

*To Love A Stranger*, Chapter 1 excerpt

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: *Liudas.*

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, *Liudas, 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.