

# STACCATO

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1

*Nobody decides to go mad. Tragedies occur— forces of nature, emotional distress, sorrow for those taken too soon, terror writhing below the skin.*

*Other elements drive people to madness— smoldering rage, silent words that never stop rambling in the mind, unrequited passion, even merely following the path of destiny.*

*Fear also motivates insanity. If limits are pushed to the extreme there are few other alternatives than to face obstacles, or to flee from them.*

*I chose to flee. That was my undoing.*

*These are the events that drove me to the edge.*

Three hours earlier Nicholas Kalman had discovered what he now knew to be his father's journal buried in a bookcase. After reading the leather bound book for the fourth time, each page now appeared as a separate snapshot locked in his mind, as did every piece of classical music he had studied since the age of five. For Nicholas, the capability of a photographic memory straddled the line of celebration and curse.

Now, he struggled with the realization that the words had been written by a man he had never known . . . and that these ominous passages were intended for him. Using his finger as a marker, he closed the book and studied the nondescript binding. Numbed by the words, he sat in an overstuffed red velvet chair and stared across the music room of his Uncle Alexander's ten thousand square foot mansion.

Ringling in his ears grew louder and he became aware that the Chopin had ceased flowing from the speakers concealed by tapestries of European landscapes hung along the walls.

Nicholas's mind dizzied from reading about the premo-

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niton of approaching doom, forewarning him of his own. Swallowing hard, he considered his father's fear. Then he realized the terror was real, filling his mouth with a copper taste. *This can't be true.* He wiped a trail of sweat from his temple with his sleeve, set the journal on the table beside him and forced himself to tear his eyes from it.

Compelled by the words, he found it impossible to reshelve the book, or to dismiss the pages as utter fiction. He wondered what the written implications meant for him. Reading his father's recollections, he had fallen under their spell. His father warned of the seductive elements to be cautious of—things that had already ensnared Nicholas.

Looking around, he recognized what his father had described as cunning manipulations of deceiving comfort: first edition books exhibited within walnut cases surrounding him in a ritualistic circle, the ebony Steinway grand piano that sat regally upon a platform in the middle of the music room, exactly as the writings stated. The details even noted how flames from the fireplace bathed the Pakistani rug in an amber glow.

The visuals Nicholas discovered within the journal were vivid and concise, even the mention of the single malt Scotch he had been sipping. The liquor's bitter aftertaste urged him out of the chair. Baccarat tumbler in hand, he crossed the room to the bar and tossed the watered-down remains into the sink. He washed the crystal then polished the glass until it sparkled. He was careful to replace the tumbler in its original position equidistant from four others, then he angled the matching decanter directly in line with its crystal tray.

Cracking open a ginger ale from the mini refrigerator under the counter, he swallowed a mouthful. Refreshed by the cold, crisp drink, he went to the bookcase and placed two fingers in the crevice where he had found the journal, stuffed between thick editions of Elizabethan theatrical theory. *How did I not see it before tonight?*

Nicholas shuddered, feeling the ghost of his father join him. Though he did not know the final outcome of the man's

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life whose blood coursed through his own veins, Nicholas did know that his father, Charles Ian Hunt, like himself, had once been a celebrated world-class pianist.

As a boy, Nicholas had been told that at the time of his birth, his father's talents had been presented at renowned performance halls world-wide. Over the years, Nicholas had heard snippets of conversations between his Uncle Alexander and others about how Charles had deserted his wife and infant son, as well as his profession. His agent and managers had been horrified by his disappearance, but fellow competitors had celebrated the departure, at last rid of Charles's upstaging and the confident, sold-out performances that brought audiences to their feet.

Walking in a fog to the Steinway, Nicholas trailed his fingers across the keys. Faint tones from the perfectly tuned instrument resonated throughout the room. He fought the temptation to sit at the keyboard, to lose himself and his new circumstance in a piece of music. *Focus. You can't pretend this away. It's part of you now.*

Nicholas's head throbbed with his heartbeat. *Should I mention this to Uncle Alexander?* Returning to settle back in the chair, he picked up the journal. Nicholas recognized how his father's past had mirrored his own life. He shared the man's unease as he flipped yellowed pages to a particularly troubling passage.

*Nicholas, my son, if you ever find these words, I urge you to be careful.*

*Beware of this man you call, Uncle. Although he will make promises of wealth and fame—the price will be that of your soul.*

*It is a caution I did not heed. And now that he has finally found me, I am sure to never see you again.*

*Watch over your mother, Nicholas. Keep her near you, or I fear she will simply disappear—lost to you forever.*

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Nicholas thought of all the people over the years who had left his life without as much as a goodbye: several servants, various workers at the mansion, a tutor who disagreed with Alexander about his teaching methods . . . most of all, Nicholas's mother.

His stomach in knots, unable to deal with any more warnings, he slammed the journal shut. A sense of dread settled in his stomach. He realized that destiny and doom had found its way into his life—and into the very room his father had once known. His gaze went to the piano and he wondered if his father's fingers had touched those same ivory keys.

In a daze Nicholas left the music room, the journal clutched in his hand. He descended one flight of stairs, then walked along the second floor hallway of the mansion. When he reached his bedroom, he noticed light streaming from the crack at the floor.

Slipping inside, he eased the door shut and leaned against it. He scanned the room, its comforts calming his tense nerves. Flames licked in the fireplace, the duvet on the king-sized bed had been turned down, heavy drapes were drawn across the floor-to-ceiling windows. He pivoted his attention to the far end of the room. A slight smile lifted his lips.

Elaine Kalman sat in a plush wingback chair, feet tucked under her, dressed only in one of Nicholas's lavender dress shirts. He watched as she studied one of her ever-present college textbooks, occasionally making notations on a legal pad. He slid out of his loafers and walked to her.

She flipped back her curtain of long blonde hair and tucked a lock behind her ear. "Where have you been?" she asked in a stern voice followed by a stunning smile.

Nicholas bent down to kiss her full lips. "I hoped you would be here."

She tossed the book aside. "Just me and *Introduction to International Finance*."

"Well, now, I have something way more interesting for you to study." Nicholas held the gaze of her lazy gray eyes, then ran the tip of his tongue the length of her upturned neck.

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"I've missed you," she purred, pulling him to her.

"It's late. Won't your mother be worried?"

"I told her I was pulling an all night study session with Olivia at her dorm."

"Who's Olivia?"

Elaine gave him a shrug and a coy smile. "Someone I made up. What's that?" she asked, pointing to the journal.

Nicholas hesitated, then settled on the floor and leaned his shoulder against her leg. "I found it in the music room. Practice wasn't going well. Uncle screamed at me as usual, 'In my opinion your timing is utterly without explanation,'" he said in a clipped European accent. "Then he stormed out all pissed off."

Elaine laughed as she gathered a handful of his curls and tugged playfully. "You sound exactly like him."

"I was sitting at the piano and this book caught my eye. How many years ago did your mother adopt me? Ten, right?"

She nodded and joined him on the floor.

"I've lived here ever since. Ten years in that very room. Six, seven, twelve, hours every day except when I'm on tour." He frowned at the book. "Strange that I only ran across this thing tonight. It must have been stuck in that bookshelf all that time." He tilted toward her and whispered, "It's like it was calling out to me."

"Are you going to tell me what *it* is?"

"My father's journal."

Elaine's eyes widened. "No way. How do you know?"

He opened the cover, turned to the first written page and pointed to the dedication: FOR MY SON, NICHOLAS RENFREW HUNT.

She traced a finger over the last word. "Hunt?"

"My real name."

"I never knew that."

"There's some pretty disturbing stuff in here," he said, closing the book.

"Like what?"

He hesitated, unsure of how much to reveal for fear of

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alarming her. "It seems like a warning."

"A warning?"

"To beware of Alexander."

Elaine chuckled. "What does that mean?"

"Maybe I'm reading something into nothing. I don't know what to make of it yet."

Silence fell over them, neither taking their eyes off the journal.

"Do you want to read some of it to me?" Elaine asked in an uneasy voice.

Nicholas shook his head.

"Are you okay?"

His eyes locked on hers. "Honestly?"

"Of course." Taking his face in her hands, she said, "Always."

"I'm a little freaked." Troubled by the frown across Elaine's brow, Nicholas tossed the journal to the thick carpet and gave her his full attention. "Now I've worried you."

"No, it's okay, I just don't know what to think about this. What does he say about Alexander that's got you so freaked out?"

"Nothing." Nicholas sighed. "I want to forget about it for now. Forget about everything and everyone but you and me."

"I know what you need." She rose to sit on the chair they had been leaning against. Rubbing his shoulders, she quietly hummed a tune she had told him often ran through her head; a lullaby her mother sang when content.

He tipped his head back to look up at her. "That's nice." Elaine kissed his forehead. Finally able to relax, he exhaled and closed his eyes. "Are you staying here tonight?"

"If you want me to."

Nicholas turned around to face her. "It's not about want. It's about need. But if Alexander ever found out about us, he would flip out. I mean, it's a rush sneaking around behind his back, but it's dangerous, too."

Her smoldering eyes made him want her more. While they kissed, he reached for her shirt and found the top

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button, releasing one silver pearl stud after another. He leaned up to kiss the hollow of her neck.

Standing, he began to unbutton his shirt, prompting her to rise and help him. She pushed his roving hands away and he chuckled, struggling with his cuffs. He pulled the shirt off his shoulders and stood back to display his toned chest.

Eyes wide, hand to her mouth, Elaine gaped him. “God,” she whispered, reaching out to touch his chest.

Nicholas looked down at what she gaped at: a golf ball-sized welt over his right pectoral, angry red, ringed with purple. He whipped the shirt back on, cursing himself for being so careless. His mind hijacked by passion, he had forgotten about the lashing he had suffered a few hours earlier.

Buttoning up, he brushed past her to sit on the bed. “Like I said, practice didn’t go very well today.”

“Alexander hit you?”

He replied with a weary shrug.

She went to him and knelt between his legs. Her voice quavered when she finally spoke. “I’m going to break that damned cane of his.”

“He’ll break it on me if I don’t, as he says, ‘Shape up to reach my maximum potential.’”

“We’ve got to get you out of here.”

“What are you talking about?” Nicholas said in a defensive tone.

“There’s no excuse for beating you. I know this isn’t the first time either. You try to hide from me by undressing in the dark, but I feel you flinch sometimes when I touch you. Now I understand why you whimper if you turn a certain way. It’s getting worse. Mother should have never allowed you to move in here. You should have stayed with us.”

“Alexander wouldn’t have allowed that. Anyway, I need to stay here.” He avoided her probing stare. “I’ve got a performance tomorrow night. The tour’s coming up and I need as much exposure in front of an audience as I can get before I go overseas. We’re under a lot of pressure to perfect the Debussy.”

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Her voice raised an octave as she said, "He has no right to hit you. You need to leave that monster."

"And go where? I have no money. He's seen to that."

"That can't be. Your popularity grows each time you perform. And Mother said your fee last month with the Cleveland Orchestra was fifteen thousand dollars."

Nicholas nodded in agreement.

"How many concerts did you have last year? Thirty?"

"Thirty-seven. I know that sounds impressive, but I don't get anything but the allowance Alexander gives me, and a little cash when I travel. Didn't you notice when you went with me overseas those two times? Everything is taken care of in advance. We dine at the hotel restaurants where we stay, a driver is even provided. The promoter picks up anything else I need."

"But we go out—"

"And you always pay."

A look of dismay crossed Elaine's face. "I don't understand."

"He rationalizes, Elaine. Why would I need money? I live here, eat here. All I do is practice and study. The car is all I have and it's leased in his name. All my assets are frozen in trust until I turn twenty-one. 'Invested for my future' he says." *Eight months from now. An eternity.*

"You're an adult. He can't do that."

"He's the trustee. He can do whatever he wants."

"I have money."

"I can't ask you to help me with that." Sliding away from her touch, he went to the window. Blue light from the quarter moon's glow bathed the three-tiered fountain in the circular drive below.

"What he's doing isn't right," she muttered.

"What am I supposed to do if I leave? Get a job?"

"Keep performing. Why would that change?"

Nicholas snapped his attention back to her. "Without him? He wouldn't allow it. He'd ruin me first."

A passage from his father's journal came to his mind, warning him of Alexander's manipulation and devious ways.

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How could he explain to Elaine his mentor had an evil streak that roiled below the skin? No words would ever convey Nicholas's thoughts. He returned to her, drawing her into his arms.

A sob caught in her throat. "Please come and stay with me and Mother. She would love it and we wouldn't have to hide any more."

"We can't go public," Nicholas snapped.

"Why not? We're not doing anything wrong. We aren't related. It shouldn't matter that we love each other."

"I agree, but it matters to him. It's all about appearances with Alexander. No one knows he's not really my uncle. He's told everyone in the industry that my talent is inherited directly from him." Nicholas sighed. "Anyway, I can't just walk away. I've worked too hard."

"And I love you too much to see him keep hurting you."

"I'll be all right." Stroking her hair, he closed his eyes and breathed in her scent of gardenias and rosewater. "I'm sorry I worried you."

"I think you'd better finish reading your father's journal. Maybe he has some advice to offer."

Nicholas nodded, having had the same thought. They held each other while the antique clock atop the mantel chimed eleven times. "We could go to the country house. If I play well tomorrow night he might let me stay away for a few days."

"No one goes there this time of year, do they?" She pulled away to look at him, excitement rising in her voice.

He shook his head.

"Let's do it. Right now." She rushed to the walk-in closet, threw open the door and rifled through the contents of tuxedos, designer shirts, tailored jackets and an array of dress shoes and sneakers.

"What are you doing?"

"Packing. Where's your duffel? The black leather one we found you in Prague."

Nicholas joined her in the closet and took her hand that clutched the supple leather bag. "I can't go now."

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“Why not? It’s the perfect plan. Everyone’s asleep. We’ll slip out and Uncle would never know.”

“No, we need to do this right. Otherwise he’ll be suspicious.”

She pushed him away and planted a hand on her hip. “Okay, when?”

“Tomorrow night. Right after my performance. It’s been booked for months. I’ve worked too hard to pull out. And it wouldn’t be right.”

“The consummate professional.”

“Of course. Always,” he said, reciting the phrase she often used.

She smiled, then rewarded him with a kiss. When he didn’t reciprocate with his usual eagerness, she pulled away.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay? You look so sad.”

“I can’t stop thinking about my father’s journal.”

“Are you worried Alexander will be upset that you found it?”

“No. I don’t think I should tell him. I keep going back to what I read. It’s so . . . creepy. He wrote the journal a decade ago, but he mentions everything in the room, like nothing’s ever changed. And the warnings are things like what to look out for, and to be careful of Alexander. I think—” Elaine stiffened and he halted his words, recognizing the same fear he had felt after reading his father’s ominous passages.

“Go ahead, you can tell me,” she said, her voice quavering.

“I think Alexander murdered my father.”

She flinched, prompting him to wrap an arm around her. Tears welled in his eyes, her body wavered in a watery halo.

“He may have killed my mother, too.”

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# 2

Alexander Ambrus Kalman waited in the music room of his mansion for his niece, Elaine. Fifty-three years of living had discolored his corn-silk hair, but his sparkling aquamarine eyes remained focused, steeled, missing nothing. Afflicted since birth by a clubfoot, a brass tipped cane enabled him to move with relative ease. The hardwood stick, topped by a hand-carved ivory bust of a lion never left his side. Regal in appearance and stature, a black turtleneck accentuated his muscular upper body. He relished the fact that strangers found him intriguing, yet too aloof to approach.

Notes of Vladimir Horowitz's rendition of Rachmaninoff's Prelude in G, Opus 32, Number 5 filled the room, transporting Alexander to a melancholy cognizance.

Leaning on the cane, he tapped across the marble floor and surveyed the expansive vista from one of the twelve-foot-tall windows. The estate, perched high on the mountain-side, featured miles of an unobstructed landscape of the Great Smoky Mountains of western North Carolina. His view from the third floor looked out onto his acres of lush gardens and fountains where the sun fought to burn through the early morning fog. The panorama had been the reason he'd purchased the property to build his mansion thirteen years ago. The location reminded him of his youth spent in the mountainous Orseg region of Hungary.

Alexander's butler, Sampte, entered carrying a crystal vase full of blooming bougainvillea. Although Sampte stood well over six feet tall, he seemed to glide into the room. A charcoal morning coat hid his formidable build.

Sampte set the vase on a table near the window and said in a deep monotone, "Mistress Elaine is here as you requested."

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Alexander loved the dichotomy of the delicate, burgundy flowers atop toxic, thorny stems. He caressed one of the fuchsia bracts. "Send her in."

Sampte retreated as quietly as he had entered.

Alexander's stomach fluttered in anticipation of his niece's arrival. As a child Elaine often visited Nicholas at the mansion, becoming the young boy's only true friend. As his niece matured into a young woman, Alexander found himself drawn to her beauty. Elaine's voice captivated him, her dulcet tones reminding him of a well-trained mezzo-soprano. Although her smile rarely fell upon him, his breath caught in his throat whenever he witnessed the curl of her exquisite lips.

At the sound of a knock, he squared his shoulders and turned to the door. "Yes, come in."

Elaine eased into the room, draped in a calf-length, brightly colored floral dress. Standing at the threshold, her eyes darted to meet his, then just as quickly she averted her gaze to look beyond him as she closed the door.

Alexander drew in a slow breath at the sight of her. *I must have her soon.* "You look lovely."

"What is it, Uncle Alexander? I'll be late for class."

Restraining his urges, he attempted a flippant approach. "I see that you stayed here last night."

She went to the window and gave him her back. "I fell asleep studying."

"And where did you sleep?"

"Why? Is it any business of yours?"

"I think your mother would be interested." He limped to stand a step behind her. "As would I." He closed his eyes and inhaled her floral fragrance.

Elaine replied with a shrug. Turning around, she flinched as she nearly bumped into him.

"You captivate me." When he reached out to touch her face, she stepped away, but not before he took a lock of her silken hair between his fingers.

Elaine's eyes widened. "What are you doing?"

"There's something I need to tell you."

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She pulled her hair free. "I'm going now."

As she whirled from him, Alexander grabbed her bare arm and pivoted her to face him. "I'm not finished."

"I don't care what—"

"Let me speak. I've held my tongue for too long."

"Let go," she hissed.

He loosened his grasp and trailed his fingertips down the length of her arm. The feel of her silky smooth skin sparked his desire. "I've decided. It's time you moved in here."

A frown creased Elaine's brow, marring her beauty.

Alexander, amused by her response, puffed out his chest and announced. "With me."

It took a moment for her to speak. When she did, she stumbled over the words, "That's insane. You're my uncle. It's sick to even be thinking—"

"Don't think. Let me show you how your life will be with me."

Alexander entwined her hair in his fist and pulled her closer. "When I look at you, I hear Chopin."

Elaine's eyes grew wide. She recoiled and struggled to pull away. "Stop it, you freak."

"Freak? Freak, you say," Alexander raged.

She took hold of his wrist and attempted to free her hair. Her furious gaze locked with his and she said through clenched teeth, "Let go. Now, *Uncle*."

He released his grasp, mirroring her belligerent glare.

"I'm not one of your pupils, or a piece of music you can manipulate until it suits you. Every time I come here to visit Nicholas, you watch me." She scanned Alexander's body, her nose crinkling as though she smelled an unpleasant odor. "Leering at me. I feel your hot stare everywhere I turn. It's time you know . . . I—I love Nicholas. I'm with him. In every way. I would never even think of being with you."

Each searing word cut through Alexander. He leaned on the cane to steady himself. "How *dare* you deny me."

She folded her arms tight across her chest. "We're going away together. You'll have to find someone else to beat with your damned stick."

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Alexander straightened his frame and towered over her. “Perhaps I should ask Sampte to step in here. Make you reconsider. He obeys me without question.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Take it as you may.”

“You can’t keep me away from Nicholas.” Her voice remained firm, yet her eyes widened with apprehension. “Your scare tactics won’t work on me. It’s too late.”

“You’ll never take him from me—and you will be mine.”

Voice steady and strong, she countered, “Consider us gone.”

He closed the gap and pinned her against the wall, mere inches from her chest that rose and fell with rapid intakes of breath.

An abrupt knock prompted him to take a step back.

Timothy Sagan, Alexander’s lesser pupil to Nicholas’s talents, stepped into the room. Without a word, blue eyes glowing, a coy grin slid across the young man’s face.

Elaine pressed a firm shoulder against Alexander’s and freed herself. In an unsteady voice she said, “Stay away from me, you son of a bitch.”

Timothy smirked at her as she ran past and slammed the door behind her.

Alexander limped to the window and looked down on the front path. After a moment, he heard another door slam and watched Elaine rush up the drive toward her car, colorful dress billowing after her. He watched her stumble into his gardener, Manuel Esteva. The man caught her and they spoke entirely too long for Alexander’s liking. Manuel followed Elaine’s gaze to the third floor. The two looked up at the music room window for a moment. She shook her head and pushed away from Manuel, got in her car and sped away.

Alexander waited until Elaine’s silver Prius disappeared around the bend, then he turned his attention to Timothy. “You may begin.”

Timothy nodded and mounted the two steps of the platform to sit behind the Steinway. He leafed through sheets

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of music to Hummel's Sonata 5. Before he struck a single note, his hands hovered above the keyboard a full minute as he prepared to play.

Alexander settled in his red velvet chair and did his best to dismiss his longing for Elaine. He returned to the thought of how he had found Timothy performing in the minor touring circuit twelve years earlier. Impressed by the boy's memorization skills, and his fearless approach to the music, Alexander set out right away to secure the boy's talents. Timothy's nearly destitute parents reluctantly agreed to turn young Timmy over to Alexander's renowned tutelage.

Now twenty-two, Timothy's fair freckled skin and unruly red hair caused a hindrance, in Alexander's mind. The complete opposite of Nicholas's dark radiance. Alexander had often found himself strategizing how he would promote Timothy's non-traditional looks once he reached a higher level of competence, and when it came his time for exhibition.

"Don't rush the tempo this time. *Allegretto*. Play the piece as the timing is intended," Alexander said in a faraway tone. He flipped the switch to an antique metronome on the table beside him.

"She's upset you," Timothy said after a moment of studying his mentor.

"Your concern touches me."

"I try to be aware of everything you need from me."

"Then you must see that I face a troubling predicament." Alexander sighed. "There is a journey that must be made. A challenge at hand." He blazed an intense stare at Timothy. "Normally I would entrust this assignment to no one but Sampte. Nevertheless, perhaps you're better suited for this task. The matter involves my nephew, and Sampte is quite fond of him."

"Tell me what I can do," Timothy said without hesitation.

Alexander shook his head and waved his hand in a dismissive manner. Rising from his chair, he limped to the bar. "I must not burden you with my troubles," he said, splashing brandy into a snifter. "It is a family affair. You

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understand.” Going back to sit in his chair, he motioned to the couch across from him.

Timothy rose from the piano bench and hurried to perch on the edge of the couch’s cushion. Worry creased his brow as he bobbed his leg up and down. “You can trust me.”

The older man watched Timothy become more eager as the seconds clicked off from the metronome. A drop of sweat ran from the younger man’s sideburn to his jawbone. His evident anticipation amused Alexander.

“I haven’t expressed recently how pleased I am with your progress. Your Liszt is near perfection and the Prokofiev needs little improvement. I know you have always felt jealous of Nicholas’s talents in the past, and of the time I spend with him, but I need *you* now. Not Nicholas. It is your turn to prove your worth.”

Timothy arced forward and Alexander knew he had piqued the young man’s curiosity. He studied Timothy before continuing. “As you might have supposed, this concerns my niece. She is not an asset to Nicholas.”

The pain of Elaine’s involvement with Nicholas had immediately transcended to hatred for his prized pupil the moment she had spoken of their coupling. The thought of the two of them together as one sickened him. Now, he supposed, Timothy would suffice.

“Do you understand what I am saying?”

Timothy nodded.

“And what I require of you?”

“You want me to get rid of her.”

*Excellent.* Alexander’s fury again escalated when he recalled Elaine’s snub. “It is too much to ask,” he said, shaking his head.

“No,” Timothy pleaded, nearly sliding off the seat. “Please, let me show you what I’m capable of.”

Alexander took a sip of brandy and considered his pupil’s offer. He knew Prokofiev was Timothy’s most cherished composer, and always the unwavering pupil, the student had studied the master’s works to exhaustion. Timothy needed only one more prompt from Alexander to accomplish the

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ultimate task required.

“Fine. Play the Toccata Opus Eleven. I want you to keep Prokofiev and his piece in mind as you compose what you are to do. Unleash all your talents and imagination.”

Timothy crossed the room to the Steinway and again prepared to play.

Alexander went to him and placed a firm hand on his pupil’s shoulder. Timothy’s tense muscle relaxed under Alexander’s palm. “As you well know by now, timing of this master’s piece is as crucial as the execution.”

Timothy angled his body to look up at Alexander and nodded, his eyes filling with tears.

Alexander raised the snifter. “To the challenge.”

### 3

Nicholas found himself weary of the touring circuit. Though his passion for playing remained unquenched, and the rousing applause always provided a great high, when he returned to his empty hotel room, he missed sharing the accolades with Elaine.

While on the junior pianist circuit, Nicholas discovered the power he held over his audiences. As his mentor, Alexander made great effort to select the ideal pieces for Nicholas to awe the judges and audiences, and in turn, unnerve his competitors. Nicholas's confidence never wavered and as a result he rarely formed friendships with other musicians of his ranking. He enjoyed seeing his opponents squirm when the time came for judges to announce the winner. Rarely did he lose. Nicholas's envious colleagues shunned him because of his unsurpassed talent and systematic crushing of the competition.

Now two years into his professional career, he often found himself isolated. After a successful concert, he despised being alone. Although Alexander accompanied Nicholas on most of his travels, relishing the ovations as if they were for him, he often left Nicholas alone to join admirers after performances.

Stares in the dining room, at his table for one, kept Nicholas locked in his suite awaiting room service. During those long nights, Nicholas craved Elaine's company. Waking in the middle of the night, he desired her companionship as much as her body.

This night, at the university's Wilhoit Theatre twenty miles from Alexander's mansion, the words in Nicholas's father's journal tucked inside his tuxedo jacket rambled in his mind—as did, as always, thoughts of Elaine.

Four competitors were yet to perform, so Nicholas

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decided to watch them from a different position. Walking along the offstage wings he marveled at the rigging system that consisted of twenty sets of lines. Most of the heavy stage drapes were at their highest position, which left the stage floor barren of all visuals but a grand piano and the performer sitting on the bench.

Nicholas looked up and spotted a man standing on the lowest catwalk, leaning against a railing. When the man nodded to him, Nicholas lifted his hand in greeting. Then he motioned for Nicholas to join him. Intrigued, Nicholas followed the length of the stage where he found a vertical ladder bolted to the back wall of the theatre. A circular cage enveloped the rungs. As he climbed upward, his head spun and his vision blurred. When he reached the landing of the first catwalk he swung his legs onto its platform. He pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped the grime from his hands.

Queasy from the height when he looked down, he squeezed his eyes shut. Steadying himself against the railing, he peeked out again, intrigued that he could view the performer sitting at the gleaming Steinway, as well as the full house of audience members.

With cautious footing, Nicholas approached the stagehand. "This is amazing. I've never been up here before."

"Been missing out. Best seat in the house." He clipped Nicholas on the shoulder. "Enjoy." He walked the length of the catwalk and disappeared into the shadows cast from the grid work pattern high above.

Appreciating the solitude, Nicholas thought about events of the night before. He smiled knowing he would soon be alone with Elaine. *Who knows? We may never go back.*

Remembering her excitement about their secret plan, he retraced his steps down the steep ladder, then into the darkness backstage. He tapped his breast pocket, comforted by the leather book.

From the wings, he rocked on the balls of his feet and waited for his turn to perform. Nicholas's patience ended

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after enduring a butchered Bach Concerto, No. 4 from an up-and-coming Russian. Unable to wait any longer, he eased to the stage manager's console and approached a stocky, older man wearing a headset, chewing on the stub of an unlit cigar.

"I'm pulling out," Nicholas told the man. "Would you tell the promoter for me?"

"You're shittin' me, right? You're up next."

"It's just an exhibition."

"Doesn't really count, right?" the stage manager said with a grin.

"Right."

"Still, your maestro's going to be pissed."

"Well, he's not here is he?" Nicholas winked and flashed the man an easy smile. "Give my slot to Sherry over there, will you?" He pointed to an anxious woman Nicholas's age playing an air keyboard. "She performs better when she doesn't have to wait so long."

The man pulled the slimy remains of the cigar from his mouth. "Why do you care?"

Nicholas rested his gaze on the pianist who had always placed second to his first place prize when they competed on the junior circuit. "She deserves it."

"Okay, kid. Good luck with the tour, huh?"

"Thanks."

Nicholas glanced at the performer on stage, then darted into the dressing room. He squinted when the brightly lit space hit his dilated eyes. He reached for his black leather duffel bag under the counter and took out the usual after-concert black wardrobe of slacks, turtleneck, socks, and Saucony running shoes. Looking at the clothes a moment he turned his attention back to his reflection of the sleek black tuxedo, tailored specifically for him during a tour in Parma, Italy.

He relished the feel of the soft giving cloth, and the way the cut of the jacket made him look. "*Stunning*," Elaine would say. Before he left that night, he had accessorized his lapel with a blood red rose from one of Alexander's prized bushes.

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Sniffing the bud, he stuffed the change of clothes back into the satchel, then smoothed his sleeves. He knew Elaine would love that he had stayed dressed for her. He removed only the tie and put it in the duffel, zipped the bag shut and slung the strap across his shoulder.

He took one last satisfied look at himself in the row of mirrors surrounded by light bulbs that lined three of the walls and unhooked his black wool overcoat that hung from a rack. Anticipating the coming hours of passion and refuge, he rushed out the door.

4

Timothy Sagan stood outside the performers entrance at the rear of the Wilhoit Theatre, waiting for Nicholas to emerge. He had always been patient—an asset he knew would work in his favor when it became his time to tour in the world-class arena. As second chair, Timothy seethed inside when Alexander’s favored pupil, Nicholas, received the bulk of their mentor’s time and admiration. *Always after Nicholas*. He sneered, knowing if he had more attention from the maestro, he, too, could achieve greatness.

Timothy recalled the conversation with Alexander only hours earlier. He had felt his face flush when Alexander reprimanded him and thought, *This is my time. You’re supposed to be attending to me now, not treating me like a novice*. When he had questioned Alexander, his mentor answered him with a glare so cold and intense Timothy had to turn away and hide his shame. Then moments later he startled when he felt a hand atop his shoulder, suddenly conflicted by Alexander’s unaccustomed affection.

When Alexander instructed Timothy to rid him of his burden, he became aware that the task his maestro had composed was an opportunity not to be taken lightly. Most of all, he must not fail.

It filled him with a surge of hope that their relationship might grow beyond pupil to confidant. Love from Alexander was what Timothy craved most, and an emotion Alexander had never conveyed before that moment.

Over the years, in order to learn more about his mentor, Timothy had befriended others who once knew Alexander. During trips when Timothy traveled with Nicholas on tour, he listened silently to stories from conductors and promoters who still spoke of the greatness Alexander possessed as a pianist. Timothy listened, fascinated by the tales of

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Alexander's fanfare-filled performances, always punctuated by rousing pieces and brilliant execution that thrilled all who beheld his talent. Audiences rarely witnessed such a young performer possess Alexander's command of music. These renowned men often told Timothy to consider Alexander's teaching a gift, and that he and Nicholas were privileged to be under his tutelage.

Alexander demanded world-class perfection at all times. Timothy now realized the depth and scope expected of him. *Prokofiev*. His mind spun with ideas of how to remedy his mentor's pain. Alexander and his servants were Timothy's only family and the mere thought of losing favor in Alexander's eyes terrified him.

For the first two years living in Alexander's mansion Timothy had been Alexander's sole pupil. Then Nicholas invaded their world and became the favorite student—and to Timothy's dismay—the favored child. The two boys rivaled each other for their mentor's attention from the moment Nicholas moved into the mansion.

Because of Nicholas's prowess, Alexander allowed Nicholas to practice at the Steinway in the music room six to eight hours every day and then remain in the cherished space to study composition and private schoolwork. Timothy, forced to endure training on his own, received virtually no tutelage from Alexander. He also had to settle for the Baldwin on the first floor, far from his mentor.

Alexander often boasted of how it had taken only three years to guide young Nicholas to the height of the boy's capability, and that it took little prompting to keep him at the keyboard, practicing for hours without ceasing. In turn, the maestro had yet to utter a single encouraging word about Timothy's abilities. He still felt the sting of betrayal when Alexander decided to exhibit Nicholas as soon as the boy turned fourteen, instead of Timothy.

He worked as hard as Nicholas, but his efforts did not prove as fruitful, which caused great bouts of depression. His mastery of the piano proved *merely* near world-class standards. He had yet to achieve the caliber of a lead artist.

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Nicholas excelled on all levels, whereas Timothy seemed to have remained stagnant, many times having to settle as opener for the featured pianist—more often than not, Nicholas Kalman.

Now that Nicholas had achieved fame and accolades, he was all promoters, exhibitors and audiences talked about. “It all changes tonight,” Timothy muttered.

Now that his end of the task assigned by Alexander had been accomplished, Timothy decided Nicholas needed to clean up the mess. Nicholas had to be the one to get his precious hands dirty this time.

*Let’s see how pretty-boy handles real life*, he thought as Nicholas emerged from the performers entrance, looking like a *GQ* cover model in his tuxedo and perfect hair. *Always so proud of yourself, aren’t you? Well, we’ll see about that once you find what I left for you.*

Timothy smiled with satisfaction as he noted Nicholas’s disappointment.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Nicholas groaned.

Timothy scanned him head to toe then glanced at his watch. “You’re early.”

“Decided not to go on.”

“What? You mean you didn’t play?”

“I wasn’t feeling the music tonight.”

“Ah, man, the maestro’s going to kill you.”

Nicholas shuffled his feet and shrugged.

“And you didn’t change. Alexander always wants us to wear black after a performance.”

Nicholas tugged his lapel. “This is black.”

“Why did you pull out?”

“I’ve got something more important planned.”

Timothy’s mouth dropped open. “More important? Does Alexander know?”

“Do you see him anywhere?” Nicholas asked, putting on his overcoat.

Timothy knew Alexander had not been happy with Nicholas’s rendition of the Debussy and had refused to attend that evening’s performance intended to promote

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Nicholas's upcoming tour.

"Well, I'm real sorry but you'll have to postpone your plans." Timothy held out the powder blue envelope he had taken from his breast pocket.

"What's this?"

"From Alexander."

Nicholas snatched the envelope, then unfolded a matching blue sheet of paper. Timothy leaned forward, trying to look at the letter's contents.

Nicholas thinned his eyes. "Is this for you, or me?"

"Sorry. Go ahead."

Turning into the light flooding the side entrance, Nicholas read the note out loud. "Take the delivery to Henri Thibodeaux. He is expecting you." He lowered the paper and mumbled, "Who the hell is Henri Thibodeaux?"

Timothy shrugged. He took a pair of black leather gloves from his coat pocket. "You'd better put these on. Alexander said not to touch her."

"What am I supposed to deliver?"

Timothy waited a beat before he answered. "I put it in your car."

Nicholas hesitated. "Look, like I said, I've got other plans. That's why I left early."

As Nicholas tried to brush past, Timothy blocked his path. "Other plans?"

"Yeah. Tell Alexander I'll make his delivery tomorrow. Maybe the day after."

"Right. You want me to tell him that?"

"Yes."

"No." Timothy shook the gloves until Nicholas grabbed them from him. "Map's on the back."

Nicholas flipped over the note and scanned the drawing. "This is way out of my way."

"It won't take long this time of night." He swept his arm the expanse of the full parking lot. "Everyone in the county seems to be here, waiting for a performance they're never going to see."

Nicholas held Timothy's glare, but did not take a step.

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“You’ve already defied him once tonight,” Timothy reminded with a tip of his head toward the theatre.

Nicholas slapped his thigh with the gloves, looking past Timothy.

“She’ll wait,” Timothy said in a stern voice. “I’ll tell her you’ll be late if you’d like.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Elaine.” Timothy smirked. “I know you’ve been screwing your cousin.”

Nicholas took a threatening step closer. Timothy reared back. “Watch your mouth, asshole. And, she’s not my cousin.”

Timothy raised his hands in surrender. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell.”

Nicholas shoved a glove on each hand. “Stay away from her.”

Timothy chuckled as Nicholas turned and strode away. “Better get going. Henri Thibodaux’s waiting. Careful now, no mistakes.”

Suppressing the desire to follow his opponent, a sly grin crept to Timothy’s lips.

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5

Henri Thibodeaux, like his father before him, was the only private mortician for Swain County, North Carolina. His operation, located outside the city limits of Bryson City was remote and so low-bid that Henri also served as gravedigger at the cemetery adjacent to the property. He would enlist the assistance of a few schoolboys who weren't too revolted by the task. Often, he urged them into duty by chiding, "*I dare you,*" or if necessary, "*What a bunch of pussies!*" He'd make a game of it, overseeing the unearthing excursions in the dead of night. He would beguile the boys with risqué stories of women, and distant places made up of his own imagination. He seldom lacked enough troubled teens willing to help him. They seemed to like Henri, even though he spent most of his days with dead people.

Although his name sounded exotic, Henri had never ventured more than thirty miles from his home of graves and towering pines. And the women he claimed to know so much about, existed exclusively within his well-worn collection of pornography magazines.

Liquor made from his still, tucked deep in the woods behind the morgue, helped him deal with the dead spirits he swore haunted the grounds. Homegrown moonshine had been the largest staple of his diet the last several years, causing his memory to become clouded as the seasons crept by.

He shared his harsh brew with the group of boys in exchange for their strong backs. Although suspicious of Henri's oddness, the teens never betrayed him for fear of being laid to rest in the unmarked field where Henri told them an "unknown few" had been buried.

Ten years ago Henri received an anonymous call from a man requiring his services. The man spoke with a heavy

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accent Henri couldn't place. Times were lean and he had already buried most of the elderly citizens of the county at the time, so he reckoned, why not? He would have needed to close up shop soon if no more business came his way and he worried over what the community would do without his undertaking.

When the man quoted an ungodly amount of money for his services, Henri became wary of the situation. The caller told him to think the proposition over and hung up, leaving Henri stunned. He remained restless all night wondering if he should have taken the offer right away.

At dawn the next morning, by the time he had worked himself into a panic, convinced the man would not call him again, a messenger delivered a bulging sealed envelope. The deliveryman shifted one foot to the other, looking green from the odor of formaldehyde and disinfectant that wafted around the compound Henri could not even smell anymore. He figured the stench must be potent because no one voluntarily entered his place of business, with the exception of forced visits dearly departed families had no choice but to endure.

Eyes on the bundle, Henri signed for the package and dismissed the man with a grunt. He returned to his cracked Formica table and unwrapped the parcel. His jaw dropped as he stared at a thick wad of fifty-dollar bills. At first count, he thought there must be close to two thousand dollars stuffed inside. Henri's mouth dried up. He felt dizzy wondering where this little miracle had come from. Digging through the brown paper, he found a powder blue envelope with a handwritten note inside. Clutching a handful of money close to his chest, he read the fluid script.

*I trust this will be enough to accomplish the task of disposal. My man will arrive shortly after midnight.*

The foreboding request concerned Henri, but he could not bring himself to return the money, even if there *had* been a return address written on the parcel.

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Midnight came and went. Henri thought maybe he'd misunderstood. *Was I supposed to meet him somewhere?* He checked the note again, but no other details miraculously appeared. The man obviously knew where he lived, so he waited.

Henri dozed off around three o'clock. Soon after, his porch light exploded, the *pop* so loud he nearly fell off the couch. He stumbled to his front window to see who had trespassed on his property, but saw no one.

He flinched at an insistent knock. Hand trembling, he opened the front door a crack. Henri's eyes went wide as he took in the figure of a man more than a foot taller than him, standing in the shadows of his porch. Although wrapped in black plastic, Henri recognized the outline of a body draped over the man's shoulder.

"So, this is him? Or her?" Henri quavered.

The stranger did not respond.

"Okay, then." Henri brushed past the man and onto the path. "My shop is this way."

Standing at the cement building that served as his morgue, Henry glanced in both directions to make sure they were not being watched. He pulled a key from a rotting crevice of the doorjamb. Unbolting the lock, he waved the man inside. "I was worried you wouldn't come."

"Too many people around."

Henri recognized the same accent, but the voice sounded different than the man who had called. "Kids. Yeah, this place draws them. The graveyard and all."

He motioned to the stainless steel table in the middle of the room. The man carefully laid the body down. Withdrawing a twenty-dollar bill from his pocket, he handed the money to Henri. "I found it necessary to break your light." Then he turned and without another word walked out of the morgue.

"A man who always pays his debts. My father would have liked that about you," Henri called out after the man who had disappeared into the darkness.

He shut the door, secured the deadbolt, then settled his

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nerves with a long pull from a jug he kept hidden in a cabinet. Five gulps later he set the container aside and took the few steps to his new assignment. He removed the thick plastic covering and stared at the corpse. Henri sighed, relieved that he didn't recognize the dead man.

Snapping on a pair of industrial plastic gloves, he tugged a rolling cart topped with surgical instruments closer. It had been nearly six months since he had performed an autopsy and he decided this anonymous man would be good practice for him. He always felt bad violating the people he had known, but he had no emotional ties to the stranger. He could cut into this body without remorse.

Focused now, he began to drain the fluids from the body and drained more from his jug while he waited. The moonshine loosened his taut muscles and soon his panic and unease lifted enough to notice heavy bruising on the man's upper arms.

Henri took up a scalpel and sliced a Y pattern from the man's clavicles to his groin, then pulled back the skin. After cutting away the ribcage, he removed the internal organs one by one. He noted that the man's liver weighed close to twelve pounds, and figured the man must have been a heavy drinker who died naturally from liver failure. The clear liquor from his still came to his mind and a warning flashed for him not to enjoy his own home brew too much.

The discovery made him feel more comfortable. At first he feared the man had been murdered and he would be faced with the burden of hiding a crime for the rest of his life.

As Henri finished with the procedure, something caught his eye. Dread filled the pit of his stomach. Aiming the light at the dead man's face, he lifted the corpse's head by the chin.

An indentation on the victim's throat the size of a quarter had blued its impression in the skin. Although Henri tried to convince himself the man had died from a failed liver, experience told him otherwise.

"His windpipe's been crushed," he mumbled, horrified by his discovery. Now, the bruising on the man's arms made

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sense to him. *Someone must have held him down while another strangled him with something.*

Blood rushed from his head as he stumbled to a nearby stool. Sweat studded his brow. *Should I call the cops?* First, he thought of his beloved still. Then he remembered the package bursting with money, the hulking figure with a corpse draped over his shoulder as if it weighed nothing, the creepy voice on the phone. The man lying before him had met a murderous fate. Henri didn't dare tempt the same outcome.

He buried the anonymous man along with his extracted organs in an unmarked grave, far away from the dignified residents of his hallowed graveyard. He convinced himself he would learn to live with his part of the crime and decided that if his unknown client ever contacted him again he would fervently turn the man away.

As time went on, legitimate business grew worse. He couldn't refuse when the dollar amounts increased. Over the last ten years Henri had buried a dozen victims, delivered in the dead of night, in the unmarked field.

Now Henri alternated his drunken gaze from the picture window in the front room of his house, to the door, then to the telephone. Two hours ago he had received another call from the foreigner. A customer would be dropped off for Henri to attend to later that night. He eased the grimy drape open an inch and peered out at nothing but blackness.

Tipping the ever-present jug to his lips, he chugged until his eyes burned. He swiped a hand across his mouth and considered not answering the inevitable knock on the door calling him to service. But he needed the money and he knew he would not—could not—turn away the responsibility that had become so burdensome on his soul.

He settled on the couch, clutched the cool glass container to his chest, and waited. He uttered a prayer for forgiveness, apologized for the thousandth time to his dead father, and slid into a drunken slumber.

6

Nicholas jogged through the nearly full parking lot of the Wilhoit Theatre. Mist settled among the vehicles, muting their colors. Earlier that night, fearing scratches and dents in his prized jet black Porsche Targa, he had parked at the farthest space at the end of the row. Nearing his vehicle now, he glanced over his shoulder to see if Timothy followed.

He puzzled over Timothy's insistence that he wear the gloves. The ominous warning replayed in his mind. *Her? Did he say not to touch . . . her?*

Nicholas never liked Timothy. He annoyed Nicholas with his habits. The way Timothy would concentrate, sometimes up to three minutes before he laid a finger on the keyboard, or would sit on the edge of the bench eternally awaiting Alexander's approval after he concluded each composition. Even as a boy Timothy would do anything to please Alexander, which sickened Nicholas who felt mastering the piece to perfection should be the reward, not Alexander's fawning.

Reaching his vehicle, Nicholas noticed the alarm light wasn't flashing on the console. He tried the door handle and found the car unlocked. *Nothing is mine*, he thought bitterly. He looked back to challenge Timothy for breaking into his car, but saw no one else in the lot.

A dim glow from the dome light bathed the cramped interior in soft blue. He tossed the duffel bag into the miniscule rear compartment and realized the passenger seat had been shoved back to its farthest position. His attention went to an oversized, stuffed canvas laundry bag on the floor in front of the seat.

Intrigued, he slid behind the wheel and tugged at the thick muslin, then placed a gloved palm on top of the object. Feeling resilience, he jerked his hand away. *Oh my God, is it*

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*a body?*

Scrambling out of the car, he pulled Alexander's note out of his pocket. Rereading it, he wondered again about Henri Thibodeaux. Flipping the paper over, he traced the route leading to the unfamiliar location with his finger.

He craned his neck and looked for Timothy again. His heart pounded as he forced his breath to a slower pace.

Nicholas felt a sudden shift in his life. He stood still, counting his heartbeats, reminding himself to breathe. Fearful, horrified, yet intrigued, he knew he must look in the bag.

He strode to the passenger side, searching both directions to be certain no one watched him. Fog enveloped the cars giving them the appearance of hulking beasts. He heard nothing but the buzz from an overhead light. Glancing at his watch, he presumed half an hour remained before the concert would end. There would be no intrusions.

Opening the passenger door, the faint light lit the cloth just enough to make out the body's outline. Bending into the car, he unwound the knot that tied the sack shut.

Swallowing his nerves, he pulled the bag down over the body's head. Long strands of hair emerged. He realized it was a woman and fought down the bile rising in his throat.

*Why would someone kill her? Why would Alexander put my career in jeopardy? If I get caught with a dead body I'll be arrested.* The thought of Timothy and his ominous words of warning to be careful entered Nicholas's spinning mind. *That bastard's got to be involved.*

The woman's mass of tangled, blonde hair cascaded over her face. The top of the dress she wore, made of soft cloth with a colorful flower print pattern, looked familiar. A breath halted in his chest.

*No. It can't be . . .*

He didn't have the courage to look at her closely, so he repositioned the body, then dragged the cloth sack beyond her shoulders.

The sweet scent of gardenias and rosewater hit him with blunt force. His gut churned, a lump formed in his throat,

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strangling his whimper.

Mind racing, he swept the hair from the corpse's face. He cupped her head in his hands and bent inches from her. Blood slammed to his brain, ringing in his ears deafened him. He managed to utter a guttural growl.

*God, no, not Elaine.* The one person he trusted completely. She, who had unselfishly relished his triumphs and filled his days and nights with excitement and passion.

He could do nothing but stare at her beautiful, porcelain face, now turned ashen, expressionless. She had been his salvation. He mourned every time they were apart, rejoiced once they reunited. He would never see her again, be with her, love her.

Nicholas wrapped his shaking arms around Elaine's body and rocked her. Tears coursed down his cheeks. He mumbled her name again and again. After a long time, he lifted her from the tumble on the floor, swept the bag from her body and crumpled the cloth into a ball at her feet. Placing her carefully in a seated position on the passenger seat, he smoothed her hair and took her limp head in his hands. He kissed his lover's waxen forehead and released her limp body. Pulling the seat belt tight, he snapped her securely in place.

His entire body shook as he shut the door, then paced in front of the car and raked his hands through his hair. Thoughts of retribution filled his raging mind. Vows of revenge rocked the core of his being. He opened his arms and lifted his head to the misty sky. A wail of anguish emitted from deep inside him, rising in intensity until he expelled no more sound. He thrust himself forward and crashed his fists down on the hood of the Porsche.

The cacophony of sound echoed throughout the parking lot, mixing with his strangled sobs.

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