

To Love A Stranger, chapters 1 and 2

Chapter 1

Sam couldn't land a decent job. He knew he shouldn't expect any different; he had picked the world's least practical line of work, and he got what was coming to him. A young nobody-from-nowhere conductor with a Pennsylvania backwater twang in his voice and a tiny résumé to his name should consider himself lucky to get the lowest-tier orchestra that had had ever hacked through a song or two. Sam knew that. Even so, as he went through round after round of auditions during the wet grey spring of 1986, he dared to dream about a job that would let him stand up on a stage in front of a crowd and make the kind of music that would change the world. Music could do that, if you held the threads of it in your hands and gave it your soul to take into itself.

Sam dreamed about that kind of job. He didn't dream about one that would make his father proud. That couldn't happen, especially now. For what he did want, you needed a real group with real players and an audience that came to listen. In the end, he got the Richmond Symphonic Artists, a once-thriving group now one step away from oblivion.

Maybe he could save it. Maybe he couldn't. Sam got the impression that the Symphonic Artists' board of directors didn't care one way or the other. One afternoon in early June, when the city's pavements had already started to bake in heat that felt more like August, Sam sat in the conference room at the Linden Row Inn on Richmond's Franklin Street with a heavily condensing pitcher of ice water in the middle of the table and the "gentlemen of the board" in a semicircle on the other side. The gentlemen, a line of bland sweaty faces above stiff shirt collars and interchangeable striped ties, obviously wanted to get this ceremony over with so they could go home and change into shorts and T-shirts. Sam heard their thoughts between lines of jargon like *ready to*

usher in new energy and ideas and every confidence in your ability to contribute. What they really meant was, So the kid wants to jump on a sinking ship? It's his funeral.

Sam hadn't bothered to wear a tie himself. He had put on a long-sleeved shirt and carefully pressed slacks, and he ought to have been sweating as much as the gentlemen, but he wasn't. Something cold and heavy sat in his stomach.

On the one hand, he had a job—his own orchestra, the one thing every conductor wanted—and Sam knew he ought to feel an explosion of excitement. On the other hand, this meant he would leave Philly behind. He would leave so many things, and he would do that for this little group that might or might not live out the year.

The meeting ended when the chairman of the board handed over a contract for Sam to read through “at his leisure,” sign, and return. Sam thought the pages of legalese might go on longer than the orchestra's life span. The gentlemen all stood up in relief. Sam followed them to the door, but before he could make it into the anteroom, the chairman took his arm. “One moment,” he said. “I'd like a word.”

Bayard Keating looked like a daguerreotype out of one of the Civil War books in Sam's apartment. He had a white beard, an aquiline nose, and bushy white brows over dark eyes that regarded Sam with a drill-bit stare. His fingers didn't relax their grip on Sam's arm until the anteroom door closed behind the rest of the board. Then he motioned to one of the conference room chairs. Sam sat down again. Keating took the chair next to him and planted his hands on his knees.

“Let me tell you something,” he said. He had the right kind of voice, too, Virginia blue-blood with enough of an edge to bark orders to a regiment. “Half of those boys you just talked to don't want to keep the RSA alive for another season. The other half think even if we do postpone the death, we'll be caught with our pants down bringing in a conductor nobody's ever heard of.” He

stared at Sam without blinking. “But I trust you. You do this fall what you did in that audition, and you’ll show them all. They’ll find out what the RSA is good for.”

Sam couldn’t tell whether the chairman actually gave a damn about the orchestra folding or whether this was a personal vendetta against his fellow board members. Keating did look like the kind of aristocrat who would settle his grievances with a pair of duelling pistols. Sam knew he ought to feel nervous, taking on the weight of this man’s expectations, but with the cold weight already in his stomach, he didn’t feel much else. “Yes, sir,” he said. It seemed appropriate to use the same flat, level voice he used to put on when he talked to his father. “I’ll do the best I can.”

Within two weeks of that afternoon, he had signed the contract, packed up his few boxes of clothes and books and kitchen supplies, and made arrangements to have his spinet piano shipped to the bare-bones apartment he would live in when he got to Richmond. He didn’t much care about trying to make the new place comfortable or homey. It didn’t matter now that he had to leave behind the things he loved: all the things he had already lost.

Two days before he left, he wrote a letter. He sat at his beat-up spinet to write it, propping the paper up against the music stand and hoping the ink in the pen would hold out. *Dear Ma.* Once upon a time he would have written in Lithuanian, the language he used to share with her. He had stopped using that language because he didn’t know when or if he might see her again. *Dear Ma, I’m writing to tell you I’m moving to Virginia.*

The words sounded so formal on paper. They always did. He and Ma used to talk so easily. When the two of them teamed up in the kitchen, the joking and teasing during their long cooking sessions had flavoured the pierogies and kielbasi as much as the actual ingredients. Nobody used to laugh like Ma.

Sam put the tip of the pen back to the paper. *The Richmond Symphonic Artists have hired me to be their conductor this season.*

Her face would light up when she read that, but her eyes would fill with tears, too, the same way they had the last time he saw her. Five years' worth of days, and that memory hurt no less. How many more would it take?

He wrote, trying to avoid the bumps and scratches on the wood underneath the thin paper, *The RSA is a small group. They've been having some financial trouble, so we'll see how this season goes.* He had to tell Ma that so she wouldn't picture anything too spectacular. He dug the pen point in harder. *I'll do my best for them.*

He wrote down the address of his new apartment on Regina Street. She would send him a line back. They didn't exchange letters often. It probably felt as wrong to her as it did to him, writing instead of talking, and she probably knew, too, how the sight of her handwriting made him feel. He deserved that ache. She had hurt so much, and it was his fault.

He stared at the paper. Five years' worth of days. He wanted to say *I'm so sorry. I'd take it all back if I could. Or, I miss you so much, Ma, you know that, right? Or, I would come home, if...*

But that was just it. If *home* had room in it for Sam and his father both.

He finished the note with, *I'll write again once I get settled. I love you.* It wasn't much to say, not when he couldn't at least pick up the phone and say the words out loud to her, but he meant it. He signed the name only she called him by: *Lindas*.

He always addressed the notes just to her. *Mrs. Anna Kraychek, 519 River Street, Westbury, PA.* If she showed them to Dad, Sam didn't know it. None of the notes he got back had anything in Dad's writing. Only once or twice, early on, she had written, *Lindas, your dad misses you too.* Sam didn't believe it. Not after the things he and his father had said to each other.

On his last day in the city, he mailed the letter. Then he did the last thing he had to do before he left: the worst thing.

Pennsylvania Hospital was the oldest hospital in the country. Sam had learned that fact at some point, along with the additional fact that it had been founded in 1751 to serve in part as an insane asylum. The Colonial-style brick building looked more like William Penn's mansion than a place where people scrubbed out bedpans and back in the bad old days had probably strapped the loonies to the furniture.

Sam walked in grey drizzle from his apartment to the old building, about a mile's worth of city blocks. Gil wasn't always at the hospital. It only seemed like it. The complications kept happening, the general deterioration that Gil said was "only to be expected." After each too-short stint in the outside world, he ended up back at Pennsylvania, in a different room each time, but they all looked the same.

Sam didn't know about the rooms from experience. He had never visited before. During Gil's first hospitalization back in March, Sam, staggered by his phone call and the weight of his news, had asked when he could come over. Gil had gently but firmly said not to. "I'm not at my best. I'd rather you not see me like this." In truth, the thought of seeing Gil at all, much less whatever the last four years had done to him, made Sam's hands shake so much that he had a hard time hanging on to the phone. He had agreed to stay away.

They had talked regularly since that first call. Gil always sounded like himself. The same way he had sounded like himself back in March, when that one word, AIDS, beat against doors in Sam's mind that he slammed and held shut with all his strength. Sam couldn't understand how Gil could say, "I don't want you to worry about me. I just want to know you don't have it."

AIDS. Five years ago, no one had heard the word. Now it carried the same weight of terror as the old words *smallpox* and *plague*. It killed as unstoppably as those ancient nemeses, with no cure or hope of any on the horizon, and it destroyed not just the elderly and weak but the young and healthy. People didn't know where it had come from or why it was so deadly. They did know that

certain people were likelier to get it and carry it than others: people who were and always had been outcasts, not “normal,” not “right.” Sam knew about that. Those outcasts were people like him.

No, he didn’t have the disease, but he should have. It should have been him instead of Gil.

In the hospital lobby, Sam brushed collected raindrops off the sleeves of his windbreaker and went to the front desk. The nurse on duty pointed him down a narrow white hallway to the right.

Room number 16 did look like all the others. They were like tissue boxes, Sam thought disjointedly, two long rows of plain white tissue boxes opening into the fluorescent-lit hall. The door to Gil’s room stood open. Sam stopped on the other side of the hall, a hair too far away to see in.

Eight years. How could so much time have gone past already? Eight years since Sam had first met a young choir director named Gil Hart. Sam himself had only been a college freshman. He hadn’t learned, yet, how fast and how drastically the world could change.

Now he did not want to go over to the open door. His feet felt like they had been mired in concrete.

He could turn around. He could leave right now. Gil didn’t know he was here, because Sam hadn’t told him he was planning to come by. Sam could go back to his empty apartment, and then when he got to Richmond tomorrow, he could pick up the phone and tell Gil guess what, he had an orchestra of his own, not much of one, but it was a start, right? They could both pretend he had called Gil at home, and they were chatting the way any two friends would.

“Sir?”

Sam looked around. A young man in blue scrubs had stopped on his way down the hall.

“Yes?” Sam said.

“Are you here to see Mr. Hart?”

“Well, I...”

For a second Sam thought he could say he was visiting somebody else and had gotten the wrong hallway. He hesitated long enough for the truth to seep out in the silence.

“I’m glad,” the young man said. “Mr. Hart doesn’t often get visitors. I know he’ll be happy to see someone.” He took a step toward Sam. “You’re a friend of his?”

Sam fought the urge to step back. The hospital garb and the other man’s nearness made him nervous. “Yes,” he said. “We haven’t seen each other in a while.” The words sounded so casual, as if Sam and Gil were two friends meeting at a bar or a high school reunion.

The other man put out his hand. “I’m Jonas Caruso. I’m one of the attendants on this floor.”

Sam shook hands and let go as quick as he could. “Attendant? You mean like a nurse?”

Jonas Caruso smiled. “You could say that. Most men won’t use the term yet.”

A radar in Sam’s head started to whine. He moved toward the door of room 16. “I’ll go and see Gil now.”

“Of course,” Caruso said. “Glad to meet you, Mr...?”

“Kraychek.” Sam threw it over his shoulder, turning away, hoping he spoke too fast to be heard. “Nice to meet you too.”

He ducked inside room 16. For a second he felt like he’d gone to ground in a safe burrow. Then he looked around.

Gil had a room to himself. At least they hadn’t doubled the misery by putting two hopeless cases in here. Although maybe it would have been better to have someone to talk to while you lay on the white bed and stared at the white ceiling, or out the small square window at the parking lot and dripping grey sky.

Bare walls. Bare windowsill. No flowers or cards or balloons. Those things usually looked like they were trying too hard, but didn't they mean somebody cared? Sam stared at the emptiness to avoid the sight of the bed.

Gil must be asleep. Otherwise Sam would have heard his voice already.

Finally he had to look. The bed had metal handrails up at the head, like the bars of a cage. The blanket, one of those cheesecloth institutional things, wouldn't keep anybody warm. At the foot of the mattress, Sam's eyes found the shape under the blanket, and then he couldn't stop them from moving, sliding up the bed, taking in the slow rise and fall where the chest must be, and then up a little farther, the last piece.

Gil's cheekbones and jaw stood out in too-sharp definition. His eyes were closed. The lids looked bluish and too thin to keep out the light.

A touch on his shoulder might make those eyes open, or if Sam said his name. But Sam didn't want to feel that papery blue hospital gown or the contours of the bones underneath. His throat had gone too dry to let any words out.

One of Gil's hands lay on the blanket. His arm, naked except for the short sleeve of the gown, looked shrunken. His fingers, though, looked almost the way they used to, except for the blue-purple veins that stood out darker than Sam remembered. Long, strong, lean fingers.

Sam reached out. His chest felt like somebody had wrapped elastic bands around it and now yanked them as tight as they would go. He laid his palm over Gil's fingers. The skin felt cool, but alive.

"Gil," Sam whispered. "I'm so sorry."

There was silence, broken only by the faint beeping of some hospital machine and a distant voice in the hallway outside. Then: "Sam?"

Gil's voice sounded sleep-logged and incredulous, but exactly like himself. "Sam Kraychek, is that you?"

For one stupid moment, Sam still did not look up. As if he couldn't see the cheesecloth blanket under Gil's fingers and didn't know what the face against the pillow would look like. Finally he raised his head.

Gil's eyes had not changed. Sam looked at the same shade of blue that, eight years ago, had taken his breath away.

"Gil." It came out as a whisper. "Hey."

He would have expected "What are you doing here?" or even "I told you not to come." Gil didn't say either of those things. Instead he turned his hand over and closed his fingers around Sam's. "My God," he said, "you haven't changed a bit."

How did you answer that? Giving the same compliment back would be the worst kind of lie. Before Sam could find any words—if he could have, with the touch of Gil's hand on his—Gil went on, "Unfortunately, I can't say the same of myself."

He could laugh about it? Sam swallowed and managed, "How are you feeling?"

"Oh, I've been better. Now, mind you, I've also been worse."

They could have been any two people having a casual chat, except that their hands did not let go of each other. Sam's throat ached. "Are they treating you okay in here?"

"You bet. They always do, you know. I'm one of their best customers."

Oh, Jesus, Gil. Gil had always been able to laugh. His smile had looked like the sun coming out. Sam's eyes burned.

Gil said, "Now, if my memory serves, I said you shouldn't come here."

That was more like it. The tone, though, was nothing like what Sam deserved. Before Sam could explain why he had disobeyed, Gil added, "Now that I see you, I'm so glad you didn't listen."

He nodded toward the plastic beige chair at the foot of the bed. “Pull up a seat. Tell me what’s going on in the wide world.”

Sam disengaged his fingers and dragged the chair around to the side of the bed. The chill of the plastic bit through his jeans. He put his hand back over Gil’s. Such a long time ago, their fingers had laced together as if they belonged that way. Sam remembered the first time Gil had held his hand, how he had touched each finger and said, “I’ve always noticed your hands. They’re so small to be so strong.”

Sam knew he shouldn’t think about that now. The box of tissues by the bed didn’t look anywhere near big enough. Gil said, “So tell me. What’s new?”

Sam cleared his throat. “Well, I just got a job.”

“Did you? Doing what?”

“I…” Sam hesitated. It sounded too proud. “I sort of got an orchestra.”

Gil’s smile looked like the sun breaking through clouds. “I knew that would happen! Where?”

“In Virginia. Richmond.” It sounded so far away.

Gil nodded. “Tell me more. Who’s it with? What are they like?”

“It’s the Richmond Symphonic Artists. They’re a chorus and orchestra.” Sam had to rush on, the same way he had in his letter to Ma, to dim the enthusiasm in those eyes. “It’s tiny. And it’s headed down the drain.”

Gil raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“They’re on their last leg.” It was kind of funny, really, when you thought about how glamorous the whole conductor gig was supposed to be. Sam guessed he was “the Maestro” now, but did that mean anything? “They think maybe I can turn things around,” he said, “but they don’t

really care.” Thinking of Bayard Keating’s stare, he added, “Except the chairman. He’ll probably beat me with a stick if I screw up.”

Gil’s mouth twitched. “He’d better not.”

“You should have seen him,” Sam said. “Seven feet tall, with this handshake that could crush concrete. The way he looked at me, it was like he could squash me like a bug, and I’d better not forget it.”

Gil burst out laughing. Sam joined in. The grey sky outside didn’t look as hopeless anymore.

A new voice came from the doorway. “It’s good to hear somebody cheerful in here.”

Jonas Caruso stepped into the room. Sam felt his eyes fix on the joined hands on the bed. He resisted the urge to let go and push his chair back.

Caruso said, “Gilbert, how are you feeling?”

Gilbert? Really. “Better, thank you.” Gil nodded at Sam. “Jonas, this is my friend Sam Kraychek. We’re old music colleagues.”

“Yes, I met Mr. Kraychek a few minutes ago.” Caruso smiled at Sam. Sam didn’t return it. “I was glad to see you had a visitor.”

“It’s about time, right?” Gil’s tone made it a joke. To Sam he added, “You wouldn’t know I have a brother.”

How could he laugh about something like that? Sam said, “You wouldn’t know I have parents.”

He shouldn’t say that, especially in front of Caruso, who had no business hearing anything. Gil said, “You don’t talk to your parents these days?”

“No.”

The blue eyes rested on his face. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It is what it is.”

Gil squeezed his hand. “Your father,” he began.

“No,” Sam said. “Let’s not talk about him.” He glanced sideways at Caruso, who was still watching them. *Think whatever you fucking well want.*

Caruso said, “I’ll leave you to your visit. I’m so pleased to hear you sounding better, Gilbert.”

Gil smiled. “Thanks, Jonas. See you later.”

After the attendant left, Gil said, “So, you’re moving to Richmond.”

Sam swallowed. “Yes. Tomorrow.”

Gil pressed his fingers again. “And you’re here today.”

Words rushed out of Sam from some deep place inside him. “I should have come sooner. I should have come more often, Gil, I’m so sorry.”

Gil’s smile looked just like him, if you didn’t have to see the rest of the face. “I told you not to,” he said. “You only followed directions, for once in your life.”

Sam couldn’t laugh. “Gil, I wish it was me in this bed. It should have been me.”

Gil’s smile disappeared. “Don’t ever say that.”

If I hadn’t left. The same four words had pounded into Sam’s head over and over, like a jackhammer into concrete, ever since the phone call in March. They started up again now, louder and angrier than ever, but Gil interrupted them. “Now,” he said. “Tell me about Richmond.”

As if Sam were the one who needed cheering up. Gil shouldn’t have to do that. Sam forced out small talk about his new apartment (“about five feet square”) and the hall where the Symphonic Artists performed (“the Robert E. Lee and Maria Day Lewis Center for the Performing Arts; that’s a mouthful, huh?”). Gil’s eyes asked for more, and Sam told him how his northern accent made him feel like a penguin in a flock of flamingos. “They all have these great voices. When they talk it sounds like singing, but I sound as exciting as a lawnmower.”

Gil grinned. “Penguin?” he said. “Sure. Especially in your tux.”

They had too few minutes to make up for so many hours and days and weeks apart. When Sam finally had to leave, he tried to ignore the steady drip of grey rain down the window. He wrote his new address and phone number on the notepad next to Gil’s phone. “Make sure you take this with you. When do you get to go home?”

Gil tore off the paper and held it between his fingers. “Soon. Another day or two, I think.”

“Keep me posted.”

“I will.”

Sam’s wouldn’t lose it now. Gil didn’t need that. “I’ll call you as soon as I have something to report,” he said. “And don’t worry. If you’re sure you don’t mind seeing me, I’ll be back up here before you know it.”

“I would never mind seeing you.”

Sam shook Gil’s hand one more time—such a tiny, empty thing to do—and made it out of the room. In the hallway, he stood and stared at a blank patch of wall.

“Mr. Kraychek?”

Sam whipped around. Jonas Caruso gave an ingratiating smile that rasped on Sam’s nerves like a nail file on a raw cuticle. “Mr. Kraychek,” he said, “I’m afraid we’ve gotten off on the wrong foot.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” For God’s sake, Sam should at least try to keep his voice down. This was a hospital.

Caruso came a step closer. “I don’t mean to pry with respect to you and Mr. Hart.”

“We’re friends.”

“Yes, I know.” Caruso was so close now that Sam could smell his aftershave. Sam’s fingers twitched, wanting to curl into fists. “It seems to me, though”—Caruso lowered his voice—“that you have an interest in his welfare which others don’t share.”

Listen, you... Sam forced air into his lungs. “I don’t know why the fuck I am telling you this, but I was not the one that got him sick. Do you understand?”

Caruso didn’t seem offended. “I didn’t think you were. If you had been, at this point you would likely be in much the same condition he is. Mr. Kraychek, I would like to help you.”

“How the hell can you do that?”

“Let’s walk down this way a moment.”

He touched Sam’s elbow. Sam snatched his arm out of the way, but Caruso had already started walking away, and Sam had to go in the same direction to get back to the lobby. He followed, reining his anger in as hard as he could.

At the end of the hall closest to the nurse’s desk, a supply room door stood open. Caruso ducked inside and motioned for Sam to follow.

As soon as the door shut behind them, Sam rounded on him. “What is this about?”

Caruso stood with his hands at his sides, as relaxed as if he and Sam were neighbours having a friendly chat over the back fence. “It would be best if we’re not overheard,” he said. “I wanted to tell you that hospital policy ordinarily would not allow you to receive information about Mr. Hart’s state of health, since you are not a relative.”

“I know that.”

“And in this respect I would like to help you. When Mr. Hart is here, I can keep you apprised directly of his status, as necessary.”

“As necessary? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“For instance, if his health deteriorates suddenly. I feel sure you would want to know in that event.”

The closet held extra linens, piled on shelves. The heavy floral smell of laundry detergent made Sam feel sick. “Yes,” he snapped. “I would.”

Caruso nodded. “And as I said, hospital policy ordinarily would not allow you to be informed, if, say, Mr. Hart could not contact you himself.”

Why the hell call him *Mr. Hart* when apparently it was *Gilbert* to his face? “So, what, you’d call me instead?”

“Yes. With your permission, of course.”

“What would happen if somebody found out you did that?”

Caruso shrugged. “It’s a risk. My job might be compromised.”

“Compromised.” *Why can’t you say, “I could get fired?”* Sam demanded, “Why would you do that for me?”

Caruso met Sam’s eyes. Under the glare of the fluorescent light overhead, his face looked open and tired. “For the purposes of this conversation, Mr. Kraychek, and without getting into unnecessary specifics, let’s leave it that I understand what you are going through right now.”

Sam didn’t need to be told what he meant. The anger drained out of him so fast, he almost slumped down on the floor. “I’m sorry,” he said.

Caruso nodded. “You didn’t know.”

Sam realized, for the first time, that Caruso didn’t look all that different from himself. Almost the same height, dark eyes, dark hair, except in this light Sam could see traces of silver at the other man’s temples and faint lines at the corners of his eyes.

Caruso said, “So I will notify you, when Mr. Hart is here, if there is ever a circumstance you should be aware of and he is unable to contact you himself. May I have your information?”

Thirty seconds ago, Sam would have refused. Now he wrote his number and address on a piece of toilet paper wrapper Caruso produced. “It’s a long-distance call,” he apologized. “I’m moving to Richmond tomorrow.”

Caruso seemed interested in the new job. “Mr. Hart is also a conductor, isn’t he?”

Could you still say *is*? “Yes. One of the best.”

Caruso turned off the light in the closet before he and Sam stepped out into the hall. He tucked the paper into the breast pocket of his blue scrubs.

“Take care, Mr. Kraychek.” He held out his hand, and Sam shook it. “Safe trip tomorrow.”

“Thank you.”

Outside, the sky still dripped spiritless rain. Mist settled in Sam’s hair and chilled the back of his neck. At the end of the block, he turned around for one more look at the hospital. The red brick bulk reared up into the sky, as solid and unyielding as a prison.

Tomorrow he would start over. If only he didn’t have to leave so much behind.

Chapter 2

Jeannette couldn't get inside the Lewis Center. She found the back door locked, and when she went around front and peered through the lobby's glass doors, she saw a field of red plush and gold braid and Corinthian pillars, and worse yet, a security desk with a burly uniformed guard behind it. At first she lifted her chin and reminded herself that she was going to work in this building and had as much right to be here as anyone else. Besides which, she did have on her best black skirt and a brand new silver blouse. She looked every inch a professional.

She put her hand on the brass door handle, but when she imagined pushing the door open and marching into the line of the guard's stare, she swallowed. No. It made perfect sense, really, to go back around the building and plant herself in a square of sidewalk, to keep an eye on the strip of parking spaces so she would see when her new boss arrived.

Standing in the hot sun, she thought she ought to have brought her boss's letter with her. A full month and more after she had gotten it, she still didn't believe the job offer was real, which was the biggest reason why she had decided to stand outside here like—yes, okay, call a spade a spade—a twit. If she had brought the letter, she could have waved it in anybody's face if they challenged her right to walk into this building. *July 24th, 1986. Dear Miss Reilly, I am pleased to offer you the position of choral accompanist...* Signed Maestro Samuel L. Kraychek, Director, Richmond Symphonic Artists.

Jeannette had daydreamed about what this Maestro Kraychek must look like. She liked to think that the clean, decisive signature on her letter meant that he would have distinguished grey hair and lean fingers, and a face like the portrait of Franz Liszt her piano teacher had shown her years ago. Maestro Kraychek ought to be impeccably dressed in a three-piece suit, and he would have, yes, a gold watch, the old-fashioned kind you stuck in your breast pocket so you could string the chain across the front of your vest.

Jeannette didn't have any watch at all, so she counted off her best guess at seconds and switched her choral music from hand to hand like a clock pendulum. Her fingers left sweat marks on the ivory cover. Tonight she would sit down at a piano and accompany a professional chorus for an honest-to-God conductor. People from Reckord's Mill didn't do that. Jeannette's decision to leave home for college and get a music degree—granted, only at Charleston Southern University, not three hours from home—had made people look at her as if she had announced an intention to move to Australia and herd dingoes for a living. Let those people see her now.

Across the street, next to the navy dumpster, a tiny maple tried to scratch a living for itself. It couldn't have much room to grow, shoving its roots into whatever cracks in the pavement it could find, but its handful of leaves made a brave little display of red and orange. The tree knew it was September, in spite of the heat.

Jeannette admired its persistence. She didn't care much for red: her own too-fiery hair, a liability all her life, made sure of that. Tonight, especially, she had twisted it up into the smallest and tightest possible bun. She did like the little tree for being tough, though, showing the world it would make a way for itself.

A battered grey Pinto pulled up behind the dumpster. Mozart's Mass in C Minor stopped moving, suspended from Jeannette's right hand.

The car didn't look right. A conductor should drive something grander, shouldn't he? Still, to be safe, Jeannette clamped her beat-up purse under her arm and rehearsed her lines again. *Maestro Kraychek? My name is Jeannette Reilly. Pleased to meet you. Or, Maestro Kraychek? So nice to meet you. I'm Jeannette Reilly.* Whatever she did, she had to breathe and concentrate on her voice so she would sound like a bona-fide Richmonder. No need to let this man know she was fresh off the bus from Nowheresville, South Carolina.

The Pinto's door opened. Jeannette braced herself. If it really was him, and he didn't see her right away, she could walk up as if she had just arrived and hadn't spent the last however many minutes hovering here like a fool. She had already taken a step forward when the driver got out of the car.

She froze. That boy looked barely older than her. Twenty-five, twenty-six at most? He wore a white short-sleeve shirt and, good grief, blue jeans. They had frayed cuffs. She could see the dangling fringe on them from where she stood. She stared as he reached into the back seat and pulled out a brown leather briefcase that looked more battered than her purse. When he turned around, she saw the shock of dark bangs that fell across his forehead.

He hurried across the narrow street to the back entrance. His keys clicked against the glass door. In another second he had disappeared inside.

The aristocratic figure in Jeannette's imagination had been so real that she couldn't make herself believe this was her new boss. But why else would he have a key, and why would he get here so early? At least he had left the door unlocked, and she could get out of the sun before she turned into a lobster.

Inside, the cool air hit her first, carrying the smells of old wood and floor polish. Halfway down the steps to the basement, something else found her too.

Piano music. Jeannette stopped on the second step from the bottom. She knew this piece: Chopin's third Ballade. She had played it herself, a long time ago now, but her fingers still remembered the quick jumps up and down the keyboard and the long, shimmering runs. She went down the last step and opened the door into the basement. The music rolled out to meet her.

It came from a room about halfway down the hall. The room's closed door made no barrier at all. Jeannette thought maybe the dark-haired boy had a tape deck in there, was blasting a recording

by Rubinstein or Horowitz. Except Horowitz would have had a tuned piano that wouldn't have jangled every time he hit that one low note.

Jeannette stopped two feet from the room's door. She had spent hours training her hands to coax enough strength and power out of her great-aunt's tired old spinet to make the music sound like something. In those days Jeannette had spent most of her time at the piano, because when she wrapped music around herself, for those precious minutes she felt quiet and safe. Now the same piece she had played back then sang under the unknown boy's hands. She had never made it sound like this. Suspended in the music, she closed her eyes.

When the last chord came, she held onto the sound an instant too long. Door hinges squealed. Her eyes snapped open.

He stood only a few inches taller than her. She could see that now, close up. She had always been the smallest person in any room, so she should have felt better, but the few bites of dinner her sister had made her eat earlier seemed to tap-dance in her stomach.

"Hello," he said.

He had brown eyes, Jeannette noticed, the rich colour of molasses. "Hello," she said. She had forgotten to concentrate on sounding like a Richmonder, and her South Carolina twang slid into the syllables. Her tongue froze in embarrassment.

After an interminable second of silence, he asked, "Are you with the chorus?"

"Yes." *Yay-us*. She had to do better than this. Pulling the shreds of her dignity around her, she said as politely as she could, "Do you know, is Maestro Kraychek here yet?"

He laughed. "That's me. Please call me Sam." He held out his hand.

Oh. Oh, dear. Jeannette shifted her grip on her music to return the handshake. Her jaw opened like a puppet's on a string. "So nice to meet you." *Nabs. Yew*. For pity's sake. "My name is Jeannette Reilly."

“My accompanist!” Jeannette realized he wasn’t a Richmonder either. His accent put him from somewhere up north. “It’s great to meet you,” he said. “I was so glad somebody responded to my ad.”

Per Jeannette’s request, her sister Veronica had been scanning the paper for piano jobs for weeks before Jeannette followed her sister and their family to Richmond. Veronica was the one who had found the ad. But what did he mean, glad somebody responded to it?

He said, “I remember you’re not a local, but where are you from?”

Jeannette couldn’t say *Reckord’s Mill* and drag that name and all the baggage that went with it out in front of him. “Charleston,” she managed. At least it was the last place she had lived in.

“No kidding! I hear that’s a great town. Did you like it?”

“Yes. It was nice.” *Nabs* again. Jeannette bit her lip.

“And you moved here recently?”

“Just this summer.”

“Really? Me too.”

She ought to ask where he was from, try to talk like a human being. Before she could collect her wits, he said, “Anyway, I was thrilled somebody wanted to be my accompanist. You know we’re on the skids here, of course.”

Jeannette blinked. “No, I didn’t know that.”

He laughed. “Oh, sure. It’s the only reason I got my job. Otherwise they would have wanted somebody with some qualifications.”

Jeannette thought she heard a thread of bitterness in the words. She pictured the white-tie-sporting, silver-maned conductor again. Maybe that was what he meant by “qualifications.” But this man, the way he played...

“Listen,” he said, “I was going to go find a soda machine. Do you know if there’s one down here?” She shook her head. “They must have one someplace. Anyway, right after that, let’s go through my plan for rehearsal, okay?”

“Yes. Sure.”

“Great. Do you want a soda, if I can find some?”

“No. Thank you.”

“Okay. Be back in a minute.”

After he disappeared down the hall, Jeannette blundered in the opposite direction toward a Ladies Room sign on the wall. The feeble light in the bathroom showed the cracks in the floor tile, the green rings around the drains in the old porcelain sinks.

Jeannette dropped her purse and music on the floor and leaned on the last sink in the row. She couldn’t have explained to anyone, and wouldn’t have wanted to try, why her heart beat so fast and her breath came so sharp and shallow.

In the grimy mirror, she stared at her reflection. Nylons and pumps and her best skirt and high-collared blouse. On top of the finery, her sister had made her put on makeup. Jeannette’s eyes looked twice their normal size with all the silver shadow Veronica had painted on. You could see her wet-apple-red lips from the next block.

Jeannette held the faucet open with one hand and splashed ice-cold water on her eyes with the other. As she tugged at her eyelashes, trying to yank off the mascara, the piano started up again. He must have found that soda in no time. Jeannette found herself picturing his hands moving over the keys, the power and strength of each stroke.

A little voice in her head whispered, *On the skids or not, he did hire you.* It sounded like Veronica. *And you saw those brown eyes.*

No. Absolutely not. Jeannette scooped a handful of icy water and scrubbed at her lips, tasting the lipstick as it trickled between her teeth. This was just a job. Who cared how he played or what colour eyes he had or what he looked like when he smiled. Or what she looked like, ever, for that matter. She would do the best she could, get paid, and give her sister and brother-in-law something toward rent. She had no other reason to be here.

The music went on, wrapping around the splash of water into the cracked sink.

*

He told the chorus to call him Sam. “I’m delighted to be here,” he said, standing up on the podium with his score open on the music stand in front of him. “This will be a wonderful season.”

Jeannette sat at the baby grand piano, which had clearly seen better days, and folded her hands in her lap so nobody would see them shaking. When he introduced her to the chorus—“our excellent accompanist, Miss Jeannette Reilly”—she stared straight ahead at her own music and didn’t chance a smile.

He, Sam, had told her more about his job while they ran down his plan for rehearsal. Ticket sales for the RSA, as he called it, had been bad for years. If the group couldn’t turn things around this year, they would fold in the spring. He told her this matter-of-factly between sips of Coke from the machine he had discovered on the first floor.

His job could disappear. Hers—her first real one, the one she had hoped for and dreamed about for so long—could go right out the window along with it. Now, waiting for rehearsal to start, Jeannette knew she had every reason to feel nervous. In a few seconds she would have to put her hands on the keys and play in front of total strangers, and on top of that, she might have to start the job hunt again sooner rather than later. Somehow she couldn’t focus on those things. She had sat

here next to him on this piano bench, and his sleeve had brushed hers, and she had caught the spicy scent of his aftershave.

On the podium, he wrapped up his introduction. “Okay,” he said, “let’s sing. First movement, please.” He turned to Jeannette. “Let’s have the intro.”

Jeannette had practiced this music over and over on Aunt Gretchen’s old spinet, newly instated in her sister and brother-in-law’s apartment, until Veronica begged her to stop. Right now she didn’t know if she could find the first note.

Sam raised the baton. Jeannette’s hands went to the keys because they had to. The room went quiet.

The baton came down. Jeannette’s fingers moved on their own. The keys descended in perfect time with the white stick’s pulse.

Sam guided her first phrases, shaping the music with free hand. He did not look at her after the first glance when he gave her the downbeat, but her eyes stayed on him. The sound of the piano filled the room. Inside it, she heard the orchestra: gentle bowstrokes of violins and celli, soft, solemn footfalls in a hushed funeral march.

Her fear went away. The singers breathed together the moment before their entrance. Jeannette breathed with them.

Kyrie eleison!

Sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses entered in turn, layering lines of melody over each other, building a tower. Jeannette had never heard anything like this. The sheer volume of the sound wrapped around her and took her breath away. She would have closed her eyes to drink in its power, but she must not break the connection with Sam’s hands.

He leaned forward over the stand, feet planted, his free hand reaching out to the singers to ask for more. Intensity burned in his face, and the dark bangs fell across his forehead.

Dear God. He was beautiful.

In the final measures, he turned to Jeannette again. She pressed the piano's soft pedal to the floor and placed each chord exactly the way he wanted. One. Another. And soft as a breath, the last.

He curled his fingers gently into his palm, and she released the pedal. Just before he turned to the chorus, he looked at her and smiled.

“Okay.” He turned back to the chorus, his voice brisk and cool. “Not bad for a first read-through. Let's go back to the top.”

They spent an hour and a half working through the movement, note by note, phrase by phrase. Jeannette didn't feel the minutes passing. After they ran through it again, he called a break. “Good work. Let's take ten minutes.”

Chair legs scraped the floor, and a babble of voices started up. Jeannette wanted to slump forward and let the piano hold her up. She couldn't do that in front of everyone.

It was going to be okay. She could play fine. She was tired right now because she'd never had to work so hard at a rehearsal before. College choir practice hadn't counted, not compared with this.

Sitting here on the bench, trying to summon the energy to get up and go out to the bathroom, Jeannette told herself those things so she would not think about how the guiding gestures of Sam's hands had felt as intimate as a touch on her skin. She could not afford to admit how much that scared her.

Somebody came up to the front of the room. “Sam?”

Jeannette couldn't help staring. The black man who walked up from the back row of chairs had to be the tallest person in the room. He was imposing, not heavy but muscular, with skin so dark that against his arms and neck, his sky-blue polo shirt seemed to glow. He had a mass of tight charcoal-coloured curls piled up half a foot deep on his scalp.

When he got to the podium, he said, “Sam, I have to tell you, I’m so glad to see you.” His voice sounded dark and rich and made Jeannette think of chocolate. He held out his hand. “Seriously. You probably don’t remember me, but I sang in the chorus for your audition.”

The two men made a funny contrast: the tall, dark one and the small boyish figure. “I’m Nathan,” the black man went on. “Nathan Woods. Your audition blew me away. I thought, man, if they don’t hire him, that’s some truly sorry shit.”

Jeannette didn’t care for swear words. “Ugly is as ugly says,” her Aunt Gretchen had always told her, especially when Jeannette came home from school crying because of what the other kids had called her. But the fact that the man had said “shit” wasn’t what bothered her. There was something else about him, something that tugged on the edge of Jeannette’s brain and made her hands want to twist together again in her lap.

Sam laughed. “It’s kind of you to say so,” he said.

“I mean it.” The black man still held on to Sam’s hand, Jeannette saw. “You’re exactly what this group needs.”

Jeannette’s bladder suddenly demanded her attention. She didn’t want to get up in case either of the men noticed that she’d been listening, but she had no choice. She left the bench and hurried out of the room.

The air felt much cooler out in the hall. Jeannette hoped she would find the bathroom empty the way it had been before; she needed a minute to herself. When she got there, though, she found a squat woman in a bubblegum-pink sweater at the sink along with her neighbour from the alto section, a skinny, spidery blonde with faded hair and a skirt too short to hide her varicose veins.

Pink Sweater Lady beamed at Jeannette in the mirror. “Well, hello there!” she said. “Our new accompanist. I have to tell you, honey, you did a wonderful job.”

Spider was touching up her mascara, opening her pink-lipsticked mouth in a huge O, the way women always mysteriously did when they put on makeup. She paused between eyes and said, “You sure did. I thought to myself, I wouldn’t want to be that girl! How’d you ever keep up with him? He’s a pistol, isn’t he?”

Jeannette tried to set her face in a pleasant expression. “Yes. Excuse me.”

She ducked into the nearest stall. One of the sinks started up. Pink Sweater Lady said, “What’s your name again, honey? I know he told us, but I forgot already. Isn’t that awful?”

“Jeannette,” Jeannette managed. She would have to pee with both of them listening. She had always hated somebody hearing her bodily functions.

“I’m Matilda,” Pink Sweater Lady answered. “Mattie for short, and this is my friend Gladys. We’ve been in the chorus forever.”

Jeannette couldn’t hold it in any longer. The stream started, even louder than the still-running faucet. One of them must take a coon’s age to wash her hands.

Spider/Gladys said, “Our last director, Ian Scharbach, he was such a dear old thing. What a gentleman.”

“I don’t think this new boy is,” Pink Sweater Lady answered. Jeannette couldn’t remember if her name was Maggie or Millie. Both women tittered.

Jeannette sat on the toilet after she finished, but they made no move toward the door, even after the sink shut off. “What do you think of him, Jeannie?” Gladys asked.

Jeannette hated that nickname. Aunt Gretchen had always called her by it, and hearing it was almost as bad as saying the name Reckord’s Mill out loud. She flushed the toilet and took longer than she needed to arrange her skirt, but the two of them were still waiting when she came out of the stall. “Well,” she said, “I think he did a very nice job so far.” *Fab-wur.*

Pink Sweater Lady said, “Maybe so, but it won’t be easy to keep up with him. He’s not very nice to us old folks!”

The cold water at the sink shrank Jeannette’s hot fingers back to their usual size. Spider/Gladys smirked at her in the mirror. “But Jeannie here’s young. I bet she doesn’t mind having a young man to work with, do you, hon?” Her tone dug Jeannette in the ribs. “He’s not bad-looking at all, you think?”

Pink Sweater Lady chimed in. “No, he sure isn’t. In fact, if I was a year or two younger...”

Spider twittered with laughter. “A year or two? Honey, don’t you just wish.”

Jeannette’s face burned as if she had stood out in the sun for hours. She had to squeeze between the two women to get to the paper towels, and she rubbed her hands on the sour-smelling paper and threw it out as fast as she could. “I think we’re supposed to be back now,” she said.

“We won’t hold you up,” Spider said. “You’ve got an important job to do.” The *nudge nudge, wink wink* followed Jeannette out into the hall.

Back in the rehearsal room, Sam sat on a tall stool at the podium and leafed through his music. He glanced over at her. “How are you doing?”

Jeannette drew her aching shoulders back. She could handle this. “Fine, thank you.”

He turned to face her. Those eyes hit her like a battery of sunlight. “You did a great job.”

She would not go weak at the knees because of a compliment. “Thank you.” In her own ears, her voice sounded chilly.

He didn’t seem to notice. “I used to be an accompanist too,” he said. “I started out with a church choir, a long, long time ago. I joined it to sing, believe it or not—well, you haven’t heard me try to sing yet—but the director knew I could play, so that was that. They always do that to us, don’t they?”

Us. She liked that in spite of herself. “Yes,” she said, “I guess they do.”

“The choir was pretty awful anyway. Little Catholic church, old ladies who sound like they’re sitting on the washing machine during spin cycle. This was back in the town where I grew up.”

“You’re from a small town?”

The question came out before she thought. She shouldn’t have asked it. He would have no idea why it mattered.

“Oh, yes.” He laughed. “They don’t get much smaller. I’m from Westbury, Pennsylvania, which nobody’s ever heard of unless they live there. Sometimes not even then. It’s way up in the northeast corner of the state, in the middle of nowhere.”

Why, all of a sudden, did Jeannette want to tell him about Reckord’s Mill? He should not hear how she been the only kid in town who played the piano, or how that had given all the others—as if they needed it—more ammunition to use against her. She should not hand him that piece of herself.

He glanced at his watch. “We should get started. Looks like pretty much everybody’s here.” She hadn’t noticed the singers filing back in. “If they’re not here”—he winked—“they’ll know not to be late next time.”

He went back to his score, and she had to fumble for the second movement of the Mass. She felt so tired.

This had been the longest night of her life, and it wasn’t over yet. Sam rapped the baton against his music stand, calling the group to attention. Jeannette hitched her shoulders back again and put her hands on the keyboard.

In the back of her head, a small voice said, *I wish he would keep looking at me.*

*

Jeannette stumbled on the stairs on her way up to her sister and brother-in-law's third-floor apartment. Her music wanted to drop out of her slack fingers. Drew had to get up at five for work, and Veronica spent all day trying to corral the kids, and now it was after ten. Everybody would be asleep. Jeannette tried to fit her key quietly into the apartment's front door lock, but the stubborn old metal scraped and rasped.

When she stepped into the living room, the silence hit her. No screaming baby, no shrieking four-year-old, no pots and pans clanging or vacuum running or record player blaring "Thunder Road." Most of all, no Veronica yelling down the hall, "Hey, little sister, how'd it go? Tell me everything!"

Jeannette relaxed. She managed to smile.

Light came from the kitchen. Her sister must have left the ceiling lamp on before she went to bed. Jeannette made her way carefully toward it, peering into the shag rug for stray marbles from Hungry Hungry Hippos. If you didn't find them by turning your ankle, Veronica would suck them up in the vacuum and then bring the house down with her wailing, opera-singer-esque laments about kids not picking up their toys. Jeannette suspected her nephew Ricky enjoyed watching his mother rip open the vacuum bag and swear at the dust inside, but she hadn't yet caught him in the act of setting up booby traps.

Jeannette stood her chorus music on the piano and stepped over the depression in the carpet next to the bench, where the wood squealed loud enough to bother the downstairs neighbours. The only face at the kitchen table belonged to Ricky's grubby jack-in-the-box. When Jeannette scooped it up and set it on the counter, the redheaded clown swung back and forth, squeaking sadly. She took off her shoes and lined them up on the floor by the table, heels and toes touching. Her feet drank in the cool from the linoleum tile.

At the sink, she filled the white ceramic kettle with exactly enough water for one cup. She propped herself up against the counter, because if she sat at the table she would fall asleep until the shrieking kettle woke everybody up. Her body felt like a deflated balloon.

What had she gotten herself into?

She had called Sam a boy. She couldn't have been more wrong. Again, thank goodness her sister wasn't here to ask a thousand questions. Veronica would never understand how that *man* was so far above Jeannette that Jeannette had to look up to see his shoelaces.

The kettle grumbled. Jeannette took it off the heat and got her favourite mug out of the cabinet by the stove. The white violet-patterned stoneware had been pretty once, but somebody had dropped it at some point and broken a piece out of the rim. They had glued it back together, but the crack looked like a stray hair you could never rub off, and the glue around it had turned yellow. The handle also had two chips missing, like a mouse's toothmarks.

Jeannette made the tea carefully, without spilling a drop of water on the counter. She wouldn't add sugar, because Veronica never sealed the bag properly, just folded the top down and shoved it into the cabinet. She never seemed to think about ants and whatnot getting into the food.

At the table, slowly sipping the tea, Jeannette replayed the rehearsal in her head. The steam from the cup warmed her cheeks. Maybe that was why the table seemed to blur, so that the grape juice stain on the yellow Formica swelled up to the size of an eggplant. Maybe the steam made her eyes smart too.

You didn't fall in love with someone when, as of twenty-four hours ago, you hadn't met him. You didn't hand that person a key to you, no matter if something about him spoke straight to your soul. Jeannette could not be that stupid. God knew she had reason to know better.

No, of course Jeannette didn't need her sister here right now. If Veronica saw her snivelling away like this, the questions and prying would never stop. Jeannette couldn't have tolerated that for five minutes. Except...

Saint Veronica, protector of helpless creatures. Who once, when she happened to glance out the window of her third-grade classroom and see kids cornering Jeannette yet again on the playground, the way they had done so often, had shot up out of her seat and straight past her staggered teacher to barrel down on those towheaded brats like the wrath of God.

Jeannette rubbed her eyes with the back of her wrist. It was so late, she might as well call it early. She poured the rest of the tea down the sink and neatly rinsed the mug out.

In her bedroom, she shut the door and sat on the bed to peel off her nylons in the dark. Her tiny room always smelled like boiled cabbage. The downstairs neighbours seemed to fix sauerkraut every day of the week. Jeannette reached behind her for the shade that covered her little window and pulled it down. Veronica laughed at her for doing that ("nobody's going to see anything, honey, unless there's some chipmunks out in that empty lot"), but you couldn't be too careful. Jeannette wormed out of the skirt and blouse and thought about hanging them up, but the mattress sagged underneath her, and it was too much work to stand up again. She folded the clothes neatly and set them on the floor by the foot of the bed.

She hadn't brushed her teeth, and she would probably have to pee in the middle of the night. It already was the middle of the night. In two or three hours, then.

Too bad. Jeannette found her nightgown under the covers and pulled the plain white cotton over her head. Veronica's nightgowns had a lot less fabric and a lot more lace, and what fabric they did have was that slippery satiny stuff. Jeannette didn't understand how she could sleep in those things. Of course, how anybody could sleep with somebody else right next to them, especially snoring the way Drew did, was beyond her.

She burrowed under the sheets. Her pillow felt smooth and cool. In too few hours, she'd have to open her eyes again.

Sleep closed over her. The last thing she saw behind her closed eyelids was Sam's hand holding the white baton.