



CHAPTER ONE

*B*LAIR EMERSON couldn't recall ever praying for patience.

She must have, though. Once upon a time she must've flung a plea heavenward for that particular virtue, because it took a special kind of patience to adjust to a sixth boss in six years.

It hadn't always been this way. When Vic Nelson was choral director, top ratings at contest and packed-house concerts were the norm. During his nearly four decades at the helm, the Peterson High choral program had been synonymous with excellence. Blair counted herself fortunate to have had him as both her teacher in high school and her boss as an adult. In fact, after receiving two degrees in piano, she'd turned down other job offers and eagerly returned to her alma mater to work with Vic for the last two years of his tenure. And sad though she'd been when he retired, she'd been confident that a new director could fill his sizable shoes and maintain the program's stellar reputation.

But since his retirement, directors had been in and out on an annual basis, with the predictable damage to enrollment, morale, and music making. The latest hire hadn't even lasted long enough to start the year. He'd gotten a better offer two weeks ago and had done an abrupt about-face. Vic had pulled a few strings and made the most of his connections, and now Blair had a new name to learn: Callum Knight.

Leaning into the crook of the choir room's ebony Steinway grand, Blair pulled her phone from her pocket and resumed social-media stalking her newest colleague. His degree in music education was standard, but dual master of music degrees in composition and choral conducting? Those weren't. Nor were the slick, high-quality website, the

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list of published works and commissions, or the baton-wielding professional headshot. With a sigh and a roll of her eyes, Blair set the phone down on the piano. That shiny website might as well have had “Teaching Is My Fallback Plan” scrolling across it in giant red letters.

The door burst open with its typical click-squeak-bang, and a haggard-looking figure stumbled in. Espresso-colored hair, wild and wavy and so far past needing a trim that hedge clippers might be required to subdue it. A square jaw and cleft chin shadowed in what must have been a week and a half of stubble. Rumpled dress shirt, the top three buttons undone, and a blue-striped tie draped haphazardly around his neck. An enormous travel mug clenched in a white-knuckled grip. All of it a far cry from the dangerously handsome tuxedo-clad man whose headshot had just filled her phone screen.

Blair tilted her head and studied her new colleague. Was he hung-over? No . . . that wasn't the vibe. More like barely awake.

At just past noon.

On the first day of staff meetings.

Way to make a first impression.

“Morning,” he said, more grunt than greeting.

“*Afternoon*,” Blair replied with a pointed glance at the digital clock hanging above the whiteboard. “You’ve already missed half a day’s worth of meetings.”

The new director set his travel mug on a table near the board. “If they were anything like every other meeting in the world, I missed nothing of consequence. But if I did miss anything, you seem like the type who took good enough notes to catch me up.”

Blair stiffened. She had taken notes. She always took notes. How this just-rolled-out-of-bed champion of condescension could possibly know that, though, was anyone’s guess.

“Hmmp.” She jammed her phone back into her pocket.

He finished buttoning his shirt, then applied a manufactured smile to stubble-shrouded lips and extended his right hand. “Callum Knight. Pleasure to meet you.”

“Blair Emerson.” She returned his handshake but not his pleasantry.

The evaluation his piercing green eyes gave her was thorough and

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penetrating but unreadable beyond that. Oh well. She'd learn to read his expressions well enough in time. It was part of her job, after all.

"Ah, yes. The accompanist."

"Collaborative pianist" came her automatic reply. Normally Blair found the two terms interchangeable and had no preference. But the latter, though more verbally unwieldy, carried the weight of an equal musical partnership, something she suspected she'd have to fight to receive from this arrogant creature.

"Of course. Apologies." His tone conveyed much—mild exasperation, a hint of amusement, perhaps even curt dismissal—but not a hint of apology. "It's all the same, really. I wave my arms, you follow me, and it'll all be peaches and sunshine."

Blair drew herself to her full, hopefully intimidating height. "You don't need to tell me my responsibilities, Mr. Knight. Especially since I'm confident I have considerably more experience working with high schoolers than you do."

Straightening his still-untied tie, he gave a lopsided smirk. "So you've researched me, then."

"Of course I have. And I certainly hope you paid attention during your ed degree, because I am not in the mood to handhold. I'm proud of this program and ready to see it return to its former glory, and I'm prepared to do whatever it takes to achieve that goal."

"Well, currently," he drawled, weaving his tie into a quick knot, "that involves putting up with me for this school year and then giving that rousing pep talk to my replacement."

Wow. So it had come to this. Directors who announced their days were numbered before the students even darkened the doors.

Her hands found her hips. "You're not even giving this a chance. Wonderful."

"Look, let's be up-front with each other." He tightened his tie. "Composition is my passion. It was enough to keep a roof over my head for a few blessed years, but now, for a variety of reasons too long and boring to explain, I find myself in need of a steady paycheck. Since I have no dependents and since cost of living here is low, this year's salary should be enough to keep me afloat until . . . well, until I . . ."

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For the first time, Callum faltered. Gave some indication that his blustering, blowhard act was, in fact, just that. An act.

“Until you . . .” She made a keep-going gesture, her voice intentionally crisp.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Until I’ve finished the year. With any luck at all, then I can return to composing on the East Coast, and you can find someone more suitable for”—he took in the choral room, then indicated its space with a wave of his hand—“this.”

“Fine. But right now you have a job to do. One at which—up until this point, anyway—you’ve failed miserably. We’re due in the auditorium for another meeting in five minutes. I expect to see you there.”

Without waiting for a reply, she brushed past Callum and banged through the door. Since Vic’s departure, she’d learned to temper her natural optimism. But even her most tamped-down dreams were a moon shot compared to the disaster unfolding before her. A summer’s worth of prayers for a director who’d invest, who’d care, who’d *stay*, seemed to have been answered with a resounding no.

Okay then, God. Guess I’ll just muddle through as best I can with this . . . special, special human being you’ve brought into my life and start praying for lucky number seven to be the one to repair the damage.

And in the meantime . . . I could really use some patience.



The coffee at the bottom of Callum Knight’s travel mug was stone-cold. So much for the lofty promises from the mug’s manufacturer to keep it tongue-searing hot through the longest of days. Well, despite clocking in past noon, this had indeed been the longest of days thanks to an afternoon of lame icebreaker games with a passel of overly enthusiastic new coworkers.

Best bite the bullet and buy a new mug before next week, then. Because next week, for the first time in almost a decade, he’d have to clock in obscenely early and be responsible for teenagers seven hours a day.

God help them. God help them all.

With great reluctance, he switched on the obnoxious fluorescent light

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in his new office, a concrete reminder of his unpleasant new reality. His previous time in the trenches of the educational system was a distant, hazy memory after several years of successful full-time composing and the creation of his own hand-selected professional choir. But then came the pandemic, and among the casualties had been that choir, his fiancée, and his creative muse. A stack of unfulfilled commissions and missed deadlines had caught up with him, and now—unthinkably—here he stood in a high school choir office, the dull ache at the base of his skull a physical manifestation of having fallen back into his fallback plan.

The office was nothing to write home about. Not that he had much of a home to write to, of course. Tiny. Dimly lit. Squeaky, fake-leather chair with a rip in the back—the result of some sophomoric shenanigan, no doubt. A moderately sized coffee-stained desk with a strip of Formica dangling from the front. A few framed photo collages of past choirs mugging for the camera in front of the Washington Monument and the Empire State Building. The upright piano near the door with chipped keys and a cluster of circular stains on top, where a parade of idiots—or perhaps the same overly consistent idiot—had stashed their drinks. Everything was covered in a layer of dust, with only past glories to cling to.

He could relate.

Callum set his mug on the desk with a heavy thunk and dropped into the office chair, which gave an unholy shriek at being disturbed. Gritting his teeth, he tried and failed to restick the strip of Formica, then gave up and yanked it off, revealing the cheap particle board beneath. With a sigh, he tossed the strip into the trash can beside his desk. A fitting metaphor for the turn his career, his life, had taken.

At least he had a plan to fall back on. That was his mother's attempt at forcing him to find the silver lining. "You're keeping a roof over your head, Callum," she'd said when he'd reluctantly told her the news. "You're staying connected with the choral world. Who knows? Maybe those kids will give you the inspiration you need to get back to composing. Remember, God's in control."

God. Control. Two words that always rankled when appearing together. If God were truly in control, then why did Callum's life feel like utter chaos?

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However, his mother was right on one point. This job would keep him financially afloat. He should be grateful. No way would he even be here if not for his friend and mentor, Vic Nelson, who'd clued him in to the last-minute opening and—he suspected—gone to bat for him with administration.

The buzz of his phone against the desk set his teeth on edge, but his ire lessened with a glance at the screen. A text from Vic himself.

Settling in?

Ha. That was one way to put it.

Callum tapped out a reply. *As much as can be, yes. Icebreaker games today.* This he punctuated with a sarcastic confetti-horn emoji.

Icebreaker games? Then you've doubtless met your right-hand woman, Blair.

His jaw tightened. That uptight redhead certainly hadn't seemed impressed with him on first meeting. Though she'd refrained from judging him out loud, he'd heard her just as clearly as if she had. One glance into those golden-brown eyes had been enough. She'd thought he was hungover.

If only.

Instead he'd done what he did every night for the past two years: tinker at his piano into the wee hours, trying and failing and trying again and failing again and failing and failing and failing some more before falling asleep to late-night sports talk shows on the cheap hand-me-down futon his younger sister had given him.

Hungover would be a dream compared to his current misery.

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I have, was all he typed in reply.

And how'd that go?

Fine.

Liar. I can hear it in your voice.

Callum frowned.

But this is a text.

I stand by my statement.

Callum sat with the phone in his hands, leg bouncing up and down beneath the dilapidated desk. Before long, another text vibrated its arrival.

A bit of advice, if I may? Blair is the key to winning over those kids.

The kids. Gah. He'd been trying not to think about the kids. Four choirs' worth. *Four*. Plus a music theory class, a piano class, and something called Extended Learning Time. Winning them over was the last thing on his agenda. He didn't care about winning them over. He cared only about recapturing his muse, so he could resign this job as quickly as he'd taken it, return to Boston, and get his life back. Irritation surging, he started to type a reply to that effect, but the little animated ellipsis stopped him. Another incoming text from Vic.

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I'm under no illusion that this job is permanent for you. But this school year will be what you make it, Callum.

Callum leaned back in the chair and studied the little gray speech bubble. Based on what he'd seen today, this year would land somewhere between Moderately Terrible and Complete Dumpster Fire. Thanks to his prickly pianist, his puppylike colleagues, and this tiny, dusty office, Actually Good was out of the question.

But he could grit his teeth and do what he could to move the needle as close to Moderately Terrible as he could.

He texted back, the letters appearing slowly beneath his thumbs.

I'll do my best.

That was all anyone—including himself—could ask.



CHAPTER TWO

MORNING, SUNSHINE!”

At the cheerful greeting, Blair scanned the auditorium for her best friend. Joy Westinghouse’s purple-streaked platinum-blond pixie cut and crimson butterfly glasses weren’t hard to spot, and her voice—perpetually loud thanks to seven years directing orchestra at Peterson High—wasn’t hard to place. Sure enough, there she sat, five rows back, clad in one of her music-themed vintage-style dresses and clutching her trademark royal-blue *It’s a sharp, not a hashtag* tumbler.

Blair slid through the row of plush black chairs and took a seat beside Joy, whose ice cubes clanked in the tumbler. Joy always drank iced coffee, even when it was fourteen degrees outside, and thanks to the auditorium’s enthusiastic air-conditioning, it didn’t feel much warmer than that.

Blair tugged her cardigan around herself—normally not necessary at the tail end of an Illinois summer—and glanced at Joy. “I’ll never know how you do that.”

“Hot coffee is for weirdos.” Joy lifted the tumbler to her lips but paused before she could take a sip, theatrically lowering her glasses and staring at something just beyond Blair’s left shoulder.

Blair frowned. “What?”

“Who. Is. That?”

“Who is *who*?” Blair followed Joy’s gaze to none other than Callum, who’d just entered on the opposite side of the auditorium, clutching the same stainless steel travel mug as yesterday and wearing a dusty-looking tweed sport coat complete with elbow patches, as though he’d based his wardrobe entirely on cinematic university professor stereotypes. His

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hair, both facial and otherwise, was still less than kempt, but at least he'd bothered to show up this time.

"That is the latest in our revolving door of choir directors and the current bane of my existence," she said.

"You figured that out on the first day?"

Blair met her friend's level gaze with one of her own. "Did you see him here yesterday morning?"

"If *that* guy had been here yesterday morning?" Joy pushed her glasses back up and resumed ogling Callum. "I'd have definitely noticed."

Blair swatted Joy's upper arm. "Stop it. You're happily married."

"Doesn't mean I can't notice a job well done on God's part. And you, my dearest friend in the world, are most definitely *not* married." She craned her neck in a not-obvious-at-all sort of way. "And from the looks of it, neither is he."

Ew. "I can't speak for him, but I am not looking. And even if I was, I definitely wouldn't be looking at work. Or in his direction."

"Last time I checked, looking in the conductor's direction was a fairly important part of your job." Joy's eyes gleamed with mischief. "And if any of my past conductors were that beautiful? Or even close? Watching them would not have been difficult at *all*."

Blair rolled her eyes. "He needs a haircut."

"Ehh, I kinda like it. Makes him all broody and mysterious. Like Beethoven."

"Ludwig van Beethoven was not exactly the poster child for healthy relationships."

"Touché."

Callum settled in the row in front of them, three seats to Joy's right, and guzzled coffee as if it were his lifeline. He hadn't waved or nodded or even acknowledged Blair's existence. Fine with her. Though they needed to get along for the kids' sake, they certainly didn't have to be friends.

But Joy, ever the raging extrovert, had already leaned over so far in Callum's direction that she nearly fell out of her seat.

"Hi. Joy Westinghouse." She extended her right hand to Callum. "Orchestra. Eighth year. Married. Two kids, four cats, and a Sheltie."

Callum blinked at the onslaught of information. "Callum Knight."

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He tentatively returned Joy's handshake. "Vocal music. Second day. Single. No kids, no cats, no Sheltie."

Joy glanced over her shoulder at Blair, mischief curving her lips. *Told you he was single*, her look clearly said.

Blair made a face back. *And I told you I don't care.*

"And this is my best friend in the whole world, Blair Emerson," Joy said. "Who I think maybe you already met?"

Callum regarded Blair with a cursory glance. "Yes."

Charming.

"Great," Joy said. "And hey, since you're both here and we've got a few minutes, I've been wondering what sort of repertoire the choir might be considering for the holiday concert. In case nobody told you, the orchestra and choir combine for that concert, and it's never too early to start thinking about Christmas."

Callum's brows lifted. "It's August."

"We've been over this. No Christmas talk until at least September." Blair delivered her automatic reply, then pulled up short. Had she and Callum just agreed on something?

Joy had definitely noticed, if her crimson-lipped grin was any indication.

Blair resisted the urge to roll her eyes. *I see what you're doing, best friend of mine. And it won't work.*

Joy's grin grew even more devilish, a clear sign that she'd received Blair's telepathic message and was cheerfully ignoring it.

"The fall concert is only the choirs, yes?" Callum asked over the rim of his mug.

"Yes," Blair replied.

Callum muttered something that sounded suspiciously like "Thank God" as he turned back around, but Ron Cashman, the principal, had stepped to the microphone, which squealed feedback as it always did, so she couldn't be sure.

As Cashman launched into his falsely peppy introduction, Joy shot Blair a glance. A moment later Blair's watch buzzed her wrist, and the tiny screen filled with a text from Joy. Grinning, Blair pulled her phone from her purse. The 2020s equivalent of passing notes.

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You have to get along with him, you know.

Blair's thumbs tapped the screen.

Who? Cash? We get along just fine.

The screen immediately filled with a string of eye-roll emojis.

You know perfectly well I'm not talking about Cash. Give Callum a chance.

Blair studied the unruly head of dark hair in the row in front of her. Callum dragged a hand through the mop, then shifted in his chair and drummed long, sturdy fingers against the armrest. His entire being radiated boredom. Superiority. An ego the size of Alaska.

She turned her attention back to her phone.

I did. He blew it.

Five minutes in the choir room before a staff meeting does not constitute a chance. You haven't even seen him work with the kids yet.

I don't need to see him work with them to know I don't like him.

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You don't have to like him. But you do have to get along with him. If not for your job satisfaction and mental health, then do it for the children.

Blair stifled a sigh. The children. That sea of faces she anticipated greeting every morning, whose trenchant observations and unabashed wit often doubled her over with laughter. Whose determination inspired her, whose musicianship drove her to give her all every single day. A bad day at Peterson High was still better than a good day anywhere else.

Why do they have to be so lovable?



Right? 😐 SO inconsiderate of them.

Joy paused, her crimson lower lip sliding between her teeth as it did when she was deep in thought, then her beringed thumbs danced over the screen again.

Please, for me, try being nice to this one. I've got a good feeling about him.

Blair shot her friend a withering glance and tapped out a reply.

You just have a thing for guys who look like Beethoven.

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You say that like it's a bad thing.
Beethoven was HOT.

Blair clicked her phone into Airplane Mode and tucked it back into her purse. “We are not having this conversation,” she whispered.

“Avoiding the truth doesn’t change it,” Joy shot back.

Blair stifled a grin and forced herself to pay attention to Cash.

One thing was certain with Joy—Blair couldn’t live without her.

But sometimes, some days, she wondered how in the world she would ever live *with* her.



Callum sank into the creaky chair at his desk with a sigh that emanated from somewhere deep in his bones, then reached for the insulated lunch sack into which he’d thrust a hastily constructed ham sandwich and a handful of chips. Three days of meetings, and now his first school lunch—his first “first day of school” in over a decade.

What he wouldn’t give to be able to pop around the corner for some ceviche at that place in Somerville, or grab a *chowdah* from Legal Seafood like he had when he’d lived in Boston. But there was no chowdah in Peterson. No ceviche. Probably no one who’d even heard of chowdah. Instead the only restaurants nearby were a mediocre Mexican place, a pancake house that catered to octogenarians, and a dingy burger place that seemed to be open only when the mood struck the proprietor.

On the other hand, the lack of dining options might further his goal of saving every penny so he could walk out that door next May and never look back.

Had he ever been so exhausted in his life? The morning had been a blur of policies and procedures, syllabi and safety instructions, and a dozen other things that didn’t involve making music. And though all his new colleagues had waxed rhapsodic about what gems the students of Peterson were, how polite and kind and selfless they were, all the

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students who had graced his classroom had regarded him with either undisguised loathing or total apathy.

He wasn't certain which he preferred.

And Blair had been only marginally helpful. During the scant few minutes of actual singing during Mixed Chorus, she'd faithfully given pitches and played for warm-ups, but other than that she'd seemed perfectly content to watch him twist in the wind. Her expression at the piano had been one of someone who'd thought they were sipping coffee only to find they'd sipped soy sauce by mistake.

But a funny thing happened when she got around the kids. Her pinched expression morphed into one of the sweetest, sunniest smiles he'd ever seen. And the same kids who'd glared at him swarmed her with hugs and high fives and how-was-your-summer. His ice-cold accompanist— collaborative pianist had simply transformed when the kids came in. She'd come to life.

She'd become almost pretty.

But this joyous reunion, this transformation, further emphasized the adversarial relationship between the Peterson choral program and its new director. Obviously the lack of continuity at his position would lead to a certain closeness between the kids and their one constant, but that closeness came across as a concrete wall he had no hope of scaling. An exclusive club he would never be welcomed into.

The office door opened, and he jumped. "What?" It came out as half word, half growl.

Blair stood in the doorway, eyebrow arched, a cardboard coffee cup in her hand. "I'm sorry." Her tone contained no apology whatsoever. "Am I disturbing you?"

Yes. "No." It was her office too, after all. She even had a desk near the upright. Smaller than his but in much better condition. A vase of artificial flowers and a candle adorned its otherwise pristine surface, and the wall behind it was littered with mementos and photos and thank-you notes.

More evidence he was on the outside looking in and always would be.

Not that he wanted in. By no means.

He'd only be here for the year.

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“Madrigals is our next class.” Her voice was a crisp staccato. “You’ll want to start with uniforms sooner rather than later.”

“Of course.”

“Today, if possible. Especially for the new members. The company we use is wonderful, but they aren’t the speediest in the world, so time is of the essence.” Her foot wasn’t actually tapping with impatience but might as well have been.

“Yes. On it.” The beginnings of a headache throbbed at his temples.

“And make sure you remind the afternoon choirs of the deadline for the signed page of the choir handbook. You forgot that this morning.”

He dug in his desk drawer for the ibuprofen he hoped to God he’d remembered to bring in. “Anything else?”

She hesitated, her lips tightening ever so slightly. “Only this.” And then she held the cup out to him. Steam piped up from the little hole in the lid, and the life-giving aroma of coffee reached his nostrils.

Coffee? For him?

Oh, he could have kissed her.

“They’re free for staff today, courtesy of Pat’s.” His expression must have been quizzical, because she offered an apologetic half smile. “It’s our student-run coffee shop. It isn’t the best coffee in the world—or even the best coffee in Peterson, for that matter. But it’s here, and it gets the job done.” She set the cup on the corner of his desk. “They tend to go fast when they’re free, so I wanted to make sure you got one.”

“Thank you,” he managed.

But she’d already turned back toward the door. “I’ll let you enjoy the rest of your lunch.” And then she was gone, the door clicking behind her.

Did she normally eat in here, needing quiet as much as he did? Or did she have a friend or two she ate with? Did she bring a lunch? Buy one from the cafeteria? Was the Mexican place around the corner better than it looked?

He hadn’t bothered to ask.

He’d barely spoken to her at all today, other than to ask for starting pitches.

And yet she’d brought him an olive branch. The cup of coffee he didn’t know how badly he needed until it appeared in front of him. He

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took a sip. She hadn't oversold the brew. It definitely wasn't the best coffee in the world. Likely not even the best coffee in Peterson, although he made a mental note to ask her where said coffee could be found.

But right now, on his first teaching day in a job he still hoped was a bad dream . . . it meant the world.

He had no idea if he could survive the year or not.

But thanks to this coffee, he just might make it through the rest of the day.



CHAPTER THREE

Ms. EM! Thalia Jones, a senior soprano, wrapped Blair in an enthusiastic hug as kids filed into the choir room for Madrigals after lunch.

“So good to see you, Thalia.” Blair returned the embrace. “That haircut is perfection on you.”

“Thank you.” Thalia grinned and fluffed her hair, now much shorter, curlier, and redder. “My mom hates it.”

“Which I suspect is part of the appeal for you?”

Thalia’s grin widened. “You know it. She—”

“Hey.” An ear-splitting baritone yell sliced through the din. Blair and Thalia both jumped. The choir fell silent. And Callum, the source of the sound, stood beside the piano.

“The bell rang,” he said to the class. “Though it’s clear none of you heard it through that unholy racket you were making.”

Unholy racket? It’s the first day. Cut them some slack. She bit back the words.

“We’ll talk later.” Blair motioned toward the risers, and Thalia cast a reluctant glance toward Callum as she ascended to her spot on the top row of the soprano section.

The rest of the choir turned wary attention to the wild-haired man in the center of the room.

“And who are you, exactly?” The question on all the students’ minds came, naturally, from the lips of outspoken alto Makayla Barnes.

“I’m Callum Knight.” He raked a hand through his mop of hair. “Er—*Mr.* Knight, that is. I’m the new choral director here at Peterson.”

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Brayden Lee, the tenor section leader, elbowed Jake Ireland. "I heard this one wasn't even the one they hired back in May."

Jake's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Yeah. My mom said they originally hired some other guy but he got a better gig."

Jake chortled. "This one might not even last until the first concert."

"Jake. Brayden." Blair shot them a warning glare. "A little respect, please."

"Ms. Emerson. I'll take care of discipline in my own classroom, if you don't mind." Callum's gaze toward her was level, his voice pleasant, but both were underpinned with unmistakable warning.

She stared in disbelief. She'd only been trying to help, and he'd dressed her down in front of the students. While holding the coffee she'd brought him, no less. How *dare* he?

"I didn't realize you valued discipline so highly." Her voice was heated but low enough so only Callum could hear. He ignored her, but a muscle in his jaw twitched. Had her point landed? She certainly hoped so. More than half the students were on their phones, and a good portion of those still had their AirPods in. Even the ones whose phones were tucked away sat on the risers, their expressions ranging from apathy to suspicion to undisguised loathing.

Not a particularly auspicious beginning. It didn't matter, of course, since he'd be gone after this year.

Check that. Jake might not be wrong. Callum Knight might not even last until October.

"Now." Callum looked around the room, his voice a crisp staccato. "Since all of you seem so intent on running your voices, let's bypass the handbook for now and sing something."

To their credit, at least a third of the choir lowered their phones to reveal eyes glimmering with at least marginal interest.

Callum reached for a yellowed stack of music on a table to his right. "Could I have a volunteer to hand these out?"

Thalia raised her hand, and Blair sent her a glance of thanks. Thalia, a born leader and this year's choir president, could always be counted

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on to step up. Callum acknowledged Thalia with a nod, and she stepped down from the risers and took the stack from his outstretched hand.

Blair snagged one of the copies off the top of the stack as Thalia passed her, and she almost choked on the sip of coffee she'd just taken. "Daemon Irrepit Callidus?" She peered at her new director. "Callum, really?"

He met her gaze with a level one of his own amid the quiet din of choral chatter. "While everyone else played ridiculous icebreaker games, you may be pleased to know that I spent that time reading the choral handbook from the state activities association. A school this size is required to perform a level four for state festival."

Blair's eyes narrowed. "In April, yes. But this is August."

"And these are the famed Peterson Madrigals," he replied with a smirk. "I've heard good things. I believe they'll rise to the challenge."

While she had to admire the director's faith in the ensemble, and while it was true that the Peterson Madrigals likely could have handled a piece like "Daemon" in their glory days, those glory days were long gone, and she highly doubted Callum Knight could bring them back.

Pulling in a breath, she settled back at the piano bench and steeled herself for the impending train wreck, which was putting it mildly. Within ten minutes Callum's cheeks above his stubble were stained a deep crimson, sweat dotted his forehead, and the muscle in his jaw twitched wildly. At least half the kids had given up and checked out, and the ones who still tried gave a frustrated sigh as Callum cut them off.

"Altos. You missed your entrance. *Again.*"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Knight." Makayla's cheeks were flushed with anger and embarrassment.

"Sorry isn't good enough," Callum snapped. "Good enough is good enough."

Makayla's eyes widened, then filled with tears. Makayla normally kept her emotions reined in, but "not good enough" was her Achilles' heel. The girl's father was a raging perfectionist—a cardiothoracic surgeon at Peterson General—and nothing she did ever measured up. Blair had spent the last two years trying to convince Makayla of her talent, to help her see the beauty of her gorgeous alto voice with its velvety tone and natural vibrato.

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All that work over all that time, and this pompous blowhard had just undone a fair bit of it.

As calmly as she could, Blair stood from the piano and leaned toward Callum. Twin whiffs of coffee and cologne greeted her. “Mr. Knight.”

“Yes?”

“A word, please.” She jerked her head toward the office.

“Not now.” His blasé, dismissive tone made her even madder.

“Yes. Now.” Each word was a dagger. “Or you’ll find yourself in need of a new accompanist. And I’m told those are hard to find.”

That got his attention. He glanced up from his iPad and lowered his baton. “You wouldn’t dare.”

Of course she wouldn’t. Especially not if it meant leaving these kids with him. But were she a betting woman, she’d place a large wager on him not knowing this about her.

“How confident are you in that assessment?” She locked her gaze on his and refused to blink.

He stared at her, jaw rock hard, stormy emerald eyes narrowed into slits. Finally he set his baton down on the stand, the click of wood against metal the only sound in the tension-thickened choir room.

“Fine.” He stalked toward the office.

“Hold down the fort, Thalia,” Blair called as she followed Callum inside.

“Will do, Ms. Em.”

Callum stood aside to let Blair pass, then shut the door, folded his arms across his chest, and faced her, brows arched. “What on God’s green earth is so important that you were compelled to interrupt my rehearsal?”

“It’s not *your* rehearsal. It’s *their* rehearsal. *Our* rehearsal.” Pulse pounding in her throat, she gestured toward the choir room. “They are *children*, Callum. I know you’ve been conducting professionals for years, but you need to take a step back and understand that these are young people, impressionable people, who are enrolled in your class because they want to be. Because they want to learn to sing.”

Callum’s lips tightened, the skin around them whitening.

“Makayla Barnes is the one person you should never, ever say ‘not

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good enough' to. She seems tough, but inside she's a fragile young girl with a backstory that'd break your heart, and if you talk to her that way, you'll lose her. And that would be devastating, because if you heard that girl sing . . ."

"I have heard her sing. Just now."

"I mean *really* sing. If you'd heard her rendition of 'Quella fiamma' at contest last year, you'd—"

"If she's already sung 'Quella fiamma,' then she needs to be challenged. They *all* need to be challenged." Callum stepped toward her, close enough she could feel the warmth from his body. "I don't know what kind of kindergarten coddling you all have been doing around here, but this choir is capable of greatness. The talent is there. You know it and I know it. They just need someone to harness it. Channel it. Bring it out from where it's hiding to where the whole world can see."

Blair pulled back, the searing heat of anger cooled slightly by his words. Normally, she'd have a bone to pick with his description of her career as kindergarten coddling . . . but even in a frustrating, ten-minute train wreck of a rehearsal, Callum Knight had seen the talent that lay in their top choir, and something had motivated him to try to bring it out of them. Gone was the burned-out shell of a man she'd met on Monday. In his place stood someone who might have what it took to bring the Peterson High choirs out of the ashes.

"What?" Callum's voice was quieter now, hawkish eyes roving over her face in a thorough, but not unkind, evaluation.

She straightened. "If I didn't know better, Callum Knight, I'd think you might care about this job after all."

Callum dragged a hand through his hair. "Blair, when I was eleven years old, I thought I signed up for robotics as my sixth-grade elective, but a computer error put me in choir instead. And ever since then, choral music has been my *life*. Singing it, conducting it, creating it myself, coaxing it to life, watching people connect with it, with each other . . . making music is what makes me come alive. Sometimes in those magical moments when everything goes well, it just . . ."

". . . seems almost like a glimpse of heaven." Goodness. Two minutes ago she'd wanted to fling her cup of coffee right in his face, but now

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something hovered between them. A commonality. A connection. One she hadn't had with any of the other choral directors who'd occupied this office. Who'd taken charge of this classroom.

Callum seemed to feel it too, because those narrow slits of eyes had widened. Dark lashes blinked, and tightly folded arms gradually relaxed. One hand slid into his pocket, and the other found that wild mop of hair again.

Perhaps they could salvage the year after all.

"Look, Blair." His voice was considerably softer. A bit rough around the edges. "I'll be honest with you. This isn't where I saw myself at this point in my career. And those kids might be right. I might not even last the year. But as long as I am here, as long as my job is to teach them, then I'm going to demand their absolute best."

"Then may I give you a bit of advice from the perspective of someone who grew up in this community and who's worked with these kids for almost a decade?"

He nodded. "You may."

"If you want their best, you have to give them yours. And that starts with letting them see what you've just let me see. Let them see you care." She flipped a lock of hair over her shoulder. "We've had six directors in six years. Let that sink in. Nobody in this room has had the same teacher two years in a row. Every August there's a new face in front of them. New expectations. New ways of doing things. And just when they think they've got it figured out, just when they start to like that person, they get the rug yanked out from under them and have to start all over again. Frankly, it's a wonder any of them are still enrolled in choir. But the fact that they are means that getting to sing—to make music with each other—is worth putting up with all the other crap they've been through. These kids adore one another, Callum. And for a lot of them, this is the only place they feel safe. Don't take that away from them by yelling and screaming on the first day."

He was silent again, that impossible-to-read expression flitting over his face. Had she angered him again? Gotten through to him? She couldn't wait for the day when she'd understand this expression, because guessing games were the worst.

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“I think perhaps I’ve underestimated you. And been a bit rotten to you.” He flashed a slight smile. “Forgive me? Please?”

“Of course,” she replied. “Thank you.”

“And I think perhaps I’ve overestimated the choir’s capabilities at this point in the semester.”

“I . . . don’t disagree with you.”

“Well, that’s a first.” And then Callum smiled. The curve of his lips carved a slight indent in his cheek. His eyes crinkled at the corners. And her heart gave a curious thump. It wasn’t attraction. Goodness, no. But if she had to spend the rest of the school year watching someone . . . there were certainly less pleasant someones she could be watching.

“Not to push this tenuous truce too hard,” he began, his hand on the doorknob of the office. “But might you be available for a bit after school today? I could really use your help.”

Blair tilted her head. “With . . .”

“Repertoire selection,” he replied. “I’d really like to get going on music, for Madrigals in particular, but I haven’t had a chance to explore the choral library, so I’m not sure what’s in there and what I might need to order. I want to find something challenging but achievable, and high-quality compositions are an absolute must. Frankly, I’d like to select music for all the choirs. Four per choir to begin, with a goal of learning at least that number, if not more, for the October concert. Does that sound reasonable?”

Reasonable? It sounded like perfection. Not that she’d give Callum Knight the satisfaction of knowing she thought that. Not yet. Not when the idea of not hating him was so new. “Yes. Very reasonable.”

His eyes lit. “Wonderful. Then perhaps the rest of the day we go over the handbook?”

“That sounds like a good idea to me.”

“And I’ll make sure to remember to point out the deadline this time around.” He cracked the door and tossed another grin over his shoulder, and her heart did that same funny thing it had before.

She had to get that under control.

If she didn’t, Joy would never let her hear the end of it.