

## Excerpt from *Sarabande*

### Chapter Three

“Remember, Anna.”

“What?”

“It’s *andante* here.”

“I’m aware.”

“Then play like it.”

“I will. For the concert.”

“A concert is made in its rehearsal.”

She looked up at Frederick’s face, her gaze sliding down to the sagging baton.

“For you, maybe.”

The other musicians hid their mouths. A few coughed into their sleeves.

Frederick stared at her a beat too long from the podium, until she disarmed him with a smile.

“It’s not my intent to be difficult, *Maestro*. But I’ve found that a little massaging of the rhythm can be a good exercise in rehearsal. It keeps everyone sharp and slightly off-centered for the real thing.” Her smile widened. “Which is to say it keeps things . . . exciting.”

A couple of the bows in the hands behind her rapped their music stands.

“Ms. Brawne.”

“Yes?”

His voice dipped, forcing her to lean in.

“It’s my understanding that *I* am still the conductor here, Anna?”

She settled her bow into the groove of the strings. Her left fingers flexed over the instrument’s neck, while her knees squeezed the wood between her legs.

“And it was my understanding that people are paying their hundred dollars to come and see me.” She raised an eyebrow. “Sir.”

He wiped down the corners of his mouth, before raising his baton with renewed energy.

“Again! Let’s start with the first movement, everyone. And more *andante* this time, if you please.”

He looked at her pointedly. She licked her lips and closed her eyes.

*What a couple of performers we are.*

Her mind looped the familiar terrain while the woodwinds began their trill and shimmer. She knew every step to come: each note, every measure recycled from some other day, some other hour. D.C. al coda, over and over. Not only in this rehearsal, but in tomorrow night’s performance. It had already happened, tomorrow. The night was over for her. Its two standing ovations. The roses that would wither in their brittle hangar. The sweat stains stinking up her underarms. The way all those flashbulb eyes popped up at her from the concert hall, like she was a thing—*the*

*artist*—and not this flesh of uncertainty, reserve and paler nerve. The smiles of strangers, and the smiles of friends strange to anything but “the gift.” Frederick’s determination to take advantage of the afterglow and fuck her in the cramped dressing room. His not realizing that she’d already made love to six hundred people fifteen minutes before.

How was he to compare?

How was anyone, really?

The music was still the thing. She could still fall deep into its crevasses, its canyon. There was refuge, and excitement, inside its throbbing carriage, some fleeting meaning harnessed to its reins, quickening the blood inside her veins, which circled frantically, if never quite arrived.

She came in perfectly on Frederick’s cue.

Andante.

*What if this is all I am?*

The thought was swallowed by a low, driving note. Her tongue pressed against the roof of her mouth, testing the vibrations.

Her arm began its sweet and terrible fury.

The hall opened itself to receive her.

The after party had another hour to exhaust.

Well-wishers pressed against her in the small, stately reception room, replete with leather chairs, a fading damask wallpaper, and earnest, bow-tied servers. Anna recognized a few of the faces and smiled. Most let her be. She had that effect on people, some air of being apart from the crowd. From her outsider's position across from the bar, she held her wine close to her breast and hunted for Frederick with her eyes. The familiar need yawned inside her gut. All her blood had been pumped into the performance, into the Haydn. She felt turned out, desolate. A desire for music still shuffled inside her, but its thrust was rebuffed by the thick din surrounding her. Finally, it surrendered, lobotomized by the blunt, blunt scalpel of human conversation and human banal.

She pressed the glass to her cheek. Her arches were beginning to ache inside the heels, and her fingers felt numb around the glass's stem. She drank the wine in startled gulps.

With the reach of her mind, she groped for Frederick. She needed his body to uncover hers. She had come to expect, if also resent, his advances after their closer coupling on stage. Resisting because of his sense of conquest, his near entitlement that she would bend to his aggression. But grateful, it must be said, to submit after struggling against him for so many days and hours. To be pinned beneath a greater strength and convinced, through gross mechanics, that her flesh was as desirable as her song: it was the only transition that could shadow what had just been exorcised. The reality of hipbones connecting in a ragged, rhythmless beating, of their salted

bodies reciprocating so much easy lust. Her body was real again, when used by his. She occupied it, acknowledged it and forgave it for its terrible literalness, its lack of larger meaning.

“Anna!”

Lawrence emerged from the crush, dressed in tuxedo black. She kissed his proffered cheek with gladness.

“You were unbelievable tonight,” he said. “It swept me away.”

“Thanks. It’s hard to beat Boston for pure musicianship.”

“Like anyone paid attention. You owned them all, my dear.”

She smiled in a vague admission. Lawrence liked to pet her. It was their habit. They knew each other from her early days in Paris. He was a technically brilliant cellist, with fingers like bellows. But he had quit performance for management some years ago, telling her, *If you’re not a soloist and you stay in this business, you must also like being spanked in bed.*

“Where’s Freddy?” he asked.

“Good question.”

“Leaving you alone with all these wolves around?”

She shrugged and took a sip. “They don’t appear to be circling.”

“How many more cities does he have lined up?”

“Five. We head to Toronto next. Then it’s—”

She broke off.

“What?”

“Jesus. I can’t remember.”

He chuckled, patting her on the back. His hand lingered on her skin, vivid against the black, strapless dress. His thumb rubbed the apple of her shoulder in tight, discrete circles.

“Larry.”

“Hmm?”

“You’re doing it.”

His hand dropped away. He shrugged and took a sip.

“You gave me some hope once, so you can’t blame me now. Especially after a performance like that one.”

The flush in her cheek dug in.

“I wasn’t playing for you.”

“No shit.”

She squeezed his hand, instantly deflating. “I’m sorry. That was mean.”

“Spectacularly honest, I’d say.”

He aimed for her cheek again. Because he was drunk, he got her ear.

“Anyhoo. Thank you for making it to our humble dwellings, Anna. I realize Boston has nothing on Paris. I’m reminded every day.”

They both caught sight of Frederick’s long line, striding across the room.

“Not to mention all that Paris can offer you,” he murmured, before melting into the stack of bodies.

Dear Larry. He was right. She had let him hope.

Why again?

She slipped out her iPhone while Frederick spoke with a matronly woman who kept stroking his arm, cupping his elbow suggestively. Anna smiled at the wry glance he flicked her way. He had a term for this unconscious flirting with performers and artists: *Touching Jesus*. If they rubbed hard enough, maybe there would be some kind of transubstantiation in store for them as well.

She called up her itinerary on the smartphone. Frederick had finalized it ten months ago. Eight cities. The first time a couple had toured as conductor and soloist since Daniel Barenboim and Jacqueline du Pré in the 70's. Their love affair was as important as the music, in the eyes of the small public which followed such things.

New York, Atlanta and Boston were behind them. Now Toronto, and—  
Cleveland! Of course.

She pictured the city on the map in her mind, recalling the rich, vibrant acoustics in the revamped Severance Hall. A late-night meal of eggplant lasagna in Little Italy jangled some bells. *The city whose river once caught fire*. Cleve-land.

She checked her email on the touch screen as an afterthought. There were fifteen new messages. Weariness flagged her gaze: there were a number of new interviews to arrange. A charity function to attend in L.A., along with Yo-Yo Ma. The

press loved to play up a rivalry of the sexes between them (he was the “fearless virtuoso,” she an “impassioned angel,” the arms of gender stereotyping wrapping snugly about them), despite his being the most generous performer she’d ever known. A late invite to a conference on Bach, in Berlin, on the anniversary of the composer’s death. And more. All this paperwork of art, the grinding boredom of privilege. It dragged at her, but it also tethered her to the earth.

Her forehead creased at the next to last message. She didn’t recognize the sender.

*Found: Bach and a New Moon*

Her eyes crossed. Only for a moment. A kind of gray fluttering, in which color and form begged out, before the room’s walls and bodies resumed their right angles and blush. And she knew.

She knew.

The wall was cold against her back.

*Dear Ms. Brawne,*

*This is an odd email to write, and I imagine it must be an odder one to receive. I apologize for intruding into your life, but I believe I’ve unearthed something that once belonged to you. You see, my family lives in the house you once occupied, on Peach Tree Lane. While digging a grave for our cat, I came across your box.*



*I figured out the lock's combination. In a strange coincidence, it was also my birthday. Again, I apologize for invading your privacy like this. I can assure you I have no intention of doing anything with these belongings. I only wish to return them to you, if you will be so kind as to provide me with an address. I discovered your email address from an online forum. You have some very committed fans.*

*If you are interested in retrieving these items, send me your address, and I will return them promptly.*

*The Goldberg Variations still play, by the way. I shouldn't be surprised. If anything is immortal in this life, it must be Bach.*

*Regards,*

*Colin Ashe*

She meant to drop the phone inside her purse, but she dropped the glass instead, her wine dispersing quickly into the carpet fibers. The Goldberg Variations played inside her head, as her eyes mapped the spreading stain.

*Kissing the letter, then the box. Dialing the numbers to that far away day.*

“Attention! May I have your attention, everyone?”

*0-1-0.*

Frederick, liberated from the woman's fondling, commanded everyone's attention but Anna's. She remained fixated on the flesh-colored carpet soaking up its crimson kisses. The glass had been nearly empty. But it should really be—

“Well. I was going to do this before the encore tonight. I mean, really, I was . . . this. Close.”

Warm laughter whipped through the room.

*The filth on her jeans. Grit under the fingernails, too. What would her father say?*

“But I know Anna too well to interrupt her devotion to music with something as prosaic as a proposal.”

Gasps popped all around her. She thought they were champagne corks. Her neck lifted, as the heads and expectations swung her way.

*Digging deeper. So deep that no one would—*

Her back listed off the wall.

*—ever—*

“Quiet now! We don't want to frighten her.”

*—find it.*

Jagged laughter cracking her shell.

The phone dropped into her purse. She had the submerged sensation she should be struggling to the surface of something. Her smile seemed a flimsy defense against the knowing grins confronting her.

*Her tears in the dirt, too.*

Frederick. A space, or aisle, opened between them. She saw his tall frame, his tapered waist. Her eyes connected all the dots into sharp, mitered angles. She found the cufflinks she'd given him glittering beneath the chandelier's spangled light.

“Anna, my dear. I fell in love with you at this very concert hall. I still remember what was on the program that night, three years ago: the Elgar Concerto.”

Some comprehension began to dawn. But time still panted in her ear.

*Digging deeper. But not so deep that—*

“They said no one could play the Elgar like Jackie. They said it shouldn't even be tried. Especially by another young, female cellist who could only lose out by comparison.” He paused, running his finger around the lip of his glass. “Of course, ‘they’ also said that I was tone deaf back in grade school, so . . .”

“You still are, Weiss!”

The noise jerked her upright.

“I know that man, ladies and gentlemen, and all I can say is there is a reason he's taking your ticket stubs now,” Frederick continued smoothly.

Roman laughter.

*Burying it.*

She shivered. Her foot stepped over the stain.

*Buried.*

“But what I was *trying* to say is that Anna showed them all that night. She played with passion and precision. She played like a woman possessed.” He grew very

still, as his eyes met hers. It was the same look he drove at her before the first note that night. Fierce, penetrating. It staked her to the ground, made her believe in this myth of herself. “Everyone saw it. Everyone celebrated it, as they ought.”

Light, appreciative clapping.

She was here. Holy God, this was *happening*.

The past dropped from her shoulders like a dirty cape. The air felt cool against her skin, restorative. Like stage air. Her chin lifted accordingly.

“I think half the audience fell in love with you, Anna. You played upon all of our heartstrings in that red silk dress. With your hair tossed back.” He looked into his glass. “But mine—yes, my poor, feeble heart—was the only instrument you stole that night.”

She looked at him. A hundred people looked to her.

Frederick’s mouth danced with emotion.

“And you haven’t. That is to say, you have not . . .”

They waited.

He cleared his throat.

“Sorry.”

There were murmurs of understanding. She took an involuntary step forward.

“You have not given it back to me since,” he finished.

“Freddy,” she mouthed.

He strode down the short aisle, until he was close enough to take her hand. It felt small and cold inside his bigger one.

He kneeled down.

“Freddy, do—”

“Marry me, Anna.”

He pressed her palm against his lips. His eyes shined up at her.

“Just marry me, my love. Play upon my heart for the rest of our lives.”

The walls pressed in. Her mouth opened.

*If anything is immortal in this life, it must be Bach.*

And she heard, along with the rest, a single sound come from her lips.