they'd be auditioning too."

I catch Cal's eye and give a quick wave. He's playing, but manages to convey a hello with a lift of the eyebrows and tilt of the chin. I know that Jeremy sees us too, but he doesn't give me a second glance.

Matthew doesn't even bother to look.

"Good for them," he mumbles, gently pulling me along out of the building and into the crisp fall air.

2

The McInnes Conservatory of Music is my home away from home. It's not quite three blocks from the illustrious Juilliard School, but the two couldn't be more different. McInnes doesn't offer its students high-rise dorms looking out over the Hudson, or a fitness center. There are no high-tech, climate controlled practice rooms equipped with Steinway grand pianos.

Most people walk right past the unremarkable building which houses McInnes, thinking it's just another New York City public school. That's probably because it was exactly that before the conservatory took over the grim space with its cinderblock walls and yellowed linoleum floors. But the thing about McInnes is that you don't come here for the amenities, you come here because it's intimate. There's no getting lost in the crowd here. Although, today is one day when I'd welcome the opportunity to do exactly that.

It's been a few days now since the first round of Kreisler tryouts, and with dozens of McInnes students in the running, the entire building is buzzing. Pianists are comparing notes, violinists are gossiping, and my cello colleagues are passing judgment on one another's performances. It's a musician-eat-musician world over here in Lincoln Center. Personally, I'm trying to keep a low profile because I don't want to hear the insincere good luck wishes. I don't want to see their glances, or notice their giggles and whispers. I'm talented enough, and lucky enough, to sit first cello in a world-class conservatory, but that doesn't give me an advantage around here. Quite the opposite, actually. All it does is put a target on my back. There are more than a dozen other cellists walking around the building at this very moment who would happily push me under a bus to move up a chair or two in the McInnes Conservatory hierarchy.

It doesn't help matters that I'm a little shy and embarrass easily. I have a hard time being the center of attention- not a great trait to have when you're in my line of work. So, I avoid orchestra politics, I don't sleep around with my professors and I don't pay attention to the petty gossip and rumors that always

seem to be whirling around me. You'd think staying above the fray would make people respect me. Not so much. Instead, they call me *'The Mouse'* behind my back.

For now, I just pretend to be invisible and make my way quickly and quietly through the halls, up the stairs, and into one of the oldest, dingiest practice rooms in the city. Since they constructed new ones downstairs, very few people bother to come up here anymore. I'm alone as I slip into my usual spot at the far end of the hall, and unpack my cello. I don't bother with the music stand, because I won't need it for this little exercise. Once I'm settled, bow in hand and instrument between my knees, I reach over to the light switch on the wall behind me and turn off the buzzing fluorescent lights above. I'm sitting in complete darkness.

If I can't see the music to read it, then I have to recall it from somewhere deep inside of me. I have to play it by feel, rather than sight. With a breath and a nod, my fingers begin their journey up and down the fingerboard. Bach makes me stretch, and reach and work for every note. But it's not just about hitting the right place on the right string at the right time. It's also about how you land on that string. The passages can be quick, which means I have to be decisive. My fingers are committed, moving deftly across the four strings in a blur; then there are the melodies that linger on each string. The bow in my right hand draws them out, but it's the left hand that does the heavy lifting, each finger rocking in place or, almost imperceptibly, from side to side, giving that long bowed note the most delicate of quavers.

Here, in the darkness, it's almost as if the cello and I are a single entity. I supplement the instrument's delicate panels of wood, and tough lengths of gut string with my own flesh, blood, and breath. I inhale every phrase, and my entire body moves in a circular pattern, cello lovingly embraced between my knees. It takes me to places I don't usually allow myself to go, places buried deep in the back of my mind. My mother lives here, in this place where the music brings me. She's a young woman, not much older than I am now. I can see her pretty, fair face. She has freckles like me, and a head full of coppery curls. I imagine her leaning over me and tucking me in. She brushes the hair from my forehead and tells me to have sweet dreams. But they are not sweet at all. As my bow slices across the strings, I hear her and my father yelling through the night. I dig into the Bach harder, recalling the crash of objects hurled and the smack of a hand on someone's face. Whose? I don't know. My fingers move frantically now, recklessly. The music could break apart and shatter in an instant. But it doesn't. It slows and begins the lament. The crying. Her tears. There it is. He slapped her, this time. The cello is a wordless voice, heaving and sighing with the weight of her sorrow.

The bow carries my fear with it as it swings to each string in turn. They are so volatile. They cannot hold our fragile life together. It just spirals out of control, picking up speed again, until it reaches a fever pitch.

Without warning, my hand slips across the D string, lurching forward and sending my bow flying across the room. It hits the floor with a sickening ‘thwack,’ returning me instantly to the tiny, pitch-black room in which I have lost myself once again.

I mutter obscenities under my breath as I carefully lay the cello on its side and drop to my hands and knees to find the bow. I’d turn on the lights, but I’m afraid I’ll step on the damn thing and turn it into a three-thousand-dollar pile of toothpicks before I can get to it. I fumble blindly until I find it under the piano bench. I’m done. It’s a dangerous thing, to open yourself to this kind of emotion, and it’s possible to go too far if you’re not careful. I’m very careful.

I pack up and start back out the way I came in, noticing the light on in another practice room. Now that’s weird. I can count on one hand the times I’ve run across someone else up here ever, let alone at this hour of the night. I walk carefully, so my shoes won’t clack on the floor and disturb the person playing... what is that? A trombone? As I move closer, the tone is better defined. No, that’s a horn. When I’m standing in front of the room, I take a quick glance through the small window on the door and see the back of a chestnut head of hair.

Oh, now this really is a surprise! Jeremy Corrigan is practicing, just like the rest of us mere mortals. Since our freshman year, there have been rumors that he doesn’t practice. He doesn’t want to, he doesn’t need to. He’s just that good. And yet, here he is, in the middle of the night working on what? Weber? No, Strauss. Yes, definitely one of the Strauss Horn Concertos. I’m mesmerized as I hover in the shadows, listening as he tears through the intricate passages without breaking a sweat. This guy is amazingly good.

My thoughts are interrupted when he stops playing suddenly and turns his head to the side, as if sensing he’s being watched. I scurry away as quickly and quietly as I can, but something tells me he might just have gotten a glimpse of me. I use the rickety old back stairs and duck out of a side exit and onto the sidewalk, shiny from a late night shower. It’s just wet enough that the cars create mini-tsunamis as they whiz through puddles. There are a lot of people out and about tonight as I turn in the direction of home. They are a reminder that there are other people in this world, that I’m not the only one fighting the ghosts of the past on a Tuesday night at two o’clock in the morning. I find that strangely comforting.

It only takes ten minutes for me and the coffin case to get home to The Strathmore Building where in apartment 16D, it’s obvious that Matthew has been

waiting up for me. Or, at least, he was before he fell asleep on the couch in front of the television. Well, there's no sense waking him now. If I do, it'll just be another lecture about staying out this late at night, getting my rest, and more sage, sound, practical advice that I can't stomach at this hour. It's been a long, stressful day and all I want is to crawl into my own bed.

I set the cello down in the foyer and slip my shoes off so I can tiptoe through the room without disturbing him. I make my way to where he's passed out, arm splayed over the side of the couch, glasses hanging from his nose. Gently, I take them from his face and put them on the coffee table. The remote has fallen out of his hanging hand and I pick it up from the floor, using it to turn the TV off. I grab the throw blanket I keep in a basket near the couch, and drape it across his still, silent body. Finally, I turn out the light and slip down the hall.

Inside my room, I breathe another sigh of relief. As happy as I was to get out, into the night air and away from my demons, I'm equally grateful for the respite of my very own space. I've shared this apartment with Matthew since the day I turned eighteen. Growing up in a foster care facility, I never had anything to myself. Now, at twenty-three, I still get a thrill out of having my own room.

I pull a nightgown over my head and set my phone on the nightstand to charge. I should have checked my texts earlier in the evening. No wonder poor Matthew stayed up for me, he sent me six messages while I was busy indulging in my little bit of music therapy. I know he's just worried about me, but I don't have the energy for it, or anything else at the moment. It's so much easier to just slip under the covers and allow the darkness to overtake me. Unfortunately, sleep is no guarantee of escape. Sometimes, the demons follow me there,

In my dream, it is always the same. I hear the smack of the aluminum storm door, as it slams closed. I look out the window and see my mother walking across the front lawn, carrying a small suitcase. The sun catches her bright auburn hair, making it look as if she has a fiery halo. My father is close behind her.

"Get your ass back inside!" he yells.
She ignores him, getting into the beat-up old Chevy.
Something feels terribly wrong and I go running out the front door barefoot,
in my pink princess nighty.
"Mommy?" I call out.
She starts the car.
"Mommy? Where are you going?"
I walk towards the car just as she starts to pull out of the driveway. And then
I am running but she keeps driving, the car kicking up a cloud of dust around me.

*I'm screaming for her now. I know she can hear me.
She doesn't slow down. She doesn't even glance back in her rearview mirror.
I'm five years old.*

This is usually the point where I wake myself up sobbing, drenched in sweat, and today is no different. It takes me a few minutes to get my heart rate back to normal.

"Julia?" comes Matthew's voice from the hallway outside of my room.

Pause.

"Julia, are you awake?"

A rap on the door.

"Go away!" I mumble from under the covers and pull the pillow over my head to block out the sound.

"Hey, are you okay? Was that another bad dream?"

He's in my room now, standing by the bed.

"Julia, come on," he coaxes. "I brought you a cup of coffee..."

Hmmm. Bribery. I lower my overstuffed shield slowly and allow my eyes to get used to the light.

"What time is it?" I croak squinting up at him.

"It's almost nine," Matthew says. "You really need to get moving. You don't want to be late for rehearsal or Maestro Hagen might throw his toupee at you."

I smile sleepily, and sit up in bed, propping myself against the pillows. He's not kidding either. Our crazy conductor actually pulled off his ill-fitting hairpiece and flung it at the trombones after they missed a cue during rehearsal. Now they duck whenever he even glances their way.

Matthew hands me a steaming mug of coffee. I take it in one hand and pat the side of the bed with the other, inviting him to join me. He climbs in and we sit, side by side, against the headboard.

"What time did you get home?" he asks. "I didn't even hear you come in!"

"Mmm... just after two, I guess."

"You're insane!" he says, shaking his head at me. "No, I take that back. You're obsessed. God, you must be practicing five hours a day!"

More like seven, but I'm smart enough to keep my mouth shut on that point. So I do what women have done for centuries. I deflect.

"Matthew, I'm trying to make it into the next round of the Kreisler's. If that means I have to live on catnaps and coffee for a while, I'm going to do it."

He looks as if he's about to start lecturing me, but I hold up a finger before he can reply.

“Besides, Mr. Pot-calling-kettle-black, who do you think you’re fooling? You spend just as much time practicing as I do.”

I conveniently neglect to mention the fact that he’s not in school anymore. But he doesn’t.

“Not the same, and you know it. Besides, I’m not a grad student, am I?”

“You were,” I point out.

“Yes, I was. And maybe I was running on too little sleep when I was finishing up at McInnes and getting ready to audition for the Walton, but now that I’ve got the job, I’m taking better care of myself.”

“See? Exactly!” I say victoriously, slapping the mattress and making my coffee slosh dangerously close to the rim of the mug.

“What?” he asks, perplexed.

“You put in the hours. You did what you had to do and look at you now! You finished your degree and won a spot in the most elite string quartet in the world. Tell me it wasn’t worth it,” I challenge him.

He can’t. Instead, he just rolls his eyes at me.

“You’re impossible, Julia James.”

I smile at him with a frothy milk mustache and he laughs.

“But I’m cute, right?”

“Yes. Very cute,” he concedes begrudgingly.

“Seriously. Are you okay? That nightmare sounded pretty bad, even from out in the hallway.”

I nod.

“It’s just the stress of the last couple of weeks, that’s all. Things should calm down after they announce the audition results.”

“How do you figure?”

I don’t answer and he nudges me hard.

“Unless, of course, you’re not expecting to make it to the second round. Is that what you think?”

I should have just kept my mouth shut. Why didn’t I just keep my mouth shut?

“I don’t know what to think, Matthew. There was some pretty stiff competition. I just don’t want to get my hopes up too high.”

“You’ve got this. I know you’re going to win it,” he says without the slightest hint of doubt.

I smile and, not for the first time, wish I had as much confidence in myself as he does.

“What? Win it? God, we don’t even know if I made the first cut. Let’s not hang that medal around my neck yet, okay?” I laugh.

“I know it, even if you don’t,” he says, snatching the now-empty mug from my hand and untangling from me.

“I’m headed out to rehearsal, I’ll see you tonight,” he says, raising the mug as if to toast me.

Once he’s gone, I haul myself out of bed and rummage around in my dresser for some clean clothes. I’m about to close the drawer when the pair of framed photos on the dresser catch my eye. The smaller of the two is terribly faded. Even through the glass that now protects it, there are visible folds and creases from years of keeping it under my pillow. The man and woman look happy. He’s strong and tall with sandy blonde hair. His arm is draped easily over the shoulder of the woman by his side, a petite redhead whose emerald green eyes are still striking, even after the picture has had so many years of abuse. She’s holding a toddler with a crop of strawberry blonde hair and those same eyes. Me. What I wouldn’t give to be able to call to mind memories of the happier days of my young life.

I carefully return the plain, black frame to its spot and pick up its partner. There’s a little less mileage on this one. It is a candid of Matthew and me under the big apple tree out front of our home. The North Fork Children’s Home where we were foster kids together. Neither of us could have been more than eleven or twelve-years-old in it. Even now, he claims that this was the moment he fell in love with me. I put this one back too, close the dresser drawer and start my shower running in the bathroom.

Matthew has never once hidden the fact that he wants something different from our relationship than I do and, over the years, he has held fast to his belief that we are destined to be together. The truth is that there is nobody I love or trust more on the face of this earth than Matthew. That’s the problem. I’d be lost without him in my life, without our relationship. If we give in and sleep together, if we try to live as a couple rather than best friends, there is no guarantee that we won’t screw it all up. We have too much to lose if things don’t work out for us and for me, that’s an unacceptable risk.

I’m really not interested in romance at this point. I’m barely twenty-three; there’ll be time for love later on. Besides, I’ve had more than enough chaos and drama to last me a lifetime. No, what I want right now, is to play my cello and finish my Master’s degree. And, I suppose if I’m really honest with myself, I want a slot in the Kreisler Competition. But, that’s such a long shot that I don’t dare consider it. Not seriously, anyway.

3

I'm sitting on stage in the concert hall, rubbing rosin on my bow and waiting for the orchestra rehearsal to start. I use the term 'concert hall' loosely. It's actually a cafeteria retrofitted with seats and stage.

"He talked to me the other day, you know," says my stand partner, Mila Strassman.

I look up to see who it is she's talking about, and I'm not at all surprised to find that it's Jeremy Corrigan. Of course that's who she's talking about. He's the guy most of the girls in the orchestra talk about.

His entrance is the same every time. He unpacks his horn, tucks it under his arm like a football and lopes- yes, actually lopes- up the steps onto the stage. Long, lean legs stride easily past the first violins, then the harp and finally the percussion to take his place at the head of the French horn section.

If even once Jeremy would go around the other way, if he would just turn right at the conductor's podium instead of left, he'd walk right past the cello section. That would certainly make Mila and several other female musicians very happy. But he never makes that turn. Personally, I think it has something to do with the violin section, which looks like something out of the talent portion of the Miss World Competition. I've never seen so many beautiful women playing in the same string section.

"Julia, you should have seen him at the auditions last week," Mila is saying.

"I did, actually," I correct her, but she doesn't seem to notice.

"God, he is so hot! I asked him if he was nervous," she informs me. "Do you know what he said?"

I consider answering, but she continues before I can.

"He told me he just takes whatever he wants."

Now she turns to look at me.

"How sexy is that?"

I nod politely without comment.

"I wouldn't mind if he took me," she mumbles under her breath.

The thing with Mila Strassman is that she's a talker. Chatter, chatter, chatter about anything and anyone; to me, to herself, to no one in particular. And I have to say she's not the most stimulating of conversationalists either.

"So the Kreisler list is out this week, right?" she asks.

"That's what I hear," I reply as she flips through our music folder and pulls out the Tchaikovsky Symphony No.4.

"Aren't you just dying to know?" she presses. "I know I am! I mean there were, like, hundreds of cellists going for it. Pretty much everyone here is hoping to be invited to play for the committee. And then there are, like, cellists from all over the country. What will they take, like ten or something? And that's from all over right? So who knows how many cellists are trying out for it that we don't even know!"

All of that without taking a single breath.

I have taken to clocking Mila's ramblings just for the fun of it. She once yammered on for nearly a minute and half without so much as a tiny gasp for air.

When I don't respond to her latest monologue, she just keeps going.

"Well, like I said, I know pretty much every one of the cellists here auditioned, probably the violins, too. But I'm not sure anyone here is really good enough..."

She stops and turns toward me. In a rare moment of clarity, Mila realizes she may have just offended me.

"Oh, gosh, I didn't mean you aren't good enough... It's just... well, you know. All those people from around the country..."

"The world, Mila. That's why they call it the Kreisler INTERNATIONAL Music Competition," I say this a little too sharply and immediately regret it. She looks stricken.

"I'm sorry," I say, quickly. "I'm just tired. I was practicing late last night."

Her face instantly becomes sunny again, and she picks up her prattling where she left off.

"Well, the horn players, I think at least one of them has a good chance, don't you? I mean Cal is so solid. Never misses a note that one. And Jeremy... well, you know. He's so... you know..." she smiles as she leaves that sentence hanging.

I do know. Jeremy is one of those guys who is just enough of everything. Lips that curl into just enough smirk, stubble that gives him just enough ruggedness and hair just tousled enough to look neat, but not too neat. His brows appear to be set in a perpetual arch, framing brown eyes. I've never been close enough to get a good look. In fact, I've never even spoken to him, but you can

clearly see he's just one of those guys. You know, the funny, charismatic ones to whom people are just naturally drawn. It wouldn't surprise me if he had the same effect on the Kreisler Competition judges, especially the female ones.

Mila looks about ready to launch into another conversation with herself when, to my immense relief, the concertmaster stands up and faces the orchestra, violin under his chin, bow poised. Once we have all quieted, he nods to the principal oboist who plays an A for the group to tune to. Across the orchestra strings, winds, brass all align themselves into perfect unison. The concertmaster nods and takes his seat again and we wait.

It's only a few seconds before the stage curtains part and Maestro Gunther Hagen takes his spot on the podium. He's a small, older man with the aforementioned floppy patch of wild hair that, since the unfortunate trombone incident, we can now confirm is not real. Sometimes, when he's conducting a particularly energetic piece, the faux hair will shift and he'll actually swipe at it with his baton.

Like many Maestros, ours is prone to the dramatic and right now, he's standing on the podium, eyeballing us, when he should be telling us what we're going to start with. There are a few soft coughs and shuffling feet until, finally, he smiles with twinkling blue eyes and wishes us a good morning in his soft German accent.

"I'm sure most of you are familiar with the Kreisler Competition. And if you're not, you should get out of the practice rooms once in a while," he chuckles.

Polite laughter from around the orchestra.

"As you know, this competition only takes place once every four years, and it is divided into three rounds over the course of three months. The gold medal winner of The Kreisler Competition will not only receive a substantial cash prize and a recording contract, but will also embark upon a concert tour that takes him or her around the globe. To say that this could launch a young musician's career is an understatement."

Hagan pauses to look down at his podium for a long moment before he picks up a single sheet of paper, and holds it above his head for all of us to see.

"It just so happens that I have a friend on the committee and he slipped me the preliminary round results a little early."

Suddenly, he has our undivided attention.

"We usually have one McInnes Conservatory student make it into the competition."

"This year, we do not have one."

An audible stir of disappointment crosses the entire orchestra like a wave. The Maestro waits until he once again has the full attention of the one hundred musicians before him, then he gives us a sly smile.

“I’m so proud to report that we don’t have one student in the running, we have three!”

He shouts the number with an excited little hop that makes his hair shift slightly to the left.

“Please stand up so we can recognize you.... Calvin Burrige, French horn! Stand up, Cal!”

All heads swivel to the back of the orchestra and the horn section. Always calm and composed, Cal stands up, still holding his horn and gives a brief wave to his cheering colleagues. Everybody loves Cal. He’s working on his doctoral degree and he’s not just talented, he’s a decent guy. I’m really happy for him.

When the applause has died down, the Maestro continues.

“Congratulations to ANOTHER horn player, Jeremy Corrigan!”

If Jeremy is surprised, he doesn’t show it. He simply stands and nods smugly as if to confirm what he has known all along. Now we all face front again to hear who the Maestro will call next. It’s so quiet that I can hear Mila’s stomach rumble next to me.

“And then there was one!” Hagen teases with an impish smile on his face. He looks around the orchestra, from one section to the next until he cannot contain his excitement anymore.

“And finally, please join me in congratulating.... our principal cellist, Miss Julia James!”

Wait. Did he just say my name? Everyone has turned to look at me, so I must have heard him right. I can feel the warmth rising from below my collar up to my forehead. I’m sure I must be turning a lovely shade of scarlet as the people around me applaud and whistle. I’m shocked, thrilled, and terrified. Mila has to give me a push to get me to stand up.

Don’t look down at your feet; don’t look down at your feet.

But there is no controlling the blushing. I notice one of the girls in the violin section pointing and whispering to her stand partner. I pretend not to notice them giggling at me.

I hear someone call out “Mouse!” I hate that nickname.

“All right! Congratulations to the three of you! I expect you will represent us well, and I hope you will all make it through to the next round!”

Finally, our cue to sit down once more.

“You made it!” squeals Mila.

“Yes I did,” I mumble under my breath as I open up the Tchaikovsky.

4

French toast. It's all I can think about in my last hour of practicing. I realize why when I glance at my watch- I've worked through lunch and dinner. Now that I've cleared the first hurdle, I have less than a month to put together a program to play as I compete against two dozen other cellists. Time, as they say, is of the essence.

It's after midnight, and I'm absolutely starving. But this is nothing new. The waitresses at the diner across from Lincoln Center know me by name now. They give me the booth in the back where there's extra space for my cello.

"Hi, Leslie!" I say with a wave to the matronly, gray-haired woman who's been serving me midnight breakfast for years now.

"Hey there, sweetie! Have you been over there at the school practicing again?"

"Always," I groan. "And I'm starving. Any chance you've got a fresh pot of coffee on?"

"As a matter of fact, I do!"

"Don't worry, I'll get myself seated," I say, starting to head for the back.

Leslie leans over the counter at me and speaks in a stage whisper.

"Julia, I'm sorry but there's someone in your usual spot. If I'd known for sure you were coming..."

I wave a hand at her dismissively.

"Don't worry about it. I'll park this beast somewhere else," I say, patting the case on my back.

As I turn the corner to look for an alternative booth I stop in my tracks. Sitting there is none other than the dashing Jeremy Corrigan. He's writing something in a notebook when he looks up suddenly and spots me. Damn. No stealthy retreat possible. It'll look rude if I turn around now. Won't it?

I give him a small smile of recognition and a nod to acknowledge that I know him.

Okay, that was fine.

He cocks his head as if trying to place me and I see the sudden light of recognition cross his face.

I'm about to slide into a booth a few down from his when he decides to speak to me.

"You're out late," he says.

"Oh, it's still early for this one!" Leslie pipes in as she arrives with a pot of coffee and a fresh cup. "Where did you decide to sit, honey?"

"Uh- I think over here..." I gesture to the spot I've picked but he interjects.

"Please, join me," Jeremy says.

I must be looking at him funny because he says:

"Unless, of course, you'd rather be alone..."

Now he and Leslie are both waiting for me to say something. Well, I might not ever get an opportunity like this again.

"Sure, thanks. The company would be nice."

And then he bestows upon me a beautiful, gleaming, crinkly-eyed smile. I think it's maybe the nicest smile I've ever seen. It's warm and welcoming, friendly and familiar. With this one expression he makes me feel as if he's been here, counting the minutes till my arrival. I like this smile very much.

I set the cello down in a corner and slide in across the table from him.

"The usual?" Leslie asks as she pours my coffee.

"Yes, please."

When she's gone, I have no choice; I have to look at him.

"Julia, right?"

"Uh... yes..."

"You don't sound so sure about that."

The corners of his mouth twitch up and his smile turns teasing.

"I am. Yes. Julia. Sorry..."

"I'm Jeremy," he says, as if I don't know.

"Yeah..."

This is getting worse by the second. He must think I'm a total idiot.

"Congratulations on making the Kreisler list," he says, by way of an icebreaker.

"Um, thanks. You too."

"Are you just leaving the practice rooms now?" he asks, glancing down at the watch on his wrist.

"Yes. How come you're out so late?"

“I was covering for a friend in one of the Off-Broadway pit orchestras. Just got out a little while ago and I’m starving. I love breakfast for dinner.”

He leans forward and says this last part softly, as if he’s letting me in on his deepest, darkest secret. It makes me smile.

“Me too. I’m a regular here,” I say.

“I could tell when she asked if you want your usual. What is your usual, by the way?”

“French toast- on the thin bread, not the challah, with warm syrup and crispy bacon.”

“Now I’m sorry I ordered the eggs and home fries.”

Again he leans forward conspiratorially.

“And you know, I’m a big fan of warm, sticky syrup.”

Now he looks a little... what? Impish? Naughty? Sexy as hell is what he really looks like, and I’m fairly certain he isn’t talking about breakfast food anymore.

Don’t blush. Don’t blush. Don’t blush.

“You don’t say much, do you?” he asks when I ignore the comment and sip my coffee.

“Oh, sorry! I don’t mean to be rude. I’m just wiped out from practicing all day.”

And I’m totally tongue-tied by your rugged good looks. Did I mention my knees are knocking too? Being this close to him has made me a nervous wreck.

“So, do you know what you’ll play for the next round?” he asks, steering my thoughts back into safe territory.

“Bach for sure, I’m still consulting with my teacher on the rest. What about you?”

“I don’t know yet. I’m thinking one of the Mozart Concertos. Oh, and there’s this Villanelle for piano and horn. That’s an option, too.”

“Oh, I love that Villanelle. I heard you play it at your senior recital last year. It was amazing!”

My sudden enthusiasm seems to take him aback. His dark eyebrows knit together as if he’s trying to remember something.

“You were there? At my recital?”

I nod and take another sip. The coffee cup has become a life raft that I’m clinging to in an attempt to keep from drowning. I take a quick look around. Where is Leslie? I’m going to be fake-sipping soon if she doesn’t get me a refill quick.

“How could I have missed that?”

“Missed what?” I ask, turning back to him.

“You.”

Oh.

“I’m easy to miss,” I say in my usual breezy, self-deprecating manner.

But he doesn’t smile back at me. In fact, every bit of humor has left his face. Oh, hell. What have I said now? This isn’t going well at all.

“Is that what you think?”

“What?”

He sighs exasperatedly.

“You think you’re easy to miss?”

I look down at the table in front of me, hoping he won’t notice the redness I can feel in my cheeks.

“Apparently,” I mumble.

“Meaning what?” he asks, suddenly sounding a little defensive.

I look up. I can tell I’m irritating this pretty boy, but there are some things that even quiet little Julia can’t let go by.

“Jeremy, we’ve been playing in the same orchestra and sitting in the same classes for five years. Five! And you weren’t even sure of my name until just now.”

He doesn’t move, doesn’t respond for what feels like the longest time, and just keeps his eyes squarely on mine. Hazel. They aren’t brown after all, they’re definitely hazel.

Dammit! Focus, Julia! I have to will myself not to look away. Not this time.

Finally, to my utter shock, Jeremy is the one to look down.

“You’re absolutely right, Julia. And I apologize, I won’t make that mistake again.”

I’m spared from having to respond by Leslie, who brings our plates out and sets them down in front of us. She catches my eye, gives a little gesture toward Jeremy with her eyebrows and winks at me.

We prepare our food in awkward silence. He slaps the bottom of the ketchup bottle. I pick up the syrup, look at it and put it back down again.

“What?” he asks, noticing.

I giggle a little.

“What?”

“You’ve made my syrup seem... dirty,” I say with a smile.

He looks perplexed for a moment, and then a sly grin crosses his face.

“Then I’ve done my duty for the night.”

I shake my head and smile, the tension suddenly broken. Mila is never going to believe this.

“So how are things back in the horn section?” I ask, moving on to a more neutral topic. “Is it weird with you and Cal Burridge both in the running for the horn slot at the Kreisler’s?”

He shakes his head as he chews a piece of rye toast.

“Nah. No more than usual. I’m not worried about it anyway.”

“Oh? Are you that certain you can beat him out?”

He shrugs.

“Is he a good horn player? Absolutely, one of the best in the country for sure. Is he better than me? I don’t think so. But, I guess we’ll just have to wait and see what the judges think.”

“Huh.”

The single syllable comes out sounding a little more snarky than I had intended.

“You disagree?” he asks, picking up on my disapproval.

“Disagree? No... Well, I guess a little. It’s just so different from the way I look at things.”

“Okay, so what’s your thought process then? You’re the top cellist at one of the most exclusive conservatories in the country. What did it take, mentally, for you to get here?”

“It wasn’t a mental process for me,” I say with a shrug.

One of those arch-y eyebrows shoots up skeptically. Really? He wants to debate philosophy of success over eggs? Fine. I may be reserved when it comes to a lot of topics, but music isn’t one of them.

“It was... it IS a physical process for me. I practice until I have calluses on my fingers. Most days I’m running on five hours of sleep so I can spend the rest of the time prepping for rehearsals and lessons. I have a cello teacher, an accompanist and an audition coach. In other words, I work my butt off. That’s my process.”

“Okay, so hard work is how you got there. Fair enough. But let’s take the music out of the equation...”

“What?”

He holds up his palm.

“Please, just indulge me for a second. You beat out a lot of fine musicians to become principal cello at McInnes. There must be a dozen of them who would love to see you lose. You’re not naive, you know that they’re gunning for you.”

He pauses and looks at me quizzically.

“You do know that, don’t you?”

I shrug.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he presses, looking at me with an intensity I didn’t know he possessed.

“I’m not naive. Nor am I an idiot. Of course I know that. Hell, Mila Strassman would skewer me with her bow to move up a chair if she thought she could get away with it.”

“She’d never get away with it,” Jeremy interjects. “That girl can’t keep her mouth shut. She’d be telling everyone what she’d done in under thirty seconds.”

I give in to a tiny chuckle because he’s right, but I want to finish my thought.

“As I was saying, I am aware. I just choose to ignore it.”

“Ignore what? You don’t think they all talk about you, behind your back? Don’t forget, I sit behind you, Julia, and I’ve got a great view of your section. I see the other cellists snickering when you’re singled out to demonstrate how something should be played. I was in Maestro Hagen’s office when Tom Carson came in to complain about you last semester. I think you were out sick or something, and that idiot was petitioning to take your spot!”

He has become louder and more animated. In the mirror on the wall next to me I can see Leslie look up from where she’s clearing another booth. I purposely drop my volume a little lower, hoping he’ll get the hint.

“What do you have to be so indignant about?” I ask with a half-smile. “The cello crazies are my problem. And the truth is, Jeremy, that if the Maestro doesn’t think I deserve my spot, he’ll demote me. If any of them is a better cellist than me, they deserve to sit first chair. That’s the way it is.”

He starts to jump in, but I’m on a roll.

“And you know, for a guy who didn’t recognize me when I walked in the door, you seem to pay very close attention to what people are saying about me.”

“I pay very close attention to what people are saying about everybody,” he says coolly.

“Life can be unfair,” I begin slowly, “even tragic at times. There are things far worse than people talking about you behind your back.”

Now I’m done. And I’m immediately sorry to have been sucked into this debate with a guy I barely know.

“Such as?” he asks, his voice trailing off.

“Such as what?”

“What ‘far worse’ things have you encountered?”

Nope. Not going there.

“You know, Jeremy, maybe you should leave the cello section drama to me and focus on the other four players in the horn section. They hate you. Seriously hate you.”

I’m not totally surprised when a wide, brilliant smile passes across his face.

“That, Julia, is exactly the effect I’m going for.”

I sigh in exasperation and flag down Leslie for the check. I think it’s about time to wrap-up this bizarre late-night rendezvous. Besides, my French toast is gone and I’m feeling a sugar coma coming on.

He opens his wallet and drops a few bills on the table as a tip.

“I’ve got this,” I say, as Leslie approaches.

“Absolutely not,” he says, plucking the black folio out of her hand before I can even reach for it.

“No, really, thanks, but you don’t have to...” I protest but he shakes his head at me resolutely.

“Not gonna happen,” he says as he pulls more cash out and tucks it in with the bill.

I sigh in exasperation. I guess this is one of those "pick your battles" moments.

“Well, thanks,” I say getting out of the booth. “That was very nice of you. I’ll see you at rehearsal tomorrow...”

I can’t even get the sentence out before he’s on his feet, grabbing the cello case and swinging it over his shoulder.

“Oh, no, thanks, Jeremy, I can...”

“Are you nuts? You’re all of five feet tall. You think I’m going to let you walk home alone in the middle of the night with an expensive instrument hanging off your shoulder? My mother raised me better than that, Julia,” he says with that crinkly smile.

How do I argue with that? I nod reluctantly, and follow him as he leaves the diner with my instrument in tow. I practically have to run to keep up with his long stride.

“Someone waiting up for you?”

“Nah. My roommate is asleep by now.”

“That’s Matthew Ayers, right? He knows my brother. Good violist.”

“He is,” I agree.

We’re about to dash across the busy street when he seems to realize he doesn’t know which direction to go in.

“Which line are you on?”

“Excuse me?”

“The subway. I want to get you to the subway station, at the very least.”

“Oh, no. I live just around the corner, right off of West 62nd.”

He gives a long, low whistle.

“Pretty steep rent over there.”

“I just rent a room. It’s Matthew’s apartment.”

We are on the move again and I fall in beside him quietly until my building comes into view.

“I can take it from here,” I say.

Jeremy stops, looks around and then up.

“What, here? You and Matthew live in the Strathmore Building?” he asks incredulously.

“Thanks again for seeing me home, Jeremy,” I say, holding out my hand to take the cello from him. But he’s still looking up.

“Jeremy?”

“Oh, yeah. Sure. Here,” he says, pulling the strap from his shoulder.

“Goodnight,” I say with a small wave.

“Hey, you don’t really think that no one notices you, do you?” he asks.

I sigh. It’s not what I think; it’s what I know from years of experience.

“Goodnight, Jeremy,” I repeat, ignoring his question and turning my back on him.

Carl the doorman has come out to usher me and the coffin/case in.

“Goodnight, Julia,” Jeremy says from behind me.

I hold up a hand without turning.

“Carl?” I ask when I’m safely in the lobby and out of earshot.

“Yes, Miss James?”

“Is that guy still out front?”

He gives a quick, stealthy glance over my shoulder, trying not to look too obvious.

“Yes, Miss. He’s watching to see you’re safely inside. Seems like a gentleman,” he says approvingly.

“Yes, he does,” I say to myself as the elevator doors slide closed and I push the button for the sixteenth floor.

5

When I push open the doors to the performance hall, I'm almost knocked over by the cacophony. It sounds as if every musician in the orchestra is playing something different, all at the same time. The noise doesn't usually bother me, but I'm running on not much sleep, and I'm more than a little anxious about seeing Jeremy again after our impromptu meeting last night.

I'm breathing hard as I slip into my seat on the hardwood stage and get my cello situated between my knees. Bow bow bow. Pluck pluck pluck. That'll have to do for a warm-up today. From next to me, I feel a jab in the ribs.

"Hey, look!" Mila says, thrusting her chin toward the front of the orchestra.

And there he is. Jeremy Corrigan, horn under his arm, strides up the steps to the conductor's podium... and makes a turn to the right. Wow. He's actually going to pass by the cello section. I hunch down a little, grab a pencil and pretend to be absorbed in writing notes on the music in front of me.

"Hi."

He's stopped beside my chair.

"Hi," I say, putting down my sham pencil and sitting up straight.

"Nice talking to you last night," he says just loud enough so that I can hear him. "I'm sorry if I was a little... pushy with my opinions."

"No need to be sorry," I say with a genuine smile. "It was an interesting night. And hey, thanks again for walking me home."

"The pleasure was all mine," he says. "This time, anyway."

Can this guy say anything without it sounding like a sexual innuendo? Before I can reply he's gone, moving on to take his seat with the horns.

"What the hell was that?" Mila asks in a hushed squeal. "He walked you home? From where?" she demands.

Oh, this might get a little bit ugly.

“It was nothing. I stopped by the diner after practicing last night and he was there. He asked me to sit with him, and he made sure I got home safely. He was just being polite.”

“Since when are you even interested in him?” she demands, shaking her head at me in disbelief.

“Mila,” I say, trying to diffuse the situation, “It was nothing. Really. I went to the diner, where I often go, and he just happened to be there. I didn’t go there looking for him, he didn’t go there looking for me. It was a total coincidence.”

She cocks an eyebrow skeptically and I’m reminded of my conversation the night before. This girl isn’t my friend. Not really.

“You expect me to believe that?”

I sigh and turn back to the music in front of us.

“I really don’t care what you believe,” I say.

I can tell the comment has surprised her. She’s not used to me having an attitude with her, and now I can feel her staring at me in disbelief. I have to say, I kind of like it. So this is what it feels like to actually say what you’re thinking!

By the time rehearsal ends, Mila has given me no fewer than ten loud sighs, twelve sidelong glances and one ‘humph!’ I don’t give her even a moment’s notice. Aside from the counting, that is. She’s quick to flee the cello section when we’re finished, and I decide to give her a few minutes to clear out. We’ll sort it out later when she’s had a chance to calm down.

“Nice job today, *Julia*.”

The unmistakable voice, his voice, is coming from behind me. I turn around and see him coming toward me on his way off the stage. Mr. Smarty Pants wants to let me know he hasn’t forgotten my name.

“Well, thank you, *Jeremy*,” I reply, with equal emphasis. “Twice in one day!”

“What?” he stops and asks.

“You. You never come past the cello section... but here you are.”

A wicked little smirk crosses his face.

“Why *Julia*, I had no idea you kept track of my movements so closely.”

Ugh! I walked right into that one. He starts to leave, but then stops and turns back.

“You know, next time you come across me in the practice rooms, you should stop in, instead of just lurking out in the hallway,” he says, then resumes his trip off the stage without waiting for comment.

I can’t help but notice the fact that *Jeremy Corrigan* looks just as attractive going as he does coming.

6

“You’re sure you’ll be okay?” Matthew asks as he zips his tux in the garment bag and hangs it from a hook on the back of his bedroom door.

I roll my eyes at him.

“Yes, I think I can manage without you for a few nights.”

“It’s not a few nights, Julia, it’s a few weeks. And you don’t have to be so damned independent, you know. A guy likes to feel he’s needed,” he says with faux indignation.

I walk up from behind and give him a bear hug.

“I do need you. We need each other. But we’re both going to be just fine. Matthew, this is your first tour as a full-fledged member of The Walton String Quartet! You’ve worked your whole life for this. Why are you worrying instead of being excited?”

He pats my hands around his chest.

“I’m excited. It’s just a long time to be away from... home.”

“Well, you go ahead and be homesick, but I’ll be busy here. I have a competition to prepare for,” I say, letting go of him so he can finish packing his overnight bag.

“Yes, you do,” he replies as he grabs socks and underwear from his dresser drawer. “But I hope you’re going to do more than just live in the practice rooms while I’m gone.”

Despite my protests, Matthew has the smaller of the two bedrooms in our apartment. That’s not to say he’s living in a hovel or anything. Our two-bedroom apartment is large and sunny with windows that run from floor to ceiling. At night, the city view is spectacular. There’s a gas fireplace in the living room, and the kitchen is like a little oasis of stainless steel and granite. My favorite amenity is the small balcony overlooking Lincoln Center.

I can’t tell you how many nights we spent as kids, lying out on the lawn of the North Fork Children’s Home, looking up at the stars and planning what our

lives would be like when we “grew-up” which, in the case of un-adoptable foster kids is eighteen. Up until that time, we had no control over where or how or with whom we lived. We swore it wouldn’t be like that forever. And it hasn’t been.

Unlike most kids coming out of that living situation, Matthew has money. Lots of money. When he came of age, he was finally able to take control of the estate his parents left him when they were killed in a boating accident. He doesn’t like to take rent from me, but that’s non-negotiable, as far as I’m concerned. I may not be rich, but I do well enough teaching lessons on the side.

“So what are your plans for the weekend?” he asks now as I perch on the edge of his bed and watch him collect his toiletries.

“Oh, you know, the usual. Dinner, dancing, a show. Maybe a carriage ride around Central Park.”

“Well, you’ve always been a hopeless romantic.”

I giggle.

“Nah. I think I’m probably going to plant myself in a practice room for the next couple of days, depending on how my lesson goes this afternoon. Dr. Sam has made it very clear that if I don’t get my act together on the Rachmaninoff Cello Sonata, I can’t use it for my audition.”

“I thought you had that one down already. You’ve been working on it for months,” he says, tossing some T-shirts into the suitcase.

“Yeah, I thought so too,” I sigh, watching as he adds jeans and a wad of socks to the heap.

“So, what’s the problem then?”

I start pulling the clothes back out and folding them.

“Oh, you know Dr. Sam. He’s big into the meaning behind the piece. The composer’s intention, blah, blah, blah...”

“And he doesn’t think you know the meaning behind the piece?”

“You’d think, right? Nope, he wants me to spend some time with the third movement in particular to see if I can find an ‘emotional connection’ to it,” I say, with rolled eyes.

“Could he have been a little more vague, do you think?” he asks with a sarcastic smile.

“Tell me about it!”

I return the newly folded items to his suitcase. He looks down at them appreciatively, and then joins me on the edge of his bed.

“Does it have to be this piece? I mean, there are hundreds of other sonatas and concertos you could do instead.”

I sigh and look hard into his golden brown eyes, the color of amber. They are clouded with concern. I hate to worry him about this stuff, but it's impossible to get anything past him. He knows me too well.

"Matthew, this is the one," I say finally. "With the Rachmaninoff and the Bach, I think I can win the cello category."

He nods firmly.

"Okay, well, there it is, Julia. If you feel that strongly about it, then the answer is somewhere in here," he says, tapping his chest over his heart. "Not," now he taps his head, "in here. Get out of your head and trust your heart."

"I know you're right," I whine, "but that's easier said than done."

"Of course I'm right!" he quips as he gets to his feet again. "And no one ever said it was going to be easy, Julia. Now, if you'll excuse me, my driver will be here soon and I've still got things to do."

"Ah, yes. I'm sure your adoring public will be waiting for you at the airport," I tease. "Are you going to wear sunglasses so you won't be hounded by the paparazzi?"

I duck with a squeal of laughter as he throws his deodorant at me.