



Olivia Janae

The
**Loudest
Silence**



Chapter 1

KATE PAUSED IN THE LOBBY of Chicago's Symphony Center and tried to swallow the lump in her throat. She bounced her shoulders to shift the cello case on her back and popped her neck to relieve the tension yet again. Her hand shook as she reached for the gold-embossed door.

She had been through this first-day thing so many times before. The job with this chamber group was no different than those she'd done with other prestigious groups over the last few years, but the flutter of butterflies never left her stomach.

The annoying voice of reason spoke up in the back of her mind, reminding her that this job was more important than most. It meant she could stop freelancing for two years, a reprieve she was thankful for. Well, a year, anyway.

Taking a breath, she pushed through the doors.

The high warble of violins and the cough and splutter of horns as they teased and joked through their warm-ups were no different than what she heard at any other gig. The welcome familiarity calmed her raw nerves.

Kate paused at the open door, feeling small. In front of her, the stage spread out in a grand half circle, though it was dwarfed by the majesty of the Symphony Center, with its ocean of red velvet seats, tall pillars, double-deck balconies, gold-leaf walls, and huge chandeliers of cloud diffusers.

It wasn't at all like the smaller halls she had often played in, ones with moldy curtains and old 1970s wood paneling, or the hall of some community center. This hall was intimidating, as it was surely meant to be.

Still, Kate smiled. Playing in a hall like this, less than a mile from her dream hall, was what she had been working toward. She walked through the door and started toward the stage.

The world of classical music posted auditions online, and once the job was won, photos and a bio of the new hire were posted as well. Perhaps for this reason, only a few people from the small group noticed her enter.

Kate didn't mind. She hated walking into a rehearsal space and being stared at as if she were a new zoo exhibit. It reminded her of all the first days she had been through at new schools while growing up.

She pushed back the painful memory and climbed the side stairs to the stage. On the far side stood several men and women dressed in professional suits and dresses. Their lofty expressions made it clear that they were board members.

She hesitated. The train had made her later than she'd wanted to be, and she needed time to warm up. But she also wanted to make a good first impression on the board, especially since she didn't have a benefactor, unlike a lot of Chicago freelancers.

She ran the fingers of her free hand through her hair to tame the windblown blonde curls, wishing she had stopped in the bathroom to brush them, and approached the group with a confidence she didn't really feel.

"Hi." She smiled and offered her hand to the nearest board member. "Katelyn Flynn, new cellist."

"Oh, of course. Zachary King, vice chair of the WCCE board." He shook her hand. "I take it your relocation went well."

"It did. Thank you," she said, smiling politely.

"Good, good." Zachary patted her arm. "Be sure to introduce yourself to the president when you see her."

"Will do." She shook a few more hands, then nodded at the rest. That done, she turned to scan the faces of her fellow musicians, but the face she was looking for wasn't among them. If he didn't get here soon, he wouldn't have any warm-up time. And why did he have to be late on her first day? She wanted to get their reunion over with as soon as possible.

Kate gritted her teeth against the new flutters in her stomach.

She had made her choice. She had taken the job in Chicago despite him being in residence. And it was going to be good, she promised herself yet again. They were both adults. It would be fine.

Despite her pep talk, another lump had formed in her throat

Pointedly ignoring it, she found her seat and shifted the thirty-pound weight off her back. Stretching her neck and shoulders, she pulled out her cello and bow and began warming up.

The still-empty seats gradually filled. Musicians pulled out their instruments and tuned up, then played scales, warming their muscles like athletes before a game.

“Hi! You must be Katelyn.”

Kate looked up from her cello at the small woman who had appeared in front of her. “Kate.” She forced a professional smile and stood to offer her hand, her cello balanced in the other.

“I’m Mary. We spoke on the phone. It’s nice to meet you, Kate.”

Kate nodded in recognition. Mary was the personnel manager and artistic director and a violinist. She didn’t look like Kate had expected.

Even compared to Kate’s own five-foot-four frame, Mary seemed small. Her black hair was styled in a pixie cut. She had the soft yet stony disposition of a schoolteacher—sweet, but with the don’t-mess-with-me attitude not far under the surface.

“Are you comfortable getting started right away?” Mary asked. “If you want a rehearsal to sit back and—”

“No, no.” Kate waved her hand. “Just throw me in.”

“Sink or swim, huh? I like that.” Mary smiled and turned to the small group, clapping her hands. “All right, let’s get going.” After making a few announcements, she added, “As you all can see, our new cellist made it. Kate Flynn, welcome! We’re excited to have you!”

Kate looked around to acknowledge the introduction. From the bass section, she caught sight of the lone bass player’s familiar brown eyes. Stephen had finally shown up. She nodded to him.

He winked at her and rolled his eyes toward Mary, then the ceiling. The charm that had been so boyish years ago still radiated from him.

Mary continued going over plans for the upcoming season and the first concert. “As you can see from the list here”—she held out a sheet of paper—“we’re focusing first on the strings with *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*. It’s such a beautiful piece and one we rarely play together. I’m particularly excited because...”

As Mary’s remarks continued, Kate’s enthusiasm began to wane. *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* was a familiar piece. She had begun playing it at thirteen.

But some of the tension also left her shoulders. The WCCE was well-known in the Midwest, and she'd been worried about the other players being a cut above her. Now she could breathe. It was just another group in another state in another city.

Then a flash of worry went through her. She had been hoping the group would elevate her playing, but *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*... *It didn't speak well to the group's supposed cutting-edge image.*

Well... She glanced back at Stephen. Maybe there were a few more complications here.

Her gaze dropped to her phone propped on her music stand before Stephen could meet her eye. So far, there were no notifications. She bit her lip, unsure if that made her feel better or worse. Tonight, she had been forced to do something she hated: she had left Max with a stranger, earning her a bundle of bad-mom points. But they had only been in the city for forty-eight hours, so what the hell else could she do?

Thinking of Max with a stranger opened a floodgate of melodramatic thoughts that she had been able to shut down upon entering the hall. But now an image flashed through her mind of Max alone and injured, their apartment emptied of their few belongings, and the ceiling fan still swinging haphazardly. The mental picture appeared in black-and-white, like an old cops-and-robbers movie. The officer who responded to the 911 call would, of course, wear his hat cocked on his head and sound like Humphrey Bogart as he told her there was "very little we can do, sweetheart."

Just as she slipped into another worried daydream, a flurry of motion from stage left caught her eye. She squinted to see past the stage lights.

A medium-height brunette stood in the shadows, her back perfectly straight and her chin held high as she faced down Zachary King. Everything about the woman was fierce, from her shoulder-length bob styled to perfection to the crisp suit and deep-red lips. The woman said something that made Zachary take a step back.

The young Asian woman standing next to her focused on Zachary with her hands dancing as he spoke.

It was sign language. That much Kate knew. She had seen it used on *Sesame Street* with Max. She thought the name was beautiful, that it fit so perfectly with the graceful movements.

The Loudest Silence

What was a person who couldn't hear doing in a chamber rehearsal? Both brunettes were dressed too well to be there by accident. It wasn't as if they had taken a wrong turn at Albuquerque.

The younger and taller of the two finally let her hands fall to her stomach as if in a rest position. She turned toward her companion and waited

The other woman's painted lips curled back. She pinned the man with her gaze, stabbed her finger at him again, and said something that seemed to make him quake in his boots.

He nodded again, turned on his heel, and hurried away too quickly to maintain his dignity. Kate felt bad for him, but then her attention was pulled back to the women.

The younger woman raised her brow as her hands flew into beautiful fluid motion again.

The other rolled her eyes. With quick, stabbing motions, she answered in the same language. The flow of their hands was mesmerizing.

"So, I think that's it for now!" Mary's voice brought Kate back to the moment. "I think we should try a quick run-through."

Reluctantly, Kate turned her attention to the sheet music, ready to play.

* * *

The rehearsal had gone as smoothly as she could have hoped for. The group played beautifully, which was great since the first gig was scheduled for only a few days later.

"Well, hello, stranger." She heard Stephen's voice as she pushed through the stage door and stepped outside, eager to save Max from the new sitter—and possible Noir-style burglar.

"Hey." She turned to greet him. "Way to show up at the last minute today."

His smile exuded all his charm. "Eh, I like to get warmed up at home. What can I say?"

She rolled her eyes and forced a smile. "It's good to see you." She hadn't been sure how she would feel talking to him again after so many years, after...well, everything. It was nice to see him, and she hadn't expected that.

“Right back at you, lady.” Stephen gave her a slow smile that quickly split into a grin. He held out his arms for a hug. She went to him, far too aware of him to feel comfortable. They ended the embrace quickly, chuckling awkwardly.

“You seem nervous, Flynn.”

Kate debated briefly about how honest to be. “It’s not exactly nerves. It’s more that if there are any mistakes, then it’s all me. There’s no one else to blame when you’re the only cello.”

A part of her still wasn’t sure if she was supposed to be there. She had won the job, yeah, but had they really meant to pick her instead of some other thin blonde with a cleft chin and a small scar under her left eye?

It wasn’t a new feeling either. Kate had never felt as if she fit anywhere. After as many foster families as she had been through, it was impossible not to feel that way.

“We all make mistakes. No one will judge you for them. At least not today,” he added, nudging her with his elbow.

Kate snorted and suddenly remembered what it had been like that summer at Tanglewood, sitting in a cabin, sharing a bottle.

She shoved the nostalgic memory back down. “Talk about making the new girl feel welcome!”

His laugh was full-bellied and loud. “Hey, now, don’t mistake me for the welcome committee. That’s not a roller-coaster I wanna ride.”

“You did all right at Tanglewood.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t think handing you a shot as soon as you walked in was a good idea tonight.”

She laughed. “I don’t think I’ve had one since then.”

“How’s the apartment? Does it suit you?”

She nodded. The apartment was also something she didn’t want to get into just then.

“And little Max?”

Startled that he had asked, she looked into his eyes. Of course he would, but somehow...

“Yeah. Yeah, no.” She shoved her hands into her pockets, suddenly feeling smothered. “He’s good. Growing like a weed.”

“Good, good.” Stephen shifted his feet. “Well, it was good to see you. Let’s get a drink soon.”

The Loudest Silence

“Yeah, yeah.” She shivered in the night air.

“Well, uh, you sounded great in there tonight. Seriously.” He turned and walked away.

Kate headed down the sidewalk toward the L station. That meeting had gone better than she expected. God, she was glad it was over.

* * *

Kate hopped on the train, her teeth chattering in the cool air. If she was this cold now, how would she handle the snow next winter? She badly needed a new coat.

The commute to her apartment in East Rogers Park was fifty minutes—assuming there were no delays. It was long enough for her to lose the feeling in her toes thanks to the poor L car heating. She watched as the train passed the downtown skyscrapers, the lights in the tall buildings twinkling brighter than any stars. She had missed living in a big city. It was nice to be in one again. Who knew where the next job would be? She and Max could next end up in a tiny town in Alaska or even Timbuktu. Everything had an expiration date: jobs, homes, dates, relationships. Even the car she had bought for herself when she was young had finally been retired. It was day one of the job. She shouldn't already be thinking about what was coming next, but it was inevitable. A year went by quickly.

The skyscrapers finally gave way to brick apartment buildings. The outside lights went from bright, warm, and welcoming to dim as the train traveled toward her neighborhood.

She pushed herself deeper into her seat as the train commuters changed from young business professionals to sus-looking teenagers wearing bulky jackets and pants hanging down so low, it was a wonder they didn't fall off.

She made it back to her apartment. “Hello?” she called out softly, picking her way in the dark around boxes littered everywhere.

“Hi, Mrs. Flynn.” Stacey appeared from Max's room as Kate rounded the corner into the hallway. The night-light cast an eerie shadow over the babysitter's face.

Max, half-asleep, was draped over Stacey's shoulder. He pulled his thumb from his mouth with a whine and reached for his mother. His half-closed eyes, red-rimmed and swollen, peeked out from under his flop of dark hair.

“I’ve been trying to put him to bed for two hours, Mrs. Flynn, but he’s been really upset.”

“Kate. Let’s just go with Kate instead of Mrs. Anything. And, yeah, it’s all right. It’s usually a problem with a new babysitter. Don’t worry about it.”

Holding her three-year-old—who was getting far too big to be held like a baby—Kate paid the babysitter and maneuvered through the dim light to his bedroom. She laid him back on his bed, rubbed his belly, and gently pulled his thumb from his mouth. “Hey, kid.”

“You were gone,” he said.

“I had to work, remember?”

He nodded.

“You’re sleepy. Close your eyes.”

“You home?”

“Yes. I’m home for the night.”

Hearing Kate’s words, Max rolled onto his stomach, his thumb moving to his mouth. She pulled it out again and rubbed his back gently until his breathing became deep and even. Then she stood up and stretched. He—no, they—were going to be tired in the morning.

As she made her way to her own room, her shins seemed to bang into every box in the apartment.

Kate was tired of moving boxes. She hated them—hated what they represented for Max. At least they didn’t have a lot of them anymore. They had moved six times since Max was born. After a while, they had stopped accumulating whatever wasn’t absolutely necessary, measuring all things by asking, “Is this worth packing into the car?”

She fell into bed with a sigh. Unpacking could wait for another day. As she closed her eyes, a familiar dissatisfaction crept up her spine: Max had been with a babysitter. She didn’t know anyone. She was going to bed alone.

God, she was so tired of this life.

She rolled over and hugged the pillow, forcing herself to sleep before the negative thoughts could fully blossom.

Chapter 2

A FEW DAYS LATER, A teary-eyed Max followed her through the apartment, whining as she pulled on her concert blacks, her usual slacks and professional black blouse, and her heels. When she dressed for a performance, he usually understood that it was time for his mommy to go and play music. Tonight, however, he refused to settle.

“Buddy, look.” She pointed at the large pot on the stove. “You get to have soup with Stacey! You like Stacey, remember? You said she’s funny.”

Max’s bottom lip was out, and his huge eyes blinked back tears, making his brown irises stand out until she felt as if she were facing a bereaved Precious Moments figurine.

“But I don’t wanna!” he wailed, wrapping his arms around her knees.

She lifted him into her arms and kissed his temple. “Hey, I’ll be home soon, Max, and you get to have your soup. Maybe Stacey will put on *Ninja Turtles*.” She caught the babysitter’s eye, trying to convey that *now* would be a good time to put it on.

Stacey smiled and nodded but didn’t move. Whatever message she had just received was not the one that Kate was trying to get across.

“Do you wanna watch *Ninja Turtles*?” Kate pointedly shifted her gaze from Stacey to the TV. “Maybe we can make pizza tomorrow like Michelangelo. Whatd’ya think? You wanna be like Michelangelo?”

Max shook his head, then dropped his face onto her shoulder. She probably had snot on her concert blacks now.

“Okay, buddy, I gotta go.”

“No-o-o-o!”

She pulled gently and then harder, fighting to get Max to release his hold. “Jesus, kid, you’re getting strong. Stacey, you wanna—?”

“Right! Sorry.”

Stacey pulled him from behind as Kate extracted his arms. Finally, she was loose. She scrambled to pick up her things.

“I love you.” Kate pushed the mop of hair off his forehead to plant another kiss. She held back the *I’m sorry* that she wanted to say and dashed out the door.

Stomach churning, she hurried down the hall and down the stairs, trying to ignore his screams. With each step, the same thought repeated: *I hate this*. She replayed his flushed, tear-stained face over and over in her mind.

* * *

Kate entered the building through the stage door, her cello case hanging from her back.

The WCCE gig was a small one, a fundraiser for a local arts high school. The music was easy, but her fingers twitched, her stomach rock hard.

“Hey, Flynn.” Stephen met her at the door. “You okay?”

“What? Oh.” She popped her neck, still hearing Max’s screams. “Yeah. Max just, uh... He doesn’t like it when I leave in the evenings. He really cries and—” She noticed the vacant look on his face. “Uh, never mind. Yeah, I’m good.”

Stephen cleared his throat. “You look a little unsteady on your feet. Are you ready?”

“Are you kidding?” Kate swung the case off her back and set it down. “I was born ready.”

If he heard the wobble in her voice, he didn’t mention it.

“Don’t be worried.” William, one of the violinists, grinned at her. “This is fun, right? And you only have two pieces today. The others are mostly brass.”

“Right.” Kate rubbed her moist palms on her slacks.

“You got this. Don’t stress.” Stephen grinned.

The small group had already assembled on the stage, leaving little time for Kate’s nerves to ramp up. She had no sooner set up her instrument than someone announced the piece they were about to play. The room hushed, the eyes of the audience on the players.

The Loudest Silence

It was always at this moment, just before the first piece, that she wondered why the hell she had gotten into this career.

Her hands and fingers were steady even though her stomach spun like a washer. She counted out the beats, then slowly drew her bow across the strings, pulling a low, deep moan from her cello. The sound calmed her nerves, reminding her of the answer to her question. She loved the cello. She loved music. That was why she put herself through this insane career. Love.

As she played, her eye was drawn to a commotion at stage left. She glanced over, and her heart jumped into her throat like an excited bunny. It was same angry woman and her companion that Kate had noticed during her first rehearsal at the Symphony Center. Once again, their hands were flying wildly, and, just like before, it took Kate a long time before she was willing to look away from the mesmerizing movements.

And she wasn't the only one distracted. At least half the children in the audience had turned their heads to watch.

One, two, three, four. She counted the rests, then began to play again.

She did her best to ignore the commotion, but the longer their hands flew, the more her admiration turned to agitation. It was getting harder to look away. In fact, it was getting downright distracting.

The one who had cut into Mr. King so thoroughly was beautiful. Her lightly golden skin, large eyes, and full lips were almost as distracting as the hand movements themselves.

Kate forced herself to look away. God, they were rude! This audience was made up of children! They were learning how to behave during a performance, and the women were setting a bad example.

Finally, the last note of her portion of the program finished. She and the other string players rose from their seats, bowed to the audience, and exited the stage.

"Who are those women?" Kate asked Stephen as soon as they were out of earshot.

Stephen, who was about to go back out to play with the brass ensemble, shrugged.

Finally, the performance was over. Stephen appeared as she was chatting with a stagehand.

"As per tradition, it's time to partake in some bad wine. Whatd'ya say?"

Kate turned at Stephen's sudden appearance.

"You all right?"

"What? Yeah, of course. Wine, yeah, okay. Just give me a minute."

She *had* to speak to those two women, tell them how rude they had been. She had to say *something*. If she were in their shoes, she would want to be told.

Jaw set, she started toward them, remembering the look on the face of the woman who had metaphorically crushed King beneath a designer pump. Perhaps she should have been intimidated, but she wasn't; angry people with authority did not bother her as much as they probably should. She worked through her speech, trying to find a way to say the words politely.

She approached the woman, who was now staring intently at her phone screen, unaware of anything around her.

"Excuse me."

The woman did not look up.

Had Kate really just tried to *speak* to a deaf person? Feeling like an utter genius, she lightly touched the woman's hand. The woman looked up and gazed at her intently. Kate blinked, disoriented. She hadn't seen her up close before, so she hadn't noticed the intensity of her eyes or their rich shade of brown. They were surprisingly beautiful despite their remoteness.

Kate realized that she was staring and blinked. Forcing a smile, she opened her mouth to speak, then stopped. Her face heated. She had no idea how to communicate with someone who couldn't hear.

The stranger forced a smile that said she dealt with this kind of ignorance every day. She drew a circle around her mouth with two fingers and stared at Kate's lips, giving the impression that she could lipread.

"Okay." She pointed to herself. Should she enunciate more? Shaping her lips in exaggerated movements, she introduced herself. "Kate."

"Don't do that with your lips."

"Oh." Kate felt her cheeks go warm and her eyes go wide. The woman had *spoken*. Kate hadn't expected that. Though now that she thought about it, hadn't she seen her speak to King? She hoped she had wiped the surprise off her face quickly.

"Vivian Kensington."

"So, um, I'm the new performer with the WCCE and—"

Vivian Kensington nodded, cutting Kate off. “Yes, the cellist. Katelyn Flynn. Welcome to the group.”

Her voice was a bit unusual. While the pitch was perfectly ordinary, if a little deep, it mostly sounded as if she had a bad head cold and made her tone nasal and constricted. Each word seemed to flow just a bit into the next, but otherwise, she was perfectly understandable.

The way she spoke was intriguing. And the way Vivian Kensington stared at her was disconcerting. Kate felt her heart flutter.

“Is there something I can help you with, Ms. Flynn?”

Kate paused, then frowned as she remembered that she had come over because she was angry. *Damn it!* She shifted, her irritation returning. How was it that Ms. Kensington seemed annoyed with her? She had assumed that Zachary King had transgressed in some way, but maybe this woman was just rude. “Uh, right. I just wanted to say that you were really distracting during the performance.”

“Excuse me?” Ms. Kensington’s voice was cold and flat, dripping with aristocratic venom through the distortion.

“Sorry. That was kind of blunt. What I meant to say was, you were talking through the entire concert, and it was really distracting.” The pressure of the woman’s glare made Kate shift her stance. “It wasn’t just me. The other players were distracted too. And so were the kids. So I thought...”

A pained look flashed across the woman’s face before indignation rose to mask it. Her hands began moving in the alien language, fast and quick.

Kate was about to point out that she had no idea what the hand movements meant when a voice from behind supplied her with the answer. “I’m deaf.”

Kate looked around.

The woman’s younger companion stood with a drink in her hand. “Hi. Charlie Hseih. I’m Ms. Kensington’s interpreter.”

Kate returned the smile, but Vivian Kensington was having none of their pleasantries. “Tell this—” She scowled, then paused as if reconsidering her words. “Tell *Ms. Flynn*,” Charlie read as the woman’s hands flew, “that I am deaf, and sign language is my main means of communication. Oh...” Charlie blushed. “Um—”

“Yeah, I got the gist, Ms. Hseih,” Kate said, turning to face the interpreter.

“Charlie.”

“Charlie. Look, I understand that she’s deaf, obviously—”

Charlie opened her mouth to speak, but Vivian snapped her small, manicured fingers in front of Kate’s face, drawing her attention back.

“Talk to her,” Charlie said. “Pretend I’m not here. Geez, she’s really mad. What did you say?”

“I was trying to tell her that, with all due respect, she was drawing attention during the concert.” She turned back to Ms. Kensington, refusing to allow her glare to shake her. “Your hands were going during the concert, and it was really distracting to everyone. All of the children were watching you, Ms. Kensington, and not listening to the music.”

“And I told you that I am deaf and this is how I communicate!” Charlie read. “What is so hard to understand about that?”

Kate bristled. The woman seemed to be deliberately misconstruing her words. “I get that, but we’re here teaching children how to behave in a performance setting, right? So, isn’t it rude for *anyone* to talk during a performance, whether it’s with their voices or with their hands? I’m just—”

The woman’s hands burst into motion so quickly that Kate wasn’t sure how Charlie could follow them.

Kate took an involuntary step back as the woman’s hands moved, slapping into each other.

“Are we also not meant to teach these children about tolerance and acceptance of those who are different? I apologize”—her face made it clear she was not sorry at all— “if my language was distracting to you, but allowances must be made, just as handicap rails are available on buildings to allow all to enter.”

Kate winced. She felt as if she were standing in front of a firing squad. She glanced around.

Yes, people were staring.

“Let us only hope,” the woman continued disdainfully, bending a little as her hands bounced sharply, “that people with attitudes such as yours do not spend too much time with these children and that your archaic intolerance will not be passed on to the next generation.”

It took Kate a second to recover enough to respond. “Whoa, wait a minute, lady! I wasn’t singling you out because you’re deaf. I was making a

comment about *anyone* talking during a performance! I have a son, and I wouldn't want him to think what you were doing was okay, so I—”

The woman pushed past her. Charlie followed.

“Oh, come on! I meant I wouldn't want him to see someone talking during a performance!” she snapped at the back of the woman's head.

What the hell?

Why had she automatically accused her of discriminating against her because she was deaf? She most certainly had not said that. Why would she even think it?

She considered chasing after her to make sure the woman knew exactly what she'd meant, but before she could react, Stephen stepped in front of her, a cup of wine in his hand. “So, I'm gonna step in here.”

Kate snarled.

“I see you met our resident ice queen.”

“What?”

He jerked his head toward the retreating back of Vivian Kensington. “Were you two fighting?”

“Yeah, I guess so. I don't know. She was speaking sign language through the entire performance, and it was really freaking distracting. You didn't notice?” She took a sip of the cheap wine, grimacing at the vinegary taste.

Stephen laughed. “Oh, of course I noticed. No one would have the guts to say something to her, though, so *brava* to that.”

“Why? Because she's deaf? Does that mean she gets to be as rude as she likes and it should just be ignored?” She knew her anger was making her act out unprofessionally.

From across the room, Ms. Kensington caught her eye and glared.

“Well, no.” Stephen shrugged. “But considering her position...”

Kate grabbed his arm. “Oh God, please don't tell me she's someone I should know.”

Stephen clinked his plastic cup against hers. “I'm sorry to say it, but good job, gorgeous. You haven't even been here a week, and you've already pissed off the president of the board.”

Kate looked down at her empty cup. “Of course I did.”

Chapter 3

“MAX, HURRY! WE’RE GOING TO be late!” Kate picked up the bag that held her cell phone, sunglasses, and the snack she knew Max would want before they even got to the train. “Max!”

He ripped from his room, his ears sticking out from under his baseball cap. His cheeks spread out in a wide grin, making them look as chubby as a chipmunk’s. Slamming into her legs, he nearly knocked her over. “For the music?”

“Yes!” she answered. “Let’s go!” She leaned down and kissed his cheek.

He squared his cap on his head and pulled her toward the door. “Let’s go! Let’s go!”

Kate resisted the urge to laugh at the little twig legs sticking out of his shorts, but he gave her arm another tug, and with a promise to herself to stop for coffee, they were off to the Mommy & Me music day with the WCCE.

The last two weeks had been uneventful. Max had been looking forward to their first social event for days. He genuinely loved music.

The community center where the event was being held was large, and Kate was reminded of a happy period during her childhood. It smelled like Play-Doh, apple juice with a side of graham crackers, and construction paper. And it was *loud*. Children of all ages were yelling, laughing, screaming, all of them excited for the afternoon of noisemaking that they had been promised.

Max wasn’t shy, but he also hadn’t been exposed to many kids his own age, thanks to their constant moving, something Kate felt a never-ending guilt about. Overwhelmed by all the other children, Max pulled on Kate’s arm in a silent demand to be picked up.

“Hey, no need to be afraid, Max,” she whispered as he buried his face in her shoulder, hiding in her hair. “Should we find the teacher? Yeah?”

He nodded, his hand twisting as his thumb went to his mouth.

“Hey, kid. We’ve talked about that, right? Mr. Thumb is too big to go in your mouth anymore. You’re a big boy, and you don’t need it!”

He removed his thumb, his lip jutting out.

Kate moved quickly, hoping to avoid a breakdown. She looked around for someone in charge.

“Ms. Flynn?”

Kate turned to see a casually dressed Charlie Hseih smiling at her. It was strange to see her out of her professional garb. “Uh, Ms. Hseih! Hi!”

“Charlie. Are you here for the event?”

Charlie shot her an easy smile, as if she were inviting anyone who met her to sit back and talk over coffee or a drink. Maybe it was because she wore a pair of worn Converse. Or maybe it was her asymmetrical bob. Or maybe it was the fact that Charlie was makeup free, giving her a relaxed and friendly air. It was easy to smile back at her.

“Yeah,” Kate answered. “Are you here for it too?”

“Oh no!” Charlie laughed, waving her hands. “No, I don’t have kids. I’m one of the teachers.”

“Oh!” She had assumed that Charlie worked privately for Vivian Kensington, but maybe she actually worked for WCCE.

“Vivian didn’t tell me you had kids. Who’s this?” Charlie asked, flashing Max a grin.

Max peeked out from under Kate’s hair, a finger in his mouth instead of his thumb.

“Just the one. This is my son, Max.” Kate bounced him affectionately and gently pulled his finger out of his mouth.

“Hi, Max! Oh my goodness, you’re so cute!” Charlie squealed. She tickled his side, making him squirm in delight. “He’s so handsome.”

Kate thanked her. “So, um, how did they rope you into working this?”

“Actually, uh...” Charlie brought her hands up and began moving them as she spoke. “This is something we run every year. This is kind of *our* annual event.”

Kate looked at the sign language in panic. “No! You’re kidding! Shit. Wait, don’t tell her I said that.” She slapped down Charlie’s hands. Then she felt the air on her back getting colder. Or had she imagined that?

Kate turned to find herself face-to-face with the ice queen. *Oh crap.*

She had dreaded meeting her again. Part of her was convinced that she was going to be fired for having insulted the board president. She hadn’t meant to do that. She shouldn’t have approached her in the first place. She blamed first-day performance jitters. She told herself it was because she had wanted to make her aware of how distracting she had been, but now, weeks later, she admitted that she had been offended by their rudeness. She hadn’t exactly overreacted, but she also hadn’t *not* overreacted.

She needed to apologize.

Kate opened her mouth, but the only thing that came out was an awkward “Ah...”

“It’s true,” Ms. Kensington said with a voice as tight as Kate’s back muscles. “We both have a strong passion for children as well as a desire for community outreach.” She nodded slightly at Kate and began signing as Charlie translated. “Ms. Flynn, it’s very nice to see you.” Her words were polite, but her eyes were cold, her chin sharply jutted, her lips a thin line. “Have you signed in yet?”

“Not yet.” Kate flinched as the sign-in clipboard was slapped into her hands. Okay, she probably deserved that. She filled it out quickly and handed it to Charlie.

Ms. Kensington looked away from Kate and turned her attention to Max. “And this must be Maxwell.” She addressed him in her slightly distorted voice.

“Um, yeah.” Kate hooked her thumbs into her back pockets and wondered how the hell this woman knew the name of her son. His *full* name.

Ms. Kensington beamed at him but didn’t touch him—something Kate appreciated since most people felt compelled to tousle his hair or pinch his cheek. Instead, she leaned over slightly so that she was level with his face.

At the attention of a new person, he buried himself in Kate’s hair.

Ms. Kensington smiled brightly, causing a dimple to appear. “Hi, Max. I’m Vivian.”

He peeked out. “Your voice is funny. Are you sick?” He reached out to touch her throat.

Kate felt her face flush. Great. Now Ms. Kensington was going to think that both she *and* her son were jerks.

But to Kate's surprise, Ms. Kensington smiled warmly, staying at his eye level. "No, I'm not sick. My voice sounds different because I'm deaf. Do you know what that means?"

He shook his head and struggled to get down. Kate set him on the ground.

Ms. Kensington kneeled in front of him, not seeming to mind that he stared at her in rapt attention.

"What's death?"

Charlie snorted. Ms. Kensington glanced at her, then laughed too. "No, little prince, *deaf*, not *death*. It means that I can't hear."

"Nothing?" he asked, his eyes wide.

"Nope. Nothing. My ears don't work like yours do." She tugged gently on his earlobe.

Perplexed, Max reached up.

Ms. Kensington leaned in closer, allowing him to look into her ear.

"Max..." Kate didn't know what he had in mind, but she knew her son and—

Max leaned in and screamed as loudly as he could right into Ms. Kensington's ear.

Everyone in the room froze. Everyone except Ms. Kensington.

"Oh my God, Max!" Kate snatched him away and held him against her legs. She was screwed with this woman. There was no hope for an apology. She should just give up now and pick up the want ads on the way home. If she was lucky, she could find a night shift at a McDonald's on the South Side.

Then Ms. Kensington laughed. To Kate's utter bafflement, she *laughed*.

"Nope, nothing."

"Wow!" Max had the same look on his face as when they had built and set off bottle rockets. "What are you doing with your hands?" He held one tightly to study it, as if willing it to reveal its magic.

"It's called sign language. That's how Deaf people like me speak. We sign. See?" She signed a few words and Charlie interpreted. "It's nice to meet you, Max. I like your hat."

Max asked several more questions before he fell silent, seemingly satisfied.

Kate had watched the entire interaction in slight horror, unsure if it would be worse to stop his questioning or allow him to continue.

Finally, Ms. Kensington spoke again. “Have you met the other children yet?”

Max shook his head, and when Vivian offered her hand, he took it.

Vivian looked up at Kate, the warmth melting from her eyes.

Kate tried to look as apologetic as possible.

“It’s all right.” Ms. Kensington spoke before Kate could open her mouth. “Children always have questions, and I don’t mind them. Thankfully, children do not have the same prejudices as their parents. *Children* can still learn better.”

Kate’s mouth fell open. She turned to Charlie as the ice queen took her child across the room.

Charlie whistled and said something in Chinese, her eyebrows high.

“I didn’t mean it like that!” Kate wailed.

“Tell her that, then. Make it up to her,” Charlie told her. “Take her to dinner and apologize or something.”

Kate swallowed and nodded back. It made sense, yet her stomach twisted with nerves at the thought. It didn’t matter. She was going to do it anyway.

* * *

Every time Kate began to have fun playing with the kids, every time she began to let her hair down, Ms. Kensington would catch her eye, burning her with her stare, her nose wrinkled as if she smelled something bad. Then Kate’s enjoyment would dissipate in angry humiliation. It was as though the sight of Kate disgusted the woman.

This was so bad. She had to get this behind her and say something before she left today. She knew better than to think that an apology would make it better; clearly Ms. Kensington hated her. Maybe if she apologized, though, she could move on and feel less guilty.

At the end of rehearsal, she turned to where Max was playing with his new friends. She felt Ms. Kensington’s eyes on her back—or maybe her mind was playing games with her. Either way, the sensation was like nails on a chalkboard.

Max was bouncing uncontrollably as the class wound down. At least he had enjoyed himself.

Across the room, Kate looked again at the perfectly presented woman. Part of her intimidation, Kate decided, was how pretty she was. On top of that, the tailored slacks, tight black blouse, and tall heels gave her a too-put-together professional air that told anyone who dressed casually that they needed to stay ten feet away.

As if she knew Kate was thinking about her, Ms. Kensington glanced at her, looked away, then glanced at her again. She all but rolled her eyes before she looked away the second time.

It was now or never.

“Do we hafta go?” Max whined.

“It’s over, kid. That means it’s time to go home.”

“Don’t wanna.”

“Max, sit right here for a minute, okay? Stay put. I mean it.” She eyed him. He could be a loose cannon when he wanted to be. “So, what are you doing?” she confirmed.

He sat down with a sigh, swinging his dangling legs. “Not getting up.”

“Good job, buddy.”

Kate approached the woman from behind and tapped her shoulder. Ms. Kensington jumped and turned, a scowl on her face.

“So,” Kate said, “can I help clean up?”

Ms. Kensington’s mouth popped open, appearing ready to say something, but instead she flattened her hand on her stomach and rubbed it as if it pained her. With her face hard, she pointed to the toy instruments and a large plastic bin.

“Right.” Kate placed them into the bin and pushed it into the corner with other bins. Ms. Kensington watched the entire time.

When Kate had finished, she returned to face her nemesis. “Anything else?”

Ms. Kensington shook her head and moved to turn away, but Kate caught her arm.

“Look, I want to apologize.”

Ms. Kensington looked down at Kate’s hand, then back up to meet her eyes with a scathing glare.

Kate dropped her hand and opened her mouth.

Before she could speak, Ms. Kensington held up a single finger, spun on her heel, and walked purposefully away.

Kate stared after her, flabbergasted. “What kind of an adult holds a grudge like this?” she shouted at the back of Ms. Kensington’s head, her arms flailing. But of course Ms. Kensington neither saw nor heard her.

“Stomp on the floor!”

“What?” Kate swung around to see Charlie standing next to Max.

“Stomp on the floor! That’s how you get a Deaf person’s attention. She’ll feel it through the wood.”

Kate stomped twice on the floor, hard, and the retreating woman spun around as if she had been tapped on the shoulder. She walked back to face Kate, who quickly spoke before Ms. Kensington could leave again. “Give me two minutes. Please!”

Ms. Kensington folded her arms across her chest and lifted a single eyebrow.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean what I said at the community center to sound the way it did. I didn’t mean to insult you.”

“What did you mean, then?” Ms. Kensington asked in her distorted voice.

“All I meant was that I thought we were trying to teach the children that all talking, all *communication*, whether with our mouths or our hands, can be distracting to the performers. I was talking about respecting the players and the music.” Kate began to gesticulate wildly. “It wasn’t about you being deaf. I’m not some evil person who’s against Deaf people!”

Ms. Kensington’s dark eyes narrowed, and Kate stuffed her hands into her back pockets. This wasn’t working at all. Charlie’s suggestion popped into her mind, and her teeth ground.

“Look, Ms. Kensington. Let me do *something* to apologize.” Then, as if the words had a life of their own, she added, “Let me take you out to dinner.”

Ms. Kensington continued to stare but still said nothing.

“Oh, come on, I’m not that terrible! This is silly.”

“Dinner?”

Kate gulped. “Yes.”

Ms. Kensington’s face didn’t relax as she considered. Then she dipped her head. “Next Friday.”

“It’s a date.”

Ms. Kensington’s eyes narrowed again. “Dinner.”

The Loudest Silence

Kate coughed, her mouth suddenly dry. She hadn't meant... She didn't want... "No, no, I meant... No, I didn't mean..."

"Friday," Ms. Kensington said again. Then she turned and walked away.

* * *

Subject: Meeting Time
To: kflynn88@wcce.org
From: vkensington@wcce.org

Good afternoon.

I would like to settle on a time and place to meet Friday night. I am free any time after 7 pm.

Cordially,
Vivian Kensington
President, Board of Directors
The J.C. Kensington Foundation
Windy City Chamber Ensemble
2381 South Michigan, Chicago, IL 60604
312-783-4230, ext. 825 | 312-733-7330 (fax) | www.JC-Kensington.org

* * *

Subject: Meeting Time
To: vkensington@wcce.org
From: kflynn88@wcce.org

Ms. Kensington:

Do you have any suggestions about where to go, since you live here?

K

* * *

Olivia Janae

Subject: Re: Meeting Time
To: kflyn88@wcce.org
From: vkensington@wcce.org

I suggest, Ms. Flynn, that you know the details of an engagement before you present it.

Cordially,
Vivian Kensington

* * *

Subject: Re: Meeting Time
To: vkensington@wcce.org
From: kflyn88@wcce.org

Let's say 8 pm.

K

* * *

Subject: Re: Meeting Time
To: kflyn88@wcce.org
From: vkensington@wcce.org

And where, exactly, shall we meet?

Cordially,
Vivian Kensington

* * *

Subject: Re: Meeting Time
To: vkensington@wcce.org
From: kflyn88@wcce.org

I'll let you know.

K

* * *

Kate stood in front of the mirror, smoothing her dress. She kept checking her makeup, her hair, and her teeth as though constant inspection would make it better. She couldn't imagine what this evening was going to be like. She had never eaten a meal with someone who hated her so openly.

Her stomach was fluttering, but not with eager anticipation.

They had decided to meet at a small trendy restaurant that Stephen had suggested, and Kate wasn't going to be late.

She checked her outfit again. Her sleeveless silhouette cocktail dress showed off her arms and legs yet was long enough for decency. The plain black hinted at professionalism.

Finally satisfied that she looked as good as she was going to get, she kissed Max and headed to the door, then paused.

What if Charlie wasn't there? She didn't want—for lack of a better expression—a third wheel. If she had to grovel, she would rather do it with fewer eyes on her. But oh God, what if she *didn't* bring her? How could she fully apologize without an interpreter?

She had spent the previous evening watching sign language videos. She tried to learn a few basics but had given up when she discovered that some signs had gone out of fashion or had been updated over the years. Plus there was ASL, English, cued speech, and something mysteriously called “home sign.” How did she know which one to use? Wikipedia had said that most Deaf people spoke American Sign Language, but what if Ms. Kensington didn't? Would she laugh at her if Kate used a 1970s version of a sign? What if she offended her again by using the wrong sign?

Oh God.

She grabbed a small notepad from the counter and shoved it in her bag before starting into the city.

* * *

Friday night in the Loop, aka downtown, was filled with people making their way to and from functions in every state of dress, from tuxedos to nothing but a tie and black boxer briefs. Kate's black stilettos clacked in time with the pulsing energy of the city around her.

She arrived at the restaurant early and quickly glanced around. When she didn't spot Ms. Kensington, she stepped forward to the hostess station.

“Name?” The young girl barely looked at her.

“Flynn,” Kate croaked and cleared her throat.

The girl checked the book. “It looks like your party isn’t here yet, and your table won’t be ready for another thirty minutes. Would you like to wait here or in the bar?”

“Bar,” Kate answered quickly.

The bar was bright with lots of fluorescent lights. Red and deep purple uplighting highlighted the huge oval counter space.

The raven-haired bartender approached her with a slightly flirtatious eye and smiled expectantly.

“Give me a Jameson up, please.”

“Liquid courage?” the bartender asked.

“Yup.” Kate chuckled. “Something like that.”

What if Ms. Kensington didn’t show? Would that be a good thing or a bad thing?

Maybe that would be better because then we can just keep glaring silently at each other. At least rehearsals wouldn’t be torture.

A warm hand touched her arm.

“I’m sorry I’m late.”

Kate turned to find a very different-looking woman than she had thus far seen.

Ms. Kensington waved for the bartender and ordered a glass of wine. She stood beside Kate, looking down at her. “And what is it that you’re staring at, exactly?”

“You’re smiling.” Immediately Kate looked away. That had been so not-at-all smooth.

She rolled her eyes. “It may surprise you, Ms. Flynn, but I *am* known to do that every now and then.”

Kate looked down at her drink. So they were still in this icy place where Kate was afraid to take a step.

“Was there something else?” Ms. Kensington asked.

Kate glanced up, squaring her shoulders. “No, nothing. You, uh, you look nice.” She was about to begin a long mental list of remarks about how stupid that had been to say when Ms. Kensington nodded.

“As do you.”

The Loudest Silence

Kate shivered at the still-frosty tone. “No Charlie?” she asked. Her heart was pounding in her chest again, and while she knew Ms. Kensington couldn’t hear it, she wondered if maybe she could read it on her face.

“I gave her the night off.”

“Oh.”

A minute or so passed in uncomfortable silence. Finally, Kate said, “They said the wait would probably be about thirty minutes.”

Ms. Kensington frowned. “Why are you yelling? I can’t hear you any better if you yell, Ms. Flynn.”

Kate groaned and hung her head. She *had* been yelling. “There’s a band playing.”

“And this equates to you yelling because...?”

“Right. Because you won’t hear me any better even if I yell over the noise. Sorry, Ms. Kensington.”

“Just for this evening, let’s drop the formalities. Vivian. Please. And it’s easier for me to read your lips if you speak normally. When you yell, or overenunciate, your mouth moves differently.”

Kate considered that information.

Vivian tilted her head, studying her. “What does that look mean? You’re quite expressive, you know.”

Kate glanced around, unsure of how to move forward, then blurted out, “I know that you think I’m the enemy, but I just want to make this as easy on you as possible.”

“Then speak *normally*, Kate.”

Kate nodded. “Okay, then.”

They studied each another. The pressure to engage in small talk was making it hard for Kate to breathe.

“So the children were watching me, were they?”

Kate leaned back, relieved. “Yeah, they were.”

Vivian’s eyes flashed.

“You’re still upset.”

“Not as much as I was.” Vivian sipped her wine. “You don’t seem to understand. So many people don’t realize that the words they say matter to someone like me. The power of words is so often underestimated. I know you meant well, but the way you spoke was less than kind. It was ableist at the very best. Children learn even when we don’t think they’re listening. I

realize I can be a bit abrasive at times, but what if a child had heard how you spoke to me?”

“I—” She hadn’t thought about it that way.

“That being said, you were right. I was being rude.”

“And I was being totally insensitive. I’m sorry.” Kate swirled her drink to give herself a moment to think before she continued. “What I had meant to say that night was that for those of us who aren’t used to seeing sign language, it’s impossible not to watch. It’s so beautiful.” She flushed.

Vivian finally sat on the barstool beside Kate. “So now that we’ve covered that, may I ask you a question?”

“Okay,” she said slowly.

“Why did you invite me here?”

Kate frowned. “Stephen said it was good.”

“No, not here to this restaurant. You could have apologized and left it at that. Why did you invite me to dinner? Was it fear for your job? Did you think I would fire you?”

“No. I mean, maybe. But that’s not why I invited you. Is it bad that I did?”

“I didn’t say that. I was just, let’s say, surprised.” Vivian’s gaze intensified. “So you know Mr. Foy?”

Kate nodded and wrinkled her nose. “Yeah, I do.”

“Oh.” Vivian smiled politely. “I didn’t realize you two were involved.”

Kate nearly choked on her drink. “What? No! I didn’t mean—no.”

“I apologize,” Vivian said quickly. “The face you made led me to think... I didn’t mean to intrude on your personal life.”

Kate snorted. “Don’t worry. I don’t have much of a personal life to intrude on. We did have a thing once at Tanglewood, but that was about it. He’s just...a friend, I guess.”

It had been a summer of drinking, hanging out, taking lessons with some of the best musicians in the world, and playing some of the best music she had ever played. Their friendship had developed quickly into something else, then had been cut off abruptly. Maybe they were friends now. It was...complicated.

“Oh, you attended Tanglewood? I must have missed that. How did you like it?”

“It was good.”

“Were you there during Andrew Goltich’s tenure?”

“No,” Kate answered. “This was four years ago, so I studied with Linda Peet.”

“I understand she’s amazing.”

Kate smiled, remembering the experience. “Yeah, she is. I was supposed to follow her to Georgia to work with her a bit longer, but, you know, life.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

Kate shrugged. The loss still smarted, though she had long ago stuffed that loss into a mental box. “But, yeah, Tanglewood was amazing.”

“I see. I knew the hairpiece had attended, but I didn’t realize you had as well.”

“The what?”

Vivian laughed again, and Kate realized that she kind of liked its deep, rich timbre. “Mm. A toupee. Mr. Foy is a walking hairpiece, Kate. That’s all he has going for him. His looks are satisfactory, his bass playing is adequate at best, from what I’ve been told, but his hair always looks like it’s fresh from a shampoo commercial.” Vivian grinned wickedly over the rim of her glass.

“You’re not a fan, huh?”

“If we are speaking off the record, so to speak, I promise the feeling is mutual. A few years ago, he and Charlie dated, and it ended badly. And I have had very little patience for the man since.”

Kate had a lot of questions, but it only took one look at Vivian’s expression to know that she would say no more about it.

“Flynn, party of two?”

Kate turned to look at the hostess.

“What?” Vivian asked.

Kate turned back and was surprised that, for the first time, the face of Vivian Kensington held neither animosity nor malice. In fact, she was smiling, and her smile was so beautiful that it took Kate a moment to gather her thoughts.

She glanced back at the hostess. “They’re calling us. Our table is ready—eep!”

Vivian had gripped Kate’s chin and pulled her face back around.

Kate stammered, trying to remember the words she had said only seconds ago, but her brain had short circuited. “I, uh...”

Once again, Vivian traced an oval around her own lips with two fingers.

“Sorry.” Kate’s cheeks grew hot. “Our table is ready.”

“Shall we?” Vivian took Kate’s elbow, and they followed the hostess.

They were led to a table and given menus. When the server arrived, he rattled off the specials with his face hidden in his notepad.

Halfway through, Kate glanced at Vivian, who was watching the young man with a blank expression, her chin propped up on her fist.

“Do you need some more time?” He asked, a false grin plastered on his face.

“Yeah.” Kate’s gaze flicked between him and Vivian.

“Take your time,” he said and left for another table.

“Did you get any of that?” Kate asked.

“Very little,” Vivian said flatly.

Instead of explaining, Kate pulled the menu of specials from her own menu and handed it to Vivian.

They studied the menu for a few minutes, then Vivian asked, “How do you like Chicago so far?”

Kate looked up “Oh, you know, there are some things I love and some I hate. The city is wonderful, though I haven’t seen much of it. And I’m not a huge fan of where we live, but it’s what I could find in a short time.”

“I’m sorry, will you please repeat that?” Vivian asked.

Kate did.

“Oh? Why don’t you care for it?”

Kate had had to work right up until the end of the month before moving and hadn’t been able to look for apartments before they moved. She had signed a lease without even seeing the place.

“The landlord told me that it was a very family-friendly neighborhood, but either he was outright lying or he meant it was ideal for a family of drug dealers.”

Vivian nodded thoughtfully. “So it’s a less-than-desirable location.”

“Yeah. When I was moving us in, I met someone in my building who told me that our neighborhood is called the Jungle.”

Vivian raised her eyebrows.

“Yeah. So I’m not too sure about where we live.”

“Can you not get out of your lease?” Vivian asked.

“I don’t think so.”

Vivian sighed. "One more time, please."

Kate frowned. "What's wrong?"

"You speak very quickly, and the glare of the candle is—"

Kate blew it out before Vivian finished her sentence.

"All right. I ask again, can you not get out of your lease?"

"I don't think so."

"Are you concerned for your safety?"

Kate opened her mouth and then closed it. How the hell did she answer that? It wasn't her safety she was worried about. She had lived in some sketchy places growing up, but she didn't want that for Max. "Let's talk about something else."

Vivian was studying Kate in a way that made her squirm. Kate thought there was a good chance that the subject of where she lived would come up again. "All right. And how do you like playing with WCCE?"

"It's great! Really great!" Now she was being too exuberant. "The people are awesome. Everyone plays well together. I can't complain."

"It seems that there is something else as well. Your eyes lit up when I asked you."

Vivian held her gaze in that way that Kate was quickly becoming familiar with. Perhaps it was because Vivian needed to study her lips to communicate, but Kate had never met someone with such an unwavering gaze. It was as if Vivian could read all of Kate's secrets through her skin.

"I'm deaf, Kate. I read facial expressions."

Kate shifted. What could she say other than the truth? "It's true. I think I'm pretty happy to be with WCCE."

"Oh?"

"It's because of Max," she admitted with an ease that surprised her. "When I was freelancing, I took any gig that came up, so my hours were all over the place. I like having a steady schedule for him."

"It must have been hard for him to never know when you would be home." Vivian's eyes softened.

"I think it was. I mean, he's still with a babysitter more than I would like him to be, but it's less often than it was before we moved."

"Where did you move from? I know it's in your file, but I can't recall at this moment."

"Gainesville, Florida. Before that, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania."

“Mm.” Vivian sipped her wine. “I was in Pittsburgh once. I got stuck on the expressway for two hours, only to get through a tunnel and realize that the tunnel itself was the reason for the delay.”

“Yeah.” Kate chuckled. “That sounds about right.”

They fell into a thoughtful silence for a few minutes, Kate still thinking about Max. “You know, it’s not just the schedule. It’s also the fact that I have a contract for longer than eight months. I mean, I know it’s only two years, but that’s still better. Or maybe it’s worse. I don’t know.”

“Why would it be worse to be settled for two years instead of one?”

Vivian leaned forward in her seat with genuine interest, so Kate answered without reservation. “I think it will probably be okay this time because he’s still young. He won’t make too many attachments. But the older he gets, the harder it will be to pull him away to a new place. He’ll start making friends and wanting to build a life for himself in each new city. I moved a lot growing up, and I never wanted that life for him. Ironic, given my career.”

“Why did you move so much?”

“My parents died when I was little. After that, I moved from foster home to foster home.”

“Oh?” Vivian leaned in a little more. “I’m sorry to hear that. Why did you move so often, if I may ask?”

“It’s how fostering works in this country. A couple has a baby of their own, and back you go. A couple gets a divorce, and suddenly you’re unwanted baggage.”

“Oh, Kate.” Vivian’s hand twitched on the table, and Kate thought she might reach out and touch her.

She cleared her throat, a little nervous at the prospect of intimacy. “It certainly teaches you to appreciate things while you have them. Anyway, I want Max’s life to be different. I want him to have a permanent home, but that would mean finding a permanent job or changing careers.” Kate picked up her glass and took a long drink. Why had she let herself say all of that?

“I’m curious. If you grew up in foster care, especially unstable foster care, how did you find your way to the cello? I find that classical music is something children are typically forced into until they are old enough to decide whether they like it for themselves.”

“Yeah, I’ve been asked that question before, actually. A foster mother signed me up for an outreach program to bring music to underprivileged kids. They loaned me a cello, gave me lessons, and let me join a community orchestra. I loved it. It was the one thing that was constant in my life, you know? I couldn’t take my belongings each time I moved, or keep my friends, but I could keep the cello because it wasn’t mine. It was the program’s. I got so good so fast that I won a few awards and eventually a scholarship to study music. I didn’t even know until I got the scholarship that classical music *could* be a career.”

“Really?” Vivian’s long fingers toyed with the stem of her glass, drawing Kate’s attention. “That…” Vivian paused, her eyes moving over Kate’s face, “is the exact opposite of my life.”

Kate picked up her water glass again and, ready to change the subject, turned the tables on Vivian. “So if we’re getting personal, then I hope it’s all right if I ask how a Deaf person ended up in the world of classical music.”

“I’ve been asked that question before,” Vivian said, nodding coyly. “I come from a large family of musicians. My mother is a harpist; my father was an oboist. My grandmother was a concert pianist, and my grandfather was a flautist. In the Kensington line, the firstborn is expected to take after the grandmother. My grandmother’s grand piano was my mother’s birth announcement gift.”

“That’s unusual.”

“What’s that?” Vivian frowned, her gaze back on Kate’s lips.

After Kate repeated herself, Vivian smiled. “Not in my family. Once my family discovered that I was growing deaf, things became a bit difficult for…everyone. They didn’t know what to do with me. I was the only one in the family who wasn’t a musician. As I got older, I began to work on the executive side. It seemed to be the only way I could be involved in my family’s business.”

“Is it difficult?”

“Yes,” Vivian said simply. “It’s hard to be taken seriously when I can’t remember what music sounds like.”

“So you weren’t born deaf?” Kate asked carefully. She was genuinely curious, but she didn’t want to cross any lines.

“No. I was hard of hearing from birth, but I didn’t completely lose my hearing until I was seven.”

The server interrupted at that moment. They placed their orders and fell easily back into conversation.

The dinner was nothing like Kate had expected it to be. Vivian's change from the ice queen was unexpected and welcome. She was pleased to find that Vivian was kind, even funny. She asked questions about Max, demanded stories, and made Kate laugh with her own stories of the ways people treated her once they learned she was Deaf.

"Would you like to take a walk?" Vivian asked as they stepped outside after their meal.

Kate began walking. "Sure, if you want to."

"What was that?"

Kate repeated herself but kept walking.

Vivian caught up to Kate and stepped in front of her, putting her hands on her shoulders.

"Oh, er, sorry."

Vivian smiled and dropped her hands. "Come with me." Taking Kate's elbow, she led her down the busy street and onto another that was bustling with activity.

The scene brought to mind Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. Pedestrians weaved in and out in a constant frenzy to get from point A to point B. Blue, red, and green lights glared down at them from each restaurant and shop. Music blared from loudspeakers. Their heels clicked along with the nightlife.

Kate glanced at Vivian as they walked. She wondered what it felt like for her. Could she feel the pulse of the city without hearing screaming patrons, car horns, and street performers? Did the energy feel different to her? She decided to save the question for another time.

"This is Michigan Avenue."

For the first time that evening, Vivian's free hand began to move, speaking in her own language.

"If you go that way"—she touched the small of Kate's back to turn her—"you hit what is called the Magnificent Mile. It's the best shopping and probably one of the biggest tourist locations of the city." Vivian took her elbow again, guiding her up a flight of wide stairs and into a huge plaza. "See that building there?" She pointed to a tall edifice shaped by two Vs with a large gash down the center that split the point at the top and

the bottom. “A few call it the Diamond Building, but most know it as the Vagina Building.”

It wasn't hard to see where the building got its nickname, but she was more distracted by the sign that Vivian had used.

“It's actually the Crain Communications Building, but the nickname makes the locals laugh.” Kate watched as Vivian quickly and easily spelled out names with her free hand. “And this”—Vivian pointed in front of them—“is The Bean.”

Kate looked to where Vivian had pointed. When she saw the giant sculpture, her mouth dropped open.

It was a huge mirror shaped exactly like what it was called: a bean. It was set on its side so that it bowed in an arch tall enough to walk under. In the daylight, the sculpture probably mirrored the sky and anyone who stood close to it. In the evening, though, it exploded into vibrant yellows, whites, and golds, reflecting every light in the surrounding skyline.

“This is amazing, Vivian.” Kate smiled at the reflection of herself and Vivian in the sculpture as Vivian's hand still lightly touched Kate's elbow.

Was it gallantry, she wondered, or was it a need to keep track of her that inspired Vivian to keep touching her? She could feel her warmth through her dress. She caught Vivian's eye in the mirrored sculpture and laughed out loud.

A few moments later, Vivian led them to the walkway under the arch.

Kate grinned like a gleeful child as she looked at their elongated reflections that dissolved into kaleidoscopic patterns.

“It's actually called *Cloud Gate*, though I've never known anyone to use that name.” Vivian again signed with a single hand. “It's my favorite.”

Kate made a silly face into the sculpture, stretching her lips into something grotesque. Vivian laughed. The sound was so light, so free from constraint, that hearing it made Kate's heart beat faster. She reached up nervously to tuck her hair behind her ear. “I can see why this is your favorite.”

“I like it at night, but I like it better when it's about to rain,” Vivian said. “The sky turns black, and it looks almost dangerous.”

Dangerous. That was a beautiful way to describe it, Kate thought.

When they were through admiring the sculpture, they sat on a nearby bench.

The two fell silent, watching tourists run through the walkway, children making faces, and families taking pictures. Behind them, a trumpet played a muted scat that melted into a soft jazz number. The notes were smooth as silk.

Kate closed her eyes to enjoy the dichotomy of the horn against the loud honking of the traffic on the opposite side of the plaza.

“Are you all right, Ms. Flynn?”

Kate opened her eyes and smiled. “There’s a trumpet behind us playing ‘It Never Entered My Mind.’ It’s one of my favorites.”

Vivian looked back at the musician. “What does he sound like to *you*?”

“He’s pretty good, actually.”

“No.” Vivian reached out and turned Kate’s chin toward her.

Just as before, her touch made Kate’s brain fizzle and then slowly power off. Vivian’s fingers were warm against her skin, and the warmth spread into her cheeks and down her neck.

“I mean, what do you hear?” Vivian asked. “What does it sound like?”

How did one explain what music sounded like? What could she say that Vivian might understand? “Blue.”

Vivian looked off into the distance, and Kate was again struck by the beauty of her eyes, the soulful richness of them.

Kate blushed. “That was stupid.”

“No.” Vivian closed her hand on Kate’s wrist. “Please. Continue.”

Vivian smiled encouragingly, and Kate no longer cared if she sounded stupid. She closed her eyes and let her mind drift to the music, the car horns and the screaming children falling to the background. The music took over, reminding her of how much she loved her career. “It sounds like water. It’s...it’s rich and smooth, like swirling, like steam that twists up from a cup of coffee or the way the Chicago River twists through downtown. Only, they’re using a mute, so there’s a different tone to the sound, like a pressure, a desperation. It’s like, I don’t know, maybe a cobalt, only darker at the edges. It sounds...it sounds like how the color blue makes you feel: warm and relaxed, yet sad and alone.” She opened her eyes and looked at Vivian’s face.

Vivian was watching her lips move so intensely that Kate wanted to paint a better picture.

“It feels like Chicago, you know? The way the city feels when you... when you’re lonely.”

“Are you lonely, Kate?”

She answered automatically. “Isn’t everyone?”

There was understanding in Vivian’s eyes, and Kate knew in that moment that Vivian was every bit as lonely as she was. The realization was somehow soothing.

She smiled at Vivian, who smiled back, the corners of her deep-red lips curling upward. Then breaking their gaze, Vivian looked down at her lap. “Thank you, Kate. That was...that was beautiful.”

The silence between them was different now, comfortable and easy. Yet, static ran through her blood, making Kate a little jittery.

The trumpet sang out its last few notes. “Max would love this.”

Vivian studied her for a moment, then said, “Let’s bring him.”

“What?”

“The day after tomorrow. Let’s bring him here. We can have a picnic in the park.”

Kate’s heart picked up its pace again. If this had been a romantic outing instead of an apology date, she would have thought she was being asked out again.

“Are you sure? I mean, Max can be a handful. He’s very good, awesome even, but he’s, you know, three.”

Vivian nodded firmly. “Max is adorable.” She moved her hands in a sign that Kate imagined meant *adorable*.

Kate pressed her lips together, then asked, “Will you show me something?”

“What do you mean?”

“In sign language. I’ve been watching you speak it since we left the restaurant, and it’s beautiful.”

Vivian looked a little bashful. “What would you like to see?”

“How about my name?”

Vivian flexed her hand, her index and middle fingers standing straight in the air with her thumb in between. Then she bounced her middle finger under her eye.

“That means Kate?”

“In a way, Ms. Flynn. It means *you*.”

Kate shifted on the bench. “Explain.”

“Well, every Deaf person has what’s called a sign name. It saves us from having to spell the person’s name out each time, and it shows familiarity.”

“How do you get one?”

“Typically, a Deaf person has to give it to you. They choose a characteristic of yours and base the name off of that.”

“What’s yours?”

“I have two. I have a professional one that I most commonly use.” She spread her index and middle finger and softly bounced them off her jaw. “That one is very generic.”

“What’s your other one?” When Vivian looked away bashfully, Kate laughed and said, “You have to tell me!”

Vivian sighed, made an V with her fingers, and tapped it to her chin.

Kate stared at the sign that was a universally known gesture. “What does it mean? ’Cause it kind of looks like...”

Vivian squirmed. “I know!” she groaned. “It does indeed mean something wholly inappropriate that refers to my sexuality. I’ve tried to change it more than once, but I cannot break Charlie of the habit.”

“So you’re—?”

“A lesbian, yes.”

Kate wasn’t surprised. She got a subtle sense whenever she met women who liked other women. She gestured to herself. “Pansexual.”

Vivian nodded as she studied Kate’s face.

“Show me again,” Kate said.

“Ms. Flynn!”

“Show me.”

Vivian made the sign again, and Kate copied it, giggling, then asked Vivian to show her how to sign her name again.

Vivian scooted in closer and took her hand gently. Molding her fingers, Vivian shaped them.

“Wait, what does that mean?” She was positive Vivian had used a different sign than previously.

Vivian smiled. “It refers to your eyes.”

“My eyes?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Vivian stared at Kate intensely. “Because you have the purest green eyes I have ever seen. They always sparkle. They’re beautiful.”

By now, Kate’s heart was tap-dancing. Maybe Vivian had said that to gauge her reaction, but she wasn’t sure what she was looking for. Finally, she said, “Show me something else. Something simple.”

“Shall we try the alphabet?” Vivian leaned in again to shape Kate’s fingers. Her hands cupped hers as she worked, her arm and shoulder pressing lightly against Kate.

When they finally started back toward the train platform, it was later than Kate had planned. “Do you take the L?” she asked.

“Actually, I only live a few blocks from here, just off Grant Park, right off the Loop.” Vivian nodded back toward where they had been sitting.

They stood together by the L stop. Kate tried to think of something to say.

Vivian broke the silence first. “Sunday?” She leaned against the post for the Red Line train, her arms casually crossed.

“Yeah. That would be fun.”

“A few of the WCCE players are playing a concert in the park that afternoon. Do you think Max would like that?”

“He would love it!”

“Good.”

“Okay. Well, I, uh—”

“Thank you for inviting me out tonight, Kate.” Vivian was scrutinizing her as if to give her words some deeper meaning. “The effort meant a great deal to me.”

Unsure of how else to respond, Kate merely nodded, though her skin was tingling.

“And thank you for the song.”

“No problem.”

Vivian continued to study her.

“O-okay,” Kate stammered. “I guess I’ll see you, then. Wait, do you have my phone number?”

Vivian laughed. “Katelyn, I’m the president of the board. Of course I do.”

“Right. Duh.” Kate groaned inwardly. “Okay, well...” Kate shuffled backward, beginning her descent to the train. “Good night.”

“Good night, Ms. Flynn.”

Kate gave Vivian a half smile and disappeared into the underground.

After she arrived home and paid Stacey, she collapsed onto the futon in a daze. She touched her stomach, aware that it was still fluttering an hour after she and Vivian had parted company. The entire evening had turned into something unexpected.

As a rule, Kate didn't date, not since Max was born. If Kate was going to do that, she wanted to feel something. She wanted an over-the-moon, knock-it-out-of-the-park, head-over-heels connection. That made it almost impossible to find someone worth leaving her son with a sitter.

She stared up at the patterns on her ceiling. This night—even though it hadn't been a date—had been absolutely out of the park.

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(2nd revised edition)

BY OLIVIA JANAÉ

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