

CHAPTER 1



Jane McAllister peeled off her jogging things to shower. It was her mid-morning ritual on weekdays. First, she attended her 8 o'clock class and was almost always late. Then, she went for a jog. Now, she would brew herself a large cup of coffee and shower, and then it was off to the practice rooms.

As she wrapped her towel tightly around her chest, she noticed something strange on her bed. It wasn't the object that was strange. The object was, in fact, very dear to her. The strangeness lay in why the object was on her unmade bed, resting innocuously in the wrinkled folds of her pretty farmhouse quilt. She retrieved it cautiously for some reason, as though it may have been some dangerous counterfeit to the original. Of course, it was not. It was the same photo album she had made several years before, with pictures of her grandmother and grandfather and the cozy farmhouse where she had been raised. With bittersweet pictures of a mother she couldn't remember and a little girl she didn't recognize. With two pictures of a father she had never met.

She flipped through the plastic pages, ascertaining they

were each covered in a familiar picture and then set about puzzling why it was in her bed. She glanced up to the closet where her big, plastic suitcase was stored. That was where she kept the little photo album. But the suitcase appeared to be undisturbed. She glanced at the doorknob and wondered whether it had been locked when she let herself in. But why would anyone break into her room to look at an old photo album? She shook her head. She would ask Mariella and there would be some simple explanation, of course. Mariella was her roommate and very best friend.

She trotted off to the shower and didn't think of it again. But later, when she was dressing, and she reached for her favorite earrings on her side of the vanity where she always kept them, her fingers grasped at nothing. They were not on her vanity. Again, she wondered if the door had been locked. She froze, feeling suddenly very alone and vulnerable in the large, quiet dormitory. Then she spied Mariella's nightstand and smiled. Mariella was always borrowing her things and there they were, resting innocently in front of the alarm clock on Mariella's nightstand.

And no one would break into her room to look through her pictures, she reminded herself. Still, she wondered about that door...

It was odd, she thought, that she felt so vulnerable in the sunny daylight of her dormitory. Darkness was supposed to be frightening, but not daytime or light. But the entire dormitory felt empty and she was alone in her room. The truth was, she thought mournfully, that the absence of others, or a profound sense of aloneness, is what made her feel vulnerable and fearful. That thought settled deep and heavy into her belly. She always felt alone. She cast a sideways look towards the bed and the photo album. The farmhouse that had once been warm and full of life was all boarded up now. Her grandmother was in a cold grave and her grandfather lived with her aunt now, and

didn't even recognize her, his mind wracked with dementia. Both of her parents had been dead since before she could remember. Apart from her aunt, about whom she knew very little, she had no one. She felt an odd sense of shame about her aloneness. It made her independent and stoic. She was frightened of this loneliness, always encroaching, always exposing itself and always exposing her. It was much easier to close it off, to pretend it did not exist.

But the voicemail alert on her cell phone reminded her she had other problems to concern herself with, problems that far outweighed a photo album on her bed, or so she thought at the time.

Dr. Pierce wanted to see her in his office as soon as possible, his voicemail proclaimed. She heaved a sigh toward the untidy stack of books on her desk. No doubt, his summons had everything to do with two failing, or very close to failing grades in Counterpoint and Advanced Harmony. She cringed at the thought of a very uncomfortable conversation about failing grades and scholarships in jeopardy.

She hurried off to the music building, but as she made her way toward the stairwell of her dormitory, she paused and turned back towards her room. She grasped her doorknob and gave it a hard twist, ensuring that it was tightly locked. Then, with a curious expression on her face, she hurried once again towards the stairwell.

CHAPTER 2



The oldest and third-longest tenured professor at the Harleigh College of Music poked his head out of his office and called out to a young man who was hurrying down the long hallway.

“Caleb Dunne!” The younger man turned around but continued walking backwards.

“I need a favor!”

The young man threw up his hands.

“I can’t teach anymore remedial piano.”

Dr. Pierce laughed. “No, it’s not that. Come to my office. Are you busy right now?”

It was Caleb’s turn to smile, because the elderly professor clearly did not care whether he was busy. But he backtracked to the professor’s office anyway.

The professor seated himself in one of the chairs positioned in front of his desk and motioned for Caleb to do the same.

“Do you know Jane McAllister?”

“Sort of—I know who she is, anyway. The flautist, correct?”

The professor nodded. “You know she’s our highest awarded alumni scholar?”

“No, but I’m curious as to why *I’m* not,” Caleb replied sardonically.

The professor laughed again.

“Her scholarship recital is in a month and she has Madeline Blakely accompanying her.”

The younger man nodded. He knew Madeline, too. But Dr. Pierce seemed to be waiting for him to understand something.

Finally, the professor shuffled some papers and pulled several scores from a pile on his desk. “Here’s what she’s playing.”

Caleb rifled through the scores disinterestedly. Prokofiev for flute. Liebermann for flute. Bloch, Bernstein... He had a sinking feeling. “A little heavy on the twentieth century, isn’t it? Can’t she play Bach or Mozart or something?”

The professor didn’t respond. Finally, Dr. Pierce said, “We both know Madeline Blakely can’t play these parts.”

Caleb heaved a sigh and let his chin fall to his chest.

The professor continued, “We really need to wow the alumni committee with this recital. They’re the ones raising scholarship funds. I can’t have the whole thing falling apart on stage because the accompanist can’t hack it.”

Caleb looked at the ceiling and rolled his eyes.

“It’s a paying gig, Caleb. All her fees are paid by her scholarship fund and I’ll make sure it’s generous.”

“It’s not that. I hate accompanist work. I hate musicians,” he said ironically.

Dr. Pierce gave a short laugh. “Give her a try. This one will surprise you. She’s very serious.”

Caleb looked crossly unconvinced. The serious ones were usually as difficult as the non-serious ones, just in a different way.

Finally, he sighed and said grudgingly, “All right, I’ll do it.”

“Good man,” Dr. Pierce said with relief. “Uh, and one other thing.” He looked intently at the young man. “She’s, well, she’s

not handling all the *pressure* that well lately.” His voice seemed to trail off as he once again waited for an understanding to bloom.

Caleb shrugged.

“She’s, well, she needs help. I can’t have my highest awarded scholarship recipient failing Counterpoint and Advanced Harmony.”

“*Failing?* You said she was *serious!*”

“She is! She is serious.” The older man sighed. “She’s nineteen years old, Caleb. She’s still a teenager—just a kid. You’ve been around long enough to know most of these kids can’t manage their time. Her playing is fine—more than fine. Her tone is angelic, her vibrato, exquisite.” He made a dramatic flourish with his hand to illustrate the exquisiteness of her tone and vibrato. “But, yes, she needs help getting through some classes.”

“So, you want me to tutor her through Counterpoint and Harmony?”

Dr. Pierce nodded. “Again, it will pay well.”

“I have six weeks to get her grades up and make sure she wows the alumni committee with a recital completely packed with difficult twentieth century repertoire?”

Dr. Pierce nodded and once again Caleb sighed.

“Well, at least she’s not a vocalist,” Dr. Pierce said and laughed. No pianist wanted to accompany a vocalist.

“I’ll do my best with her,” Caleb said, shaking his head. He had just completed a music app for Apple and Android phones and was setting up meetings to sell the app. He wondered how to balance his meeting and business schedule with this new ‘project.’

This was exactly why Dr. Pierce had chosen Caleb out of a department full of talented pianists. Caleb Dunne was a perfectionist. He would play his parts perfectly and he would make sure that Jane played her parts perfectly as well. Caleb would

insist they prepare and practice until it was smooth and precise, yet passionate. And then, on top of it all, he would ensure that she passed her classes with flying colors. He was the kind of tutor who took it personally if his pupil did not do well and the kind of accompanist who took personal responsibility for the performance. Which was also why he had burned out quickly as an undergraduate music student at the Harleigh College of Music.

Ten years before, he entered Harleigh as a freshman and quickly began to earn money as an accompanist. For a while, he accompanied at least half of the vocalists and musicians in their juries each semester, where they performed specially prepared pieces of music for a board of music professors and were graded for their efforts and abilities. Caleb was the most sought out accompanist in the department, mainly because he poured out such effort into every student's performance. He somehow managed to pull music from the soloists he played with. He knew how to let them lead, but he also knew exactly when to take the reins. He somehow managed to control the tempo while making it sound and appear as though the soloist retained all the control. He played his part perfectly and managed the soloist all at once. This was no easy task and soon word had spread that if you used Caleb Dunne as your accompanist, your grade would almost always improve by a full letter.

By the time Caleb had finished his junior year at Harleigh, he was exhausted from carrying a full academic load, performing his own juries, and accompanying everyone else. He quit accompanying entirely. Occasionally, he tutored other students to help them pass difficult music classes, but he was also an overly dedicated tutor and he found it very discouraging when students did not seem to put forth the necessary effort. When he graduated with his Bachelor of Arts in piano performance, he packed up and moved to California, where he earned a second degree in computer engineering and program-

ming. For his senior project, Caleb created a music app for cellular phones and sold it for a huge sum to a large tech company. Rumor had it that he had turned down several high paying jobs in Silicon Valley to return to Harleigh to earn a music doctorate. No one could understand why.

“She’ll have to come to my house to rehearse and study,” Caleb demanded.

Dr. Pierce nodded.

“And she’ll have to follow my rules and complete the coursework. I won’t do the work for her.”

Dr. Pierce looked only mildly offended. “I would never ask you to.”

“Send her to my house around ten o’clock in the morning.” Caleb piled the piano scores into a tidy stack and headed towards the door.