

DIDI WOOD

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## ELLIOTT CARTER IS A DEAD MAN

“...certain purposeful violations of the beat are often exceptionally beautiful.” (C.P.E. Bach)

**A**ARON COPLAND DIED on Sunday. By the time I get to work on Monday morning, Doris Corasco already has typed the year of his death on all of his cards in the music library catalog. She must have come in yesterday, the moment she heard the news. Her desk is piled high with Copland recordings, and she’s completing the dates on the record jackets by hand.

“Aaron Copland died,” I say, unnecessarily.

Doris snorts. “It’s about time.” Pushing up her glasses, she tells me, “You’ve got some messages there.”

On the desk are three pink While-You-Were-Away slips, completely filled out with the date and time, the little A.M. circled, and signed with the initials DLC. One is from Eric, asking me to call him regarding lunch. We’ve rescheduled lunch five times in the two weeks since he returned from a concert tour of Japan. He has much to catch up on, he says, and will I please be patient.

The other two messages are from Gerard, the violin instructor. Five minutes apart, the first asks if I’m free for lunch, and the second says that he’s not free for lunch after all but that I should stop by his office around one o’clock to view his new violin.

“Looks as if we’re eating alone today,” Doris remarks, without looking up.

I hang up my coat and glance at the wall, where Doris has affixed a list of contemporary composers: John Adams, Dominic Argento, Milton Babbitt, Luciano Berio, Leonard Bernstein, Pierre Boulez, John Cage, Elliott Carter, and so on. The list has been there since Doris became music librarian; the crossed-out names represent composers who have died since. More names have been added in her meticulous cursive than crossed out.

"What's left but noise?" Doris laments every time she's forced to add the name of a new composer to the list. John Corigliano, Henryk Gorecki. To me, the names themselves sound like music. Aaron Copland's name has been crossed out already, in red ink.

**I** WORKED FOR DORIS as an undergraduate, too. Now my official title is Assistant Music Librarian, St. Florian's College. Eric calls me the Spinster's Apprentice. "But your breasts are bigger," he'll say, reaching for them. His hands are huge, with dark hair on the knuckles.

"I'm practicing," he complains when I call him. "What is it?"

I can hear chattering in the background, high, in another language. "Who's there?"

"Look, Muriel, I can't talk now." He strums his guitar for emphasis. "I have a lot to do—I told you."

"Why do you bother to answer the phone, then?"

"In case it's something important." He skids on that last word. I wait for him to withdraw it. When he doesn't offer anything, I say, "I take it we're not lunching today?"

"I told you, I'm—"

"Busy. Yes, you did tell me." Angry tears sting my eyes. I lie, "I'm having lunch with Gerard, anyway."

He snorts. "Lucky you." The voices in the background get louder, then softer. Eric murmurs something with his hand over the mouthpiece, and someone giggles. "I've got to go," he says then, and hangs up. "Watch out for that one," Doris says.

I blink hard to clear my eyes before turning to her. "Who?" I assume

she means Eric, but when she purses her lips and doesn't answer, I decide she must be talking about Gerard.

Doris's hostility toward Gerard is accepted in the music department as one of the unpleasant verities, in a class with Beethoven's madness, Schubert's syphilis, and the green-and-orange plaid furniture in the lobby. His rare appearances in the music library elicit from her a series of pigeon-like clucking sounds as she surveys him from behind the desk, catching her breath audibly each time he touches a recording or a set of headphones, as if he were an oversized child whose hands were smeared with chocolate.

I assumed the source of Doris's ire to be the rubber-banded stack of cards behind Gerard's name in the "Felonies" drawer, representing overdue scores and recordings. My advisor, Jon Stoukis, hinted there was more to it.

"Let's just say," he told me, rubbing his mustache with his index finger, "that it has to do with Desire." He wouldn't say more when I pressed him on it. He looked tired. Soon after that, he married the sophomore songstress he had impregnated, and subsequently was denied tenure. At the time, I thought him romantic. Now I try not to listen when others discuss his present job, teaching junior-high band in Grundy Center, Iowa. I heard a rumor that the baby was born deaf.

Gerard seems to consider me an accomplice, ever since I allowed him to take from the library the score of Haydn's "Farewell" Symphony. Doris was in the back room. He tiptoed to the checkout desk, placed the score in front of me, and touched a finger to his lips. Those with cards in the "Misdemeanors" drawer weren't allowed to remove items from the library, to say nothing of the "Felonies," but I let him take it. I don't know why. When I waved him away, he grabbed my hand and kissed it. His lips tickled my knuckles, making me shiver. He hasn't returned that score, either.

Doris sets down the last Copland album with a sigh. With her eyes narrowed, she looks older than forty-six, which I know to be her age. Of the deceased, she says, "At least he didn't bequeath us his infernal library."

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“IT, SIT.” GERARD SHOVES a stack of papers off a chair and onto the floor, where it joins other piles. I glimpse blank student evaluations from last semester, a paycheck dated several weeks ago, and heaps of library scores. He drags a stool too close to me, leans so far forward I have to lean back. His after-shave is spicy and exotic; bay rum, I think, although I don’t know how bay rum smells. I stifle a sneeze.

Gerard’s clothes hang on him as if they were bought for someone larger. His shirt is untucked, the wrinkled tail hanging over his pants. His tawny hair is tousled and needs a trim. His attention is like that of a puppy, his bright eyes intent on what is before him, then just as intent on what greets them when he turns his head. He hasn’t shaved, and the soft coarseness of his face seems to complement his voice.

With a flourish, he places his new violin in my lap. I wonder how he was able to afford it. He can’t, if the condition of his clothing and the age of his dusty Pinto indicate his financial situation. I remember hearing from someone – perhaps from Jon – that Gerard supported a reclusive mother or sister or wife, someone named Jenny.

The violin’s surface is so glossy that I can see my face reflected there. There’s nothing remarkable about my face: it doesn’t launch ships, but it won’t turn anyone to stone, either. Twenty years from now I won’t look very different. I don’t know if that’s good or bad. It doesn’t seem to matter.

“Is she not beautiful?” Gerard murmurs.

A bead of water drops onto the violin. I imagine it burning like acid through the varnish.

“Oh!” I hold out the instrument to Gerard, careful not to let the drop of moisture slide. He whisks it off with his thumb and lays the instrument in its case. He shakes out a wrinkled handkerchief and holds it out to me.

“Miss Muriel,” he says, “what is it?” His voice is softer than usual. I press my hands to my face and feel how wet my cheeks are.

“I’m sorry,” I say, standing. On my way out the door, I slip on some papers, but catch myself before I fall.

**LIVE IN AN APARTMENT** five blocks from campus — not as close as Doris, I recite silently in rhythm with my footsteps as I walk home after work. It seems important, although when I pause inside the front door to get the mail, I'm not sure why. Besides the catalogs and bills, there are two letters: one on embossed card stock, cream-colored, from my mother, and a thin, airmail envelope from my friend Amanda, who is studying opera in Milan.

My mother's note is full of news about my siblings: Jeff is engaged to a sweet girl who owns and runs a preschool, Annette has been promoted to vice president, Sandy is pregnant again, finally with a boy, and my younger brother, Mark, has landed a role in an off-Broadway show. Am I coming home for Christmas, my mother wants to know, and do I expect her to pay for the ticket?

Amanda's letter I save until I'm in my nightgown, tucked beneath a blanket on the sofa. She claims that she's gaining weight, that soon she'll be as big as her voice and fit only for childbearing and grape stomping. I picture my svelte, cosmopolitan friend and smile. Amanda has been dating an Italian named Giuseppe who knows little English beyond the menu at McDonald's. She writes, *As my Italian is limited to operatic phrases like "My maidenhood is my gift to you" or "I'll throw myself from this window if you come one step closer, vile monster," our conversation is not especially stimulating. But really, don't we tell each other most things without saying a word?*

**A BANGING ON THE DOOR** startles me awake. I've fallen asleep on the sofa. Amanda's letter is crushed beneath me; I pull it out and try to smooth it. *What's up with Eric?* I read again. *You hardly ever mention him.* More banging. I glance at the clock: nearly midnight. Probably not safe to answer. But in case it's Eric, come to apologize, I call, "Who is it?"

"Open the door, please, Miss Muriel."

It takes me a moment to recognize the voice. Gerard, outside my apartment at this hour. At any hour. I draw the blanket around my shoulders before opening the door.

Gerard looks apologetic. He clears his throat and hands me a white Rolodex card. "Perhaps you would return this for me?"

I'm surprised to see my own name and address, in Doris's handwriting, on the card. "You stole this?"

He shrugs. "She wouldn't tell me where you live." He takes my hand, drawing me outside. The blanket slips from my shoulders.

"I don't—"

"You must come with me," he says. "At once."

With a coat thrown over my nightgown, I walk the dark, silent streets beside Gerard. He held a finger to his lips when I asked where we were going. I expected him to show me something just outside, perhaps in his car, but he kept walking and I didn't know what to do but follow. He's the violin instructor, I keep reminding myself. If anything happens to me, the police will trace it to him. Surely he realizes that. The stolen Rolodex card, which I left in plain sight on my desk, bears his fingerprints. Doris, when questioned, will recall that he asked for my address. No doubt Eric will use my memorial service to showcase a new composition. "This was one of Muriel's favorites," he'll say with a fond smile, and play something I never heard.

The campus clock strikes twelve, the pumpkin hour. I pull a loose thread from my nightgown and drop it. Fifty feet further, I drop another. I remind myself how sophisticated police detection methods have become. Just in case, though, I drop another thread.

"Are you cold?" Gerard asks, his voice loud in the darkness.

I shake my head, my fingers closing around another thread. I wait until I'm sure he isn't watching, then drop it. I scan the ground for a weapon, a sharp stone or bit of glass, but I see nothing. We are several blocks from my apartment now, away from the rows of apartment buildings and into streets with small, sedate houses sporting feeble porch lights. Doris lives in one of these, I don't know which. Gerard turns down the driveway of one without a light, its lawn overtaken by tall weeds.

"Here," he says. Our feet crush unraked leaves. The Pinto hunkers in the driveway. He fishes a ring of keys from his pocket. There are a few newspapers scattered on the porch, still bound.

"This is your house?" I ask.

"I rent from the college." He's having trouble fitting his key into the lock. He swears softly, and it goes in. "Please," he says, opening the door for me. The scent of cloves, mysterious and sweet, envelops me as I step over the threshold. I shiver. Gerard flicks on a light.

"You are cold," he says. "I'll make a fire."

**I** STAND AT THE EDGE of a large, drafty room. There is no furniture, only a battered grand piano and a music stand with *St. Florian's College* stenciled on it. Stacks of music cover the piano and the floor around it. I think of the overdue scores and wonder if Doris has ever been here. Desire, Jon Stoukis pronounced what existed between Doris and Gerard, but maybe the affair was simply a failed attempt to recoup the library's holdings. I could do it, I think, the blood pounding in my head. I could knock him out with the music stand, grab the scores, and return them to the library. My hands clench and unclench as I consider the options.

On the mantel over the fireplace is an oil painting of a woman in a high-necked blue dress, her dark hair bound around her head. With her tight mouth and pinched nostrils, she looks as if she smells something odious.

"Is this your mother?" I guess.

Gerard is arranging logs in the fireplace. "That's Jenny," he says, without looking up.

"Your wife?"

"No, she came with the house. I don't know who she is, really." He pauses, a lit match in his hand. "I think of her as a sort of muse, you know?"

I watch the flame approach his fingers. "She doesn't look as if she likes music much."

"That is why we must play extra good, to win her favor."

"Please, you're going to burn yourself."

He flicks the match into the fireplace, and the flame blossoms, devouring newspaper. Gerard stands up, wiping his hands on his pants. He must be forty, but in the firelight he looks younger, softer. His eyes are so bright. I can't stop shivering. He leads me to the piano bench and has me sit. After pawing through the music on the floor, he pulls out a worn book and sets it in front of me. Beethoven, *Sonatas for Violin and Piano*.

"Number nine," he says. He takes out his violin and tightens the hair on his bow. "The *Kreutzer*."

I fold my hands in my lap. Does he mean to serenade me? I don't think so. My heart is racing. "You mean—?"

"Ssh!" He waves the bow at me. "No more talking."

"But—" It's hard to swallow. The notes swim on the page in front of me. "There isn't enough light."

"You've played it before."

I think of the recital, my last, sometime last year. My fingers were frozen—the heater in Blaise Hall was notoriously quirky—so it must have been winter. *Pedestrian*, Eric pronounced the performance. I felt myself wilting as he continued, *Your violinist was great, though—she really kept it moving*. The next day, I switched from piano performance to library science, with a specialty in music collections. Jon Stoukis had already left the school, and no one required me to explain my decision.

I snap, "If you were there, you know—"

"Play," he commands.

"I can't play. I don't *want* to play." I gather my hands into fists and slam them on the keys. The dissonance shimmers between us. Gerard is breathing hard, and I am afraid to look at him.

"No," he says.

I look up, blinking away tears. "What?"

"I start."

He lifts the violin to his shoulder. Holding his bow above the strings, he pauses. I feel him focusing his energy; then his body tenses and he arpeggiates the first chord, loud and rich, softening as he continues. He plays the first four measures, sweet and sustained. His eyes are closed. When he reaches the pause at the end of the phrase, he opens them. He looks vulnerable, and I fear it will hurt him physically if I don't take it up.

My hands hover above the keys. I wait too long. I hit the correct notes of my first chord—not loud enough, I haven't given myself room to



bring it down, it should be an echo of what he played — then my fingers are on the next notes. I play to the end of the phrase and wait for him to say something, to tell me to watch the dynamics or keep the tempo steady or go back and do it over again. But he keeps playing, and I follow.

When we reach the end of the slow introduction, he waits for me. He cues and plays on the upbeat, and I enter — late — on the downbeat. The scroll of his instrument bobs up and down to give me the tempo. *God, he's taking it fast*, I think, and then I have to stop thinking.

We play through the four movements without stopping, without speaking. After, he sets down his violin and leans on the piano.

"Muriel," he says. He looks tired. "Your name, it means *myrrh*. Bitter. I looked it up. Why do you hate music?"

My hands ache, and wisps of hair cling to my sweaty forehead. I don't know if I played well or not. I whisper, "It hates me."

"No." He shakes his head. He reaches down to brush the hair out of my face. "There is no room in music for bitterness," he says. And then, as I start to cry, "There is no room in you."

**T**HE NEXT MORNING, I brace myself in the doorway of Gerard's tiny, cluttered office. I'm already late for work. I eye the stacks of pilfered music, feeling pilfered myself, and vow never, never to let myself be buried among them.

Around five-thirty this morning, clutching one of Gerard's unironed, bay rum-smelling shirts around me because I couldn't find my coat and I didn't want to risk waking him, I hurried home. My heart pumped terror through my body with an escalating rhythm. In my mind, I listed the things that horrified me: Gerard's lips (soft), Gerard's tongue (caressing), Gerard's fingertips (callused). Gerard's snores, as he lay on his back, legs and arms splayed, the sheet tangled around his lower

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body. The indentation at the small of his back, the way his chest smelled. The way his voice had hoarsened, and my own knees had gone suddenly weak.

I had never been out so early. I felt flushed, hyper-aware. I noticed especially the streetlights, how their brilliance waned against the sunrise until I was nearly home and the sky was bright and I no longer could tell if they were on or off.

Gerard is polishing his new violin. I watch him stroke oil into the wood. The instrument looks delicate in his hands, and he is gentle with it. My cheeks burn with the memory of his coarse fingertips. I open my mouth to speak, close it again.

"Maybe it never happened," he says. He isn't looking at me. "We could pretend that, if you want. Or that I was someone else — would that be better?"

I wish he would look at me. I have never spoken to him without seeing his eyes.

"Look," I say. There's no reason for me to be unkind. "I'm very sorry. I'm sure neither of us intended for — that — to happen."

"For what to happen?" He holds up his hands, the palms empty. The violin teeters on his lap. "See? I have forgotten already."

"I didn't mean —" I stammer, blushing. I remember his face nestled between my neck and shoulder, his sighs resonating through me to my toes. "I don't know what I mean."

"That is a lie." His voice is as flat as a slap. "You know exactly what you mean. You want to say to me now, *Gerard, it's just that you're so much older*, or *Gerard, I'm in love with somebody else, I didn't know what I was doing*. But you will be lying."

"You seduced me! You practically kidnapped me in the middle of the night, you pulled out that *Kreutzer* sonata which, now that I think of it, was remarkably handy —"

Gerard flicks the cloth over the strings. His face is red. "Go back to the library, Miss Muriel," he says. He looks at me then, his smile faint and hurt, and I feel like crying.

"I want the scores," I tell him. "All the scores. Will you give them to me?"

He looks tired. Neither of us slept much. Still smiling, he shakes his head. "I will not."

**I** SLUMP IN THE CHAIR behind the checkout desk. My shoulders ache and my hands are stiff. Doris is at a library committee meeting, and I'm relieved; when she sees me, I'm certain she'll know, as if I were wearing a scarlet G, what I've done. In the corner, three undergraduates in headphones listen to Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. One of Dido's arias, "When I am laid in earth," sends them into giggling convulsions. "When I am *laid*," they warble repeatedly, and I glare at them until they stop.

I try to picture Doris seated at Gerard's piano, her upper body swaying from one end of the keyboard to the other with the force of her arpeggios. Doris, transfigured, ignoring the library holdings scattered on the floor around her. Gerard removing her glasses, placing them on the piano, Doris succumbing—

"Shit," I groan. Doris wouldn't be so weak. The undergraduates glance up, and I stare them down. One of them whispers something, and they all laugh.

Doris has left me a note, sealed in an envelope, saying that Gerard asked for my address and that she, naturally, refused to give it to him. *Be careful*, she writes. *You know what he is*. She also asks me to send out overdue notices. *At the meeting*, she writes, *I'm going to propose that we adopt a more aggressive policy toward those who abuse library privileges*.

I work my way through "Misdemeanors" and then "Felonies," saving Gerard for last. There are twenty-seven cards behind his name. I know he has at least one more score for which he did not fill out a card. How many more has he charmed past the student assistants? His cards are filled out haphazardly, incompletely, in a handwriting so sprawling I can't tell what he has taken.

I turn on the adding machine. Twenty-seven scores, all due at least six months ago, at twenty-five cents per day. The total is more than twelve hundred dollars. I think of Gerard's living room, with no furniture in it, only a scarred piano and a borrowed music stand. His bedroom, where he sleeps on a mattress on the floor.

Last night, when I felt him holding back, I whispered that he shouldn't wait for me, that I couldn't. He stopped moving in me. Holding my face between his hands, he kissed my forehead, my cheeks, my eyelids, everywhere but my mouth. When finally his lips touched mine, I trembled

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and he, with a groan, let go. Something stirred deep within me. "With practice," he whispered, kissing my fingers, "we'll practice," before we fell asleep.

I imagine introducing Gerard to my family. He'll attempt to dress for the occasion, but his shirt will be wrinkled and his tie, besides not matching his threadbare coat, will be unfashionably wide and eternally askew. He will shake my father's hand too energetically, and my mother will be embarrassed when he bows low over her hand to kiss it. She may check to make sure her rings are still on her fingers. "He's a live one," Annette will remark to my other siblings and their spouses, and all, avoiding my gaze, will snicker.

At my mother's table, Gerard will eat heartily, praising the meal, saying that he hasn't had food this good since his mother died of consumption in the Old Country. He'll knock over his wine glass reaching for the pepper mill, then try to sop up the mess with one of my mother's heirloom damask napkins. "I want to speak to you," my mother will murmur later, in passing, her mouth pursed.

I yank open the bottom drawer of the desk to get another overdue notice. I pull too hard, and the drawer teeters at the edge of its slot. At the back is a worn folder I haven't noticed before. Its label has fallen off and been taped back on. "Death Row," it reads, in Doris's script.

Inside the folder is a thick stack of papers. On top is a handwritten list identical to that taped on the library wall, of composers still living, with those who've died crossed out. The papers beneath it are photocopies of letters to the composers, all in Doris's handwriting, arranged alphabetically by last name. I pull out one addressed to Aaron Copland.

*Dear Mr. Copland,  
Today I had the misfortune to hear Rodeo again. It is an ugly, vulgar work. I am convinced you wrote it while staring out a bordello window, so full of*

*ucking and fucking it is. If only you had died young, and Mozart had lived to 90.*

The letter, signed “A Music Lover,” is dated November 28, just last week, a few days before Copland’s death. I wonder if he received it, if he was reading it when his heart stopped.

Thumbing through the stack, I skim the letters to the other composers. They resemble the Copland letter, sometimes calling attention to specific works, using the same vitriolic language. As I read, I am amazed at the breadth of Doris’s exposure to modern music. I picture her alone in her kitchen, her stereo painfully loud, alternately writing down comments and sipping from a mug of lukewarm tea. A recent letter to Elliott Carter is the most violent:

*Dear Mr. Carter,  
Someone should affix your entrails to a rotisserie and crank the spit to repay you for the myriad ways in which you have ravaged Music. I pray it happens soon, and slowly.*

**T**HE DOOR TO GERARD’S OFFICE is closed. I check my watch: twelve-forty, lunchtime. I try to write him a note, but my pen runs out of ink after *Please*.

There’s a note on the door of the main office saying that the secretary has a family emergency and won’t be in today. The door is unlocked, and I let myself in and turn on the light. While I’m rummaging in the desk for a pen, the door opens and Eric enters. He stops short when he sees me.

“Well,” he says, attempting to smile. He grants me a brief, one-armed hug. Two tiny Japanese women, twins, tumble into the office on either side of him, chattering in high voices in their own language. I’ve never seen them on campus before.

“What are these,” I say, “souvenirs?”

“Ha,” Eric says. He sounds uncertain. “Have you seen the piano tuner?”

“No, I haven’t. But we need to talk.”

“I need to find the piano tuner. You know about the recital, don’t you?”

He takes a flyer from one of the twins. *Eric Pampas, guitar, in concert*

*with Sunny and Agnes Yoshitomi, piano. "We're doing some really exciting things."*

"I'll bet," I say. The Japanese girls are as sleek and lithe as acrobats. I clear my throat. "Can we talk, please?"

"Not now, Muriel, okay?" He backs out of the office. "The piano tuner," he reminds me.

I follow him out of the building and across the music quad to Blaise Hall. The twins have to run to keep up with us. It's cold; my coat is at Gerard's house, and I wonder if I'll ever see it again. Eric opens the door.

"Wait here," I tell the twins, enunciating carefully. I indicate with my hands, palms flat, that they should remain outside. "Stay," I say. "Okay? You stay here."

One of them shrugs. "Whatever," says the other, in unaccented English. I follow Eric inside, and the heavy door slams shut behind me.

The piano tuner, a short, faded man whose mustache is gray, although his hair is still dark, leans over the open piano. He taps a tuning fork against his head, holds it to his ear, and strikes an A and the octaves above and below it. He makes an adjustment inside the piano, plays the notes again, then some chords, and nods.

"Are you sure about that?" Eric calls. He stands at the back of the hall, cupping his hands behind his ears.

The man straightens and looks at him.

"It sounds a little low," Eric explains.

The piano tuner plays the notes again. Without consulting Eric, he taps the tuning fork against his head and moves on to B-flat.

The hall is too hot. Panting, I stand by Eric. "I can't believe you'd throw me over for the Bobbsey twins."

"They happen to be excellent musicians," he says.

"Which is more than you can say for me, right? That's it?"

"Excuse me." The piano tuner holds the tuning fork aloft and waits for

our attention. "This is fascinating and all, but I have another job at one-thirty."

**E**RIC PUSHES OPEN the door. "Here's the situation, Muriel. I am an artist, and you—" He waves a hand in the air, leaves it at that. "It's my obligation to my art to surround myself with people who aren't so...rigid. If you can't understand that, I'm sorry." He manages to look regretful before exiting.

The piano tuner bends over the piano again. He's up to B. I walk to the edge of the stage and look up at him.

"Do you play?" I ask. He shakes his head and puts a finger to his lips. He plunks the B, then a B major chord. I can smell dust burning on the heating pipes. I'm so hot it's hard to breathe. I unbutton my sweater. I wonder if I'm hyperventilating, or going into shock. I unbutton my blouse. A tiny pink satin bow adorns the center of my bra.

"I'm not rigid," I say. Or did he say *frigid*? The distinction seems important, but I can't bring myself to run after him to ask.

The piano tuner glances at me, then at the ceiling. "I have a wife and five children," he intones. He hits the B against C an octave higher, and winces. He plays the C by itself a few times. He seems to have lost his place.

My eyes fill with tears. "Did you ever play the piano?"

"Ssh," he says, careful not to look away from the keyboard. He makes an adjustment inside the piano, plays the C again.

"I thought that maybe you used to play, and now you don't anymore. Someone told me that the people in music who don't play, the historians and theorists, and probably the librarians, are really frustrated musicians. Do you think that's true?"

He leans inside the piano and makes another adjustment to the C. "You seem a little resentful, if you want the truth," he says, his voice stirring the strings.

"How can you say that?" I demand. "You should meet Doris Corasco. She makes death threats to elderly composers. She may well have killed Aaron Copland."

"I've got a wife and five kids. I have no interest in meeting anyone."

He closes the piano lid and gathers his tools.

I locate the thermostat. Someone has turned it up to eighty degrees. I push it down a few degrees, to seventy-five. "If I turned the heat completely off," I say, "and this room got cold, the piano could go right out of tune again. Is that correct?"

"My job is done." The piano tuner struggles with the door. "Open the windows, for all I care. Just keep your clothes on."

I push the lever all the way to the left, and with a groan the heater clicks off. I stand in the empty hall, listening. I imagine it filled with people, an audience straining for the sound of piano strings contracting in the cold, becoming brittle, and snapping. A modern masterpiece. Drawing myself up, the way Jon Stoukis taught me, I inhale deeply, as if for a bow.

**O**N MY FIRST DAY at St. Florian's, I entered the music quad and beheld three professors in jackets and ties crouching behind pillars and lobbing tiny pomegranates at each other. In that moment I was fiercely, inexplicably happy.

Now I open the door to Gerard's office, close it, and stand with my back against it. He has been napping with his feet on the desk. Slowly, he lowers them.

"Will you help me?" I say. I'm shivering so hard I can't fasten my blouse. He gets up and stands over me. His fingers brush my chest as he first unbuttons the ones I've done wrong and then buttons them all. He pulls my sweater closed and buttons that, too.

"I just exposed myself to the piano tuner," I tell him.

"Sometimes it's good to be vulnerable." His voice, husky, warms me.

"The piano tuner," I repeat dully. "He's not even a musician. He doesn't even play the piano."

"I don't play the piano," Gerard says. "What of it?"

Weary, I let my head drop against his chest. I can feel his heart beating. His unshaven chin scrapes me as he kisses my forehead.