

YOU,
ME,
AND
OUR
HEARTSTRINGS

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CONTENT WARNING:

This book contains depictions of ableism, anxiety attacks, familial emotional neglect, religious bigotry, and discussions of mental health. Please take care of yourself if you aren't ready to read this content. Daisy, Noah, and I will be here when you are.

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CHAPTER ONE

DAISY

I stumble into the orchestra room after fifth-chair violinist—and ever-present thorn in my side—Beaux Beckworth sticks his leg out across the doorway.

“Sorry, Differently Abled.” He tries to sing the nickname he’s had for me our entire four years at this academy, but Beaux is the sort of person who doesn’t even tune his strings properly. So, he can’t exactly carry a tune, either.

“Ha.” I smooth down the skirt of my long-sleeved paisley-patterned dress as cerebral palsy makes a muscle spasm crawl up my left leg. “You’re so funny, using my initials like that.”

I hurry across the linoleum floor to the storage room, where all the violins, violas, basses, and cellos are kept.

Beaux mumbles something about me being second chair, but before I even push through the door, I hear another voice: It’s low, like the G string on my own violin that’s waiting for me inside.

“Are you okay?” Turning on my heel, I meet Noah Moray’s eyes and do a double take. Beneath a head of dark brown hair, they’re as blue as the forget-me-nots Ma had in stock at her flower shop last month, even behind tortoiseshell glasses.

Noah is the first-chair cellist, and probably the most talented person at this academy. He also rarely talks to anyone.

I’ve heard him play hundreds of times. But that doesn’t mean I’m immune to how brilliant a musician he is.

Or that I’ll admit how much I like hearing his voice. Same as the music he plays, it makes my stomach flutter each time I get to listen. Not that I’d ever *tell* Noah this, of course.

“Yeah.” I swallow past a slight lump in my throat. My heart thrums in my chest, and my cheeks warm with a blush. “I’m all right.”

I quickly duck into the storage room, grab my violin case from its cubby, and rush back to my seat.

“Hello, everyone!” our conductor trills, actually hitting the notes, unlike Beaux. Ms. Silverstein is one of the youngest teachers at the academy, but also one of the most skilled. She played *Éponine* on Broadway for a season and performed with the Opera Orchestra of New York.

We chorus our hellos back to her, and she perches on the edge of her desk. “First, I want to congratulate you all on a spectacular run of *Fiddler on the Roof*. You were all amazing. Now . . .” She claps her hands, beaming. “It’s time to talk about the winter holiday concert!”

Murmurs erupt around the room. The Manhattan Academy of Musical Performance’s winter holiday concert is the biggest event of the year, where the band, musical theater, and orchestra students get to take the stage for the night. It’s a chance to showcase our skill to the public, music conservatory professionals, and principal conductors. It could be my one shot at getting into Juilliard.

I shift in my seat. Juilliard’s my dream. I sent in my pre-screening audition back in September. I’m not fooling myself; even on the off chance I did get accepted, my family would never be able to afford the tuition. But this is my chance for a Juilliard faculty member to see me as a skilled disabled violinist—instead of the charity case who got accepted to this school on a scholarship because of my disability.

Maybe that would be enough to earn me a live audition.

I glance across the room at Noah, who’s watching Ms. Silverstein with rapt attention, clutching the neck of his cello. Noah’s from one of the most illustrious music families in all of New York City. Combined with him being a prodigy? He could probably just walk right into my top-choice college.

That thought makes a kaleidoscope of butterflies flutter in my stomach.

Besides, Noah just looks so handsome, so intense when he plays, creating beautiful music with every press of his strings, every stroke of his bow . . .

“The concert is going to be on December eleventh this year.”

Ms. Silverstein's voice brings me back to the orchestra room. "We're, of course, performing a song as an orchestra. But before we dive into options, there is another component." She hops off her desk, walks around to the back of it, pulls open a drawer, and takes out a clipboard. A hush settles over us. "As you know, every year musicians from the orchestra, band, and musical theater are selected to perform duets. There are only four duets, so being chosen is huge.

"I have the duet assignments right here." Our conductor's smile sends another wave of whispers across the room. My best friend, Mazhar Tilki, leans over to say something to me, but I don't quite catch it. My left hand contracts around my bow frog instead.

"Are you ready?" Ms. Silverstein tucks a strand of dark brown curls behind her ear. We say yes, and she clears her throat. "In order of performance: Mazhar Tilki and Eric Zhao."

"Mazhar!" We wrap each other up into a quick hug amid the applause. But it's no surprise he got picked. He's the first-chair violinist and the best one at this academy. From across the room, cellist Eric cups their hands around their mouth and yells to Mazhar: "Ready for this?"

"Absolutely!" Mazhar replies.

Ms. Silverstein moves on down her list, but I tune her out—it's not like I'll be picked anyway. My best friend getting a spot is enough for me.

"And lastly!" she says. "Daisy Abano and Noah Moray."

I'm almost positive she did not just say my name.

My name and Noah's.

Together.

"Daisy!" Mazhar cheers as the orchestra applauds again. "We're both performing a duet!"

Warmth rushes through my whole body at his words, like hearing it from him made it feel real. I grin at him, then down the length of my violin, a blush painting my cheeks.

Raising my head, I look for Noah. His eyes are already on me, like they were minutes ago. But he doesn't seem excited. He appears . . . stoic. Like he already knew he'd get selected.

Of course he would, I tell myself. He's one of the best musicians I've ever seen. And I get to play with him. Finally, I get to show people my talent.

"All right!" Ms. Silverstein sings, commanding our attention to the front of the room again. "You'll have until this Friday, November sixth, to choose a duet piece and bring it to me for approval. Those of you performing a duet, go off with your partner to any quiet part of the orchestra wing for the rest of the period," she instructs. "Get to know each other better, brainstorm ideas, and don't forget to exchange phone numbers! Be sure to take a packet before you go." She arranges four piles of paper at the front of her desk, one for each instrument. "I've made a list of some possible songs to perform as an orchestra. Your homework is to practice them tonight. Everyone else, let's run through scales and practice them now."

Mazhar and I get up from our chairs, congratulating each other as we join the throng of students grabbing packets. He leaves with Eric, and I walk over to Noah, who's standing next to the line of cellists.

“Should we go to the stage?” he asks.

“Sounds good.”

We head out of the orchestra room through the stage's double doors, passing the bulletin board filled with colorful advertisements for the band's field trip to the National Jazz Museum and the winter semiformal next month. The empty auditorium is cool and dark.

My left foot snags on the floor, sending me stumbling into Noah's back. “Ow.” I grimace. “I'm sorry.”

I'm too embarrassed to meet Noah's eyes, so I watch his sneakers as he turns around to face me. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I almost don't look up at him. I don't want to find pity or confusion in his eyes. But instead, he's just watching me, his brow furrowed like I'm a difficult bar of music he hasn't figured out yet. I find I like that; it's preferable to the looks I get at church. “It's just a cerebral palsy thing. So, uh . . .” I clear my throat. “This is amazing.” I smile over at him as we sit down, placing the packets onto the music stands. “Are you excited?”

“Yeah.” Noah tries to return my smile, but his eyes stray over to his cello instead. “This is a big opportunity. Should we run through scales first? Then play the pieces Ms. Silverstein picked?”

“Sure.” My smile falters a little, but I try to focus on how we’ll be performing together in a little over a month, right here on this very stage.

On how I get to perform with the best musician in this academy.

I tuck my violin beneath my chin and raise it up as Noah assumes first position—his left pointer finger close to his cello’s scroll, his middle finger a short way beneath.

That’s when I notice he has Band-Aids wrapped around calluses that dominate each finger.

My own fingers shiver against my strings, sending tiny notes pinging around the stage. I find myself wondering: Exactly how much *does* Noah practice for his calluses to break like that?

“We should do a Bach concerto arrangement for both our instruments,” Noah says after we finish the final piece in the packet. “It would be the most intelligent choice.”

“Bach?” I repeat. Noah glances up at me, his eyes narrowed. “I mean, we could, but there are so many other arrangements we could do, too. I was thinking something more contemporary with just as much impact. Or we could take on Broadway.”

Music exists outside of eighteenth-century Germany. He has to know this.

“We need to think about what’s in our best interests,” Noah says. “About what would impress the audience.” He waves his bow at the empty house, making the hair on the back of my neck stand up. It’s like all those plush blue seats are watching

us—judging us—before they’re even filled with people. “I’ll arrange a Bach concerto with my cello and your violin.”

“What?” My heart pounds in my ears like *allegro*, and I can’t put my thoughts together fast enough. “Wait. Shouldn’t we talk about this? We’re supposed to decide on our duet together.”

“It’ll just be easier if you let me handle this,” Noah murmurs as the bell rings out in the hallway.

He exits the stage before I can say anything.