

Ultraviolet

The circle of fifths shows the relationships between the pitches of the chromatic scale. And it looks like a clock. The twelve tones correspond to hours. The major and minor keys answer the shadows on a sundial. Starting from A minor at noon, for example, each sharp takes you clockwise while each flat moves you anticlockwise until the two hands meet as an enharmonic pair at six o'clock. Then they carry on past each other all the way round to noon again. Or midnight. And so this is how we meet in Edinburgh, 1986: a spilled pint glass, beer sluicing across the bar. The bloke in front of me lifting his hands from the surface and taking a step back and then swiveling to apologise when he steps on my foot, his forearms raised like a doctor waiting for surgical gloves.

I look at his hands. He sees me looking at them and tries to make something of it.

"Guess what I do for a living?" he asks.

The fingers are nicked and calloused, with rough knuckles. And they're large. What I could do to a keyboard with those. "Stone mason," I say. "Grave digger."

He smiles. "Neither. Both."

His eyes are shaped in a way that offsets the wide block of his forehead. An endearing little curve to his lower lip. His hair is pale brown, almost blondish. American voice. I reckon he gets his way with women just a little too often. And he has some friends or companions, it seems, resonating beside him. A popular guy.

"What are you studying?" he asks.

We're surrounded by dark teak and old smoke and lamps with stained glass shades. It's the Rig & Run in early December, the dead end of term, and I've been trying to play Rachmaninoff all day and I haven't washed my hair or changed out of the trousers I was wearing when a car bashed through a puddle next to me and even now a television in the

corner is blaring with Chernobyl and contaminated sheep, a toxic Spring everlasting, all bad news within and without. Clare is somewhere behind me, trying to find a table before Isobel arrives, and I just want to forget it all and have a few drinks with my friends.

I make a point of looking over his shoulder to catch the barman's eye.

"English," he says to me.

I snap him a look. "You think I'm English?"

"I mean English Literature. What you're studying."

I shake my head.

"Hot or cold?"

I take a deliberate breath. Stop it before it starts. Otherwise what? Back to his room somewhere—or worse, mine—for another nasty surprise. After what happened with that other bloke I've adopted a Presbyterian attitude. Men belong on the other side of the aisle. Make them work. Make them wait. It's the only way to vet them. It's the only way to let them know I'm real.

"By any chance are you sensing a resistance from me?"

"Oh yeah."

"Then why don't you move on?" I say, brushing up against him out of sheer necessity as I lean in to order the drinks, giving him my shoulder to make it clear what's what. And then, easing back, I notice Isobel at the doorway shaking the rain off her jacket. The plain beauty of her oval face, her bright eyes. She attracts upstanding blokes seeking marriage just over the rise. But this one? He'd go for Clare's hot blonde confidence and leopard curves. She's the lightning rod for these types. As Isobel catches sight of me I bulge my face out and roll my eyes toward him. Look at this, will you.

“I’m not moving on,” he says, apparently unruffled, “because I was here first. And besides, I’m trying to find out if you’re as smart as you look.”

That comment catches me, almost. I turn back to him with an eyebrow raised, just a wee bit amused. “Good one. I bet it works with a lot of girls.”

“You think it’s a line?”

“Yeah. And a clever one for someone like you.”

He seems to straighten, his expression struck clean. “Someone like me?”

“A Yank on the make.”

He watches me for a long moment. “Oh,” he says. “I guess you’re not so smart after all. Sorry for wasting your time.”

He turns to his companions and joins in their run of laughter. The drinks appear in front of me. I hand over the money and wait for change. I glance at his back. His attitude in a major key. An upbeat Tom Sawyer-type who doesn’t deserve what I just gave him. I’m not that kind of person. I’m better than that. Now act it.

“I didn’t really mean that,” I say.

He doesn’t hear me. Or he can’t be doing with me at this point and who can blame him.

I tap him on the shoulder. “I’m just having a rough day. All right?”

He swivels at the waist and gives me a different look, blank as paper. “Sure. No problem.” He turns back.

I tap him on the shoulder again.

I’m about to admit I’ve been punishing him for someone else’s crime, but the whole mass of it seems too much. “I’m studying music,” I say instead. “And you know what? I’m bloody awful at it. When I play the Rach 3 it sounds like the Lone Ranger theme. I can’t hit

anything right. And obviously it’s one of the hardest things in the universe to play and obviously Rachmaninoff wrote it for his own *huge* hands, but what really kills me is how it exposes all the flaws I didn’t even know I had all the way back to Mozart concertos I nailed years ago—or thought I nailed, because when I play them now I hear mistakes big enough to drive a lorry through. How could I think I was any good? These *things*,” I say, holding up my hands the same way he did, “are all wrong.”

I blow out a breath. I didn’t know this was in me. I didn’t know it was how I feel. He seems to be sizing me up, measuring the full length of what I’ve said and it feels pleasant to be looked at for once, unpleasant to be truly seen. Ok, that’s us finished. I pick up the drinks.

“They’re not foreign objects,” he says.

I give him a careful look. “Sorry?”

“Your hands. Don’t blame them. It’s probably the music that’s fucking you up. What’s it called again?”

“Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto Number 3,” I say. What I don’t say is that it’s notoriously daunting and convoluted. After the failure of his first symphony Rachmaninoff sank into a depression and then emerged from it several years later with his second piano concerto, the notes tolling like a state funeral in the opening movement before a lyrical theme in E flat major crops up. A rebirth. A transformation. But he had nowhere to go after that and so he whipped up a storm in Concerto Number 3, left and right hands playing overlapping figures like a canon with ferocious climaxes over and over leading to the cadenza—two versions of it, the longer and thicker chordal one that he preferred, inaccurately labeled the ‘*ossia*’, and the lighter one in toccata style. I can’t play either. Instead I’ve been soothing myself with the E-flat major melody in the second movement, an echo of that lyrical theme in Concerto Number 2, pretending it will give me a stronger sense of the whole piece,

pretending it will lead somewhere, pretending it will revive some small measure of talent that I foolishly thought I possessed.

"Rachman . . ." he trails off. "What did you call it before?"

"The Rach 3."

"The rack. Like a medieval dungeon." He fixes a clinical look on me and then nods. "My guess is you're some kind of hyper-talented piano goddess who's finally come up against something difficult."

I'm about to protest when that comment hits me square in the chest. What I didn't want to tell myself. What I didn't want to hear.

"It always came to you much faster," he goes on, "than it came to everyone else. You absorbed it like you already knew it. Like you were remembering instead of learning. And it seemed as if you were . . ." he gestures at the ceiling ". . . beyond yourself. But now this Rach 3 is manual labor. It's just work. It makes you feel dark and dead inside. That thing—that magic, it doesn't happen even in the sections you *can* play. It's ruining all the other stuff you did before. You're doubting what you've already done. But what you're feeling now, the darkness and death . . . maybe that's part of it. Maybe you need to go through it because that's what *he* went through. At the darkest point, you'll find it. You'll light up again. The same way he did. The Rack Man."

"Rachmaninoff," I manage to say, still standing with the drinks in my hands and my body angled away from him, lost and found at once.

Isobel slips into view behind him and flashes me a look like do you require roadside assistance, madam? She knows how I've been lately. She knows I'm living in No Man's Land, though she doesn't know why. And I can't say it because my throat knots up. How stupid I was to let him take me back to his room, all carefree and sexed up that night with

who knows what, hormones and whisky, I guess, and then suddenly face down on the bed with an arm twisted behind me and his cock almost in my arse before I twisted and kicked and caught him in the balls. But now? An instinct running like a river in the other direction. I seem to want this one. I seem to want him a lot. As he’s tipping back his pint I give Isobel a wee shake of the head, or rather quite a sharp one, my eyes going off like magnesium flares. Back off, actually. Second thoughts. He’s mine.

I’m looking straight at him when he lowers his glass. He crinkles with a self-conscious look. “Was that over the top?”

I’m not sure how to reply, what with Isobel in the background with her jaw dropped like what do we have here? Leave some for the rest of us, Vi. I flick my eyes at her. Move along, please. There’s nothing to see here after all.

“Ignore it,” he says:-

I hesitate, for an instant thinking he’s cottoned on to Isobel.

“Forget what I said,” he says. “It wasn’t really me.”

I smile despite myself. “Then who was it?”

“Not who. What. Maeshowe.”

“Sorry?”

“The passage grave in Orkney. The big one. The famous one.” He watches my expression. “Oh come on, you’re Scottish. You should know this. Late Neolithic. A couple centuries shy of 5,000 years old. From a distance it’s just a mound, all turfed over. The entrance passage is long and narrow, about yay high.” He holds a hand at shoulder height. “You have to stoop or crawl through the dark. All that flagstone surrounding you. You can feel the weight. But then you reach the central chamber, which opens up to, what—” he raises his eyes above me “—twelve, thirteen feet high? Which isn’t so large, but it feels like

a stadium after that claustrophobic passage. There are a few side chambers where bones were kept, but of course they’re all empty now. Looted by the Vikings and everyone else who stumbled on it. Nothing to see. Except when I visited yesterday.”

I turn slightly, putting Isobel out of sight. She’ll find Clare at one those long benches back there, the plain hard wood polished by how many bums on a thousand nights like this. I’d set at least one of the pints down on the bar but it’s walled off with other bodies, a mass of elbows and broad backs. What the hell.

“You went there now?” I ask. “I mean, in December?”

He hesitates, as if I might laugh at what he’s about to say. “Because the passageway is aligned toward the sunset for about three weeks before and after the winter solstice. But not on the solstice itself.”

I raise my eyebrows politely. “And that’s important.”

“It’s vital.”

“But the solstice—that’s the shortest day of the year. I would think that’s the one that counts.”

“Which is why they marked it on *either side*. Maeshowe doesn’t have a hearth in the central chamber like other passage graves because I think it was always meant to be dark. A place for the dead. In the heart of winter, though, when the days are almost at their shortest, the sunset comes glaring down the passage, reaching all the way to the back wall. The inner chamber. That dead zone inside—it’s suddenly bright and alive. But then the sun keeps shifting beyond the passage until the chamber goes dark again during the actual solstice. The shortest day of the year. Until the sun returns, lighting it up again. And that’s when you feel it.”

“Feel what?”

“Rebirth. Renewal. The whole sky—the whole world happening in that moment. Maeshowe gives you the full sense of it, inside and out.”

Someone jostles me from behind, the beers sloshing and dribbling over my hands but I don't bother glancing back. Do I want this? Can I handle it? Whatever is ahead with him, a key change surprising when it happens and then inevitable afterward, these things always coming into existence just beyond the edges of the heart. Yes. I can play it now. And it goes like this.

“My name is Violet,” I say. “Violet Wringham. I'm listed in the campus directory. Ring me up and I'll meet you at a café or something. I know that's geeky and old-fashioned, but I'm not normal.”

“Violet,” he says, more to himself than to me, with a mild drawl, an easy slide through the first vowel. And then I see a secret humour edging through his smile.

“What?” I ask.

He widens his eyes in a show of innocence.

“You're thinking something.”

“I'm always thinking something.”

I tilt my head, playful but utterly honest. “If you're going to act like that, it's over before it starts.”

“Promise you won't pour those drinks on me?”

“Don't be ridiculous. I wouldn't waste perfectly good cask ale on you.”

He laughs. “That's why I was thinking it.”

“Thinking what?”

“Ultra-Violet. Because if I'm not careful, you'll burn me.”

In other circumstances this would be an insult, but here and now it seems like a sign of respect. Maybe it's the tone in his voice. Or maybe it's my need to be taken seriously. And to be liked. By him. Ok, yes. The notion settles down all snug inside me.

"Aaron Keeler," he says. "You can make fun of it all you want, as long as I get to hear your voice when you do it."

He smiles at me. I smile back despite myself, a heat coming into my face as I make my way toward Clare and Isobel with their sound advice and common sense.