

## *Parents Weekend*

by Karen Rile

It was Saturday afternoon, midsummer. The all-camp orchestra was in the Performance Barn churning through dress rehearsal for the evening's concert. On the lawn outside, their parents reclined on camping chairs and bright quilts, nibbling grapes and local Vermont cheeses, and wondering aloud if four p.m. were too early to open the wine in their faux-wicker coolers.

Corey Irving, the eighth-grade girls' counselor, was perched on a hillock overlooking this scene, nursing a daydream about the French horn teacher, when she was thrown out of her reverie by a bleating, nasal sound rising up from somewhere among the throng of picnickers.

"Cornelia! Oh, Cor-neeeeel-ee-yah! I need to speak with you at once!"

Corey scanned the crowd, but could not locate the owner of the awful voice, which she knew belonged to Susan Bloom, mother of her most difficult camper. She inched backwards under the cover of a small tree and considered her escape. She had managed to avoid Mrs. Bloom all day by ducking behind pillars and larger people.

"Cornelia!"

Mrs. Bloom's insistence on using Corey's given name, which appeared only on formal documents like her diploma and in

her Gmail address, was plain creepy. It meant she'd been researching Corey, and wanted her to know it. Last month, during move-in, she had peppered Corey with demands—extra cubbies for Miranda's three giant suitcases of clothes; a bottom bunk positioned closest to the sole electric outlet and farthest from the window. The list went on and on, as if Corey's sole responsibility on this earth were to see to Miranda's comfort and best interests. She'd even tried to bribe Corey to coach Miranda, until she found out that Corey's music degree was from a state university. Miranda was now taking supplemental lessons with Eitan Shultz, the violin teaching assistant, a Juilliard grad student. Eitan was a pompous ass and Miranda was a brat. As far as Corey was concerned, that was a match made in heaven.

Now Susan Bloom was back for Parents Weekend, and she was hunting Corey down to rant about everything that had not gone according to her maternal expectations over the first three weeks of camp: the conditions in the cabin (hot, buggy, and messy despite the genuine effort the girls had made to clean up before their parents' arrival), Miranda's orchestra seat (back row of the second violins, a result of her lackluster performance in the placement audition, Eitan's influence notwithstanding), the starchy food (fries at every meal including breakfast—and

Miranda scarfed those up), and everything else that she, Corey, had no control over.

Out on the lawn, you could hear the orchestra starting and stopping, starting and stopping. They were polishing the first movement of a Mozart symphony, No. 7, a simple, exuberant piece written when the composer was about the same age as the kids themselves. On the first day of camp, Maestro Kljucic had made a little speech about it and as he spoke Corey had watched the students' eyes widen, even the most cynical eighth-grader. What a thing, for a kid like them, to have created such music! Corey had felt the awe of it, too.

And yet, she also knew that later this evening the parents would be depressed when they deduced this same fact after reading the composer's dates on the xeroxed program. In the classical music world, prodigious achievement at a young age was amply rewarded. The parents understood that the converse was also true: this was no field for late bloomers. Each of them harbored a fear, complicated by hope, that their child had yet to reveal her full potential. One of the fathers on the lawn now cracked a worn-out joke: *When Mozart was my age, he'd been dead for ten years.* The other parents winced or chuckled nervously in turn.

"Cornelia! Hey, Coreeee! You, up there! On the hill!"

Had she been spotted? Not wasting another second to pinpoint her pursuer among the mob on the lawn, Corey sprang up and fled directly down the grassy slope, eyes straight ahead, deftly bisecting a group of gossiping violin-mothers, putting what she hoped was a swift distance between herself and Mrs. Bloom. She

may not have gone to Juilliard, but she was fast. Breathless, she ducked into Crescendo Hall, where it would be easy to lose herself among the warren of empty practice studios.

Immediately inside, with her pupils still dilated from the bright July sun, Corey stepped blindly into the path of Oliver Hsu, the ten-year-old cello prodigy, who was struggling towards the door with his naked instrument and a fistful of crumpled sheet music.

"Why aren't you at orchestra rehearsal?" she choked out, sick at the thought of the damage she could have done to Oliver's expensive little cello if her timing had been any worse. "And why isn't *that* in its case?"

Oliver shrugged. "I was *practicing*," he said, jutting his small chin, as if that were a perfectly reasonable excuse and the most obvious thing in the world. Oliver's parents, a banker and a math professor, had driven up from New York to watch him play a movement from the Lark Quartet in the first recital of the morning. Corey thought Oliver's quartet had sounded pretty impressive, considering that they were a bunch of fifth-graders using pint-size instruments. But from the looks on their faces, Oliver's parents had not been pleased with the performance.

"I gotta learn the rest of Hungarian Rhapsody for my September auditions," Oliver continued hotly, as if Corey were to blame for his predicament.

His eyeglasses were smudgy, and his hair, which probably hadn't been washed or even combed since his parents had dropped him off in June, gave off a feral smell, reminding Corey of the long-ago hamster cages of her youth. She bent to pick up a loose

page of Brahms from the floor, brushing off Oliver's dusty sneaker print. She pried the clutch of pages from him, straightened the pile, and handed them back. She did not even bother to ask what had become of his official music folder.

He squinted at her in silence.

"Don't trip! Careful, Oliver," she urged him, poor boy. She held the door open, and watched after him as he staggered towards the Performance Barn in his too-long, mud-frayed chinos.

There should be a special circle of hell, Corey decided, for parents like Oliver's, who had isolated him by the garbage cans behind the kitchen after the recital and harangued him about his practicing habits. If he didn't buckle down straight way, then how could he expect to win the soloist competition this fall? How would he pass his Curtis audition? How would he get into Harvard, like his hero, Yo-Yo Ma?

This was Oliver's first time at sleep-away camp, and the thing was, while he had generally been on time for his rehearsals, the boy had not once darkened a practice room door. Instead, he had been spending most of his free time knee-deep in the pond catching frogs and salamanders with Maestro Kljucic's four-year-old daughter and her nanny and a few of the youngest campers.

Individual practicing was benignly encouraged at camp, but it was not required—which was why the children loved it here. This was a place where they could revel in the joy of music-making without the stress of daily arpeggios and scales, or the pressure of working on their solo repertoire. For these few weeks of the year, they were free to be kids. It was also the reason that, as soon as they were old enough, the most serious child-

musicians—or, rather, the ones with the most serious parents—were packed off to disciplinarian “practice” camps, like Meadowmount, where five hours of daily woodshedding was strictly enforced, no exceptions.

It was all very foreign and peculiar for Corey, whose childhood had been so different—so ordinary—that she'd had no idea, until she got to college, what she was missing. Corey had not even realized that sleep-away music camps like this one existed until she got to college and saw the full-color posters advertising counselor and staff positions on the bulletin boards in the hallway of the music building.

When she was growing up, her parents had paid little attention to her musical progress other than to write monthly checks to Mrs. Knopp, the neighborhood violin teacher. There were no Saturday pre-college programs and no high-stakes auditions and competitions to fret over—just twice-yearly recitals in the church basement, for which her father helped set up folding chairs and her mother baked a tray of snickerdoodles. She'd spent her summers reading *Harry Potter*, and selling lemonade on the corner, and looking after her little brother while her parents were at work. When her brother was old enough not to need a babysitter, she worked, answering phones at her parents' insurance agency.

As a girl, Corey had as sense that she was special. She'd been the star of Mrs. Knopp's violin studio and concertmaster of her high school orchestra all four years. She was known around her town, a small suburb of Albany, as a “prodigy”—that was the word the reporter had used in the local paper when she won a

Rotary Club scholarship in tenth grade. The label was ridiculous, of course; even then she had recognized that it was something people said when they understood nothing about music. By junior year of college, she was concertmaster at SUNY/Purchase, Mrs. Knopp's alma mater. There, the other students had admired her. She'd graduated two months ago with honors, at the top of her class and got this job on the recommendation of her studio teacher. In August, when the music camp gig was over she would move back home to her old bedroom in her parents' house for a loosely-organized year of wedding gigs, and teaching violin lessons two days a week in an after-school program. She would also help out in her parents' office, answering phones and filing and dream about applying to grad school. This plan had seemed reasonable to her before she'd arrived here at camp; now, after three weeks in the company of hot-shots and snobs, she understood that it was pitiful. She sometimes wondered what her life would be like if she could enter a time machine and switch places with Oliver Hsu. What if she'd been handed the best of everything—a great instrument, a famous teacher? If she'd been packed off to music camp from the age of ten, like a rich kid.

Beyond the mound of hill between Crescendo and the barn, Corey spotted a flash of orange hair, which meant Mrs. Bloom was still hot on her trail. *Shit*. She hurried down the corridor towards the sound of a French horn running up and down a B-flat arpeggio. It was Pete. Pete Colliverdi, alone in a studio, practicing.

Pete raised his eyebrows at her when she burst in without knocking, but kept playing. She wedged herself into a corner on

the far side of the narrow upright piano, and slid to the ground. Anyone peering through the high square window cut into the practice room door would assume that there was no one inside but him.

Sitting on the filthy carpet in the stifling room, Corey had the strongly unwelcome sensation of bugs crawling up her legs into her shorts. Probably imaginary, but still. She closed her eyes and waited for the terrible moment to pass. Pete kept practicing. Unlike string players, he could not carry on a conversation while playing, a fact that Corey now contemplated with appreciation, because any break in his sound might give her away. Her sanctuary was safe. She watched his broad shoulders straining in the one-size-too-small Peabody Conservatory t-shirt, and the way the muscles in his arms—or were they tendons?—twitched as he pressed the keys of his horn.

Then he stopped.

"She's gone," he announced. "A scary-looking red-head with big sunglasses pushed up on her forehead. Right?"

"Miranda Bloom's mother," Corey answered in a low voice. "She wants to ream me out for all the injustices endured by her little princess."

Pete gave her a look that implied sympathy if not comprehension. He launched back into his practicing. Corey rubbed at a scabbed-over mosquito bite on her ankle. Mrs. Bloom would by now have moved on out of the hallway and gone back to complain about Corey to the other parents. This was Corey's opportunity to slip over to her cabin, Cadenza, for a moment's solitude while the orchestra finished its rehearsal, and before the

turmoil of dinner and the evening's concert. But she lingered a moment to savor the unexpected pleasure of observing Pete at work in these close quarters. She was eye-level with his beautiful square kneecaps, which, along with the rest of his legs, were blemish-free and covered with silky brown hair. An urge bubbled up to touch him. She was not usually so forward, but this was not a usual situation. She scooted forward and began to reach out her hand—then thought the better of it—no, her leg. She gave his bare ankle (he was wearing flip flops) the tiniest nudge with her sneakered toe. Pete kept playing, but he shot her what could have been an ironic look—or an interested look. Could it be that they were having a moment?

A moment, right. What was she even thinking? Pete's eyes were glued to his sheet music. He wanted her to leave, already. Embarrassed, she stood up, brushed the dirt from the back of her legs, and without another glance in his direction, she headed to Cadenza to take a shower.

Life was easier for Pete here at camp than it was for Corey. He was six years older than she was, better paid, and more respected. And yet he had less responsibility. And what responsibility he did have was uncomplicated by teen girl melodrama. Unlike most of the younger staff, who were students or hand-to-mouth freelancers the rest of the year, Pete had a real job: he was an assistant professor in the music department of a small Lutheran college in the Midwest. Here at camp, he was a member of the teaching faculty, not a lowly counselor. He had his own freestanding cabin with a private bathroom, so he didn't have to worry about adolescent bunkhouse politics. And most

important, he did not have to deal with the string players. Brass students never become hysterical about their orchestra seating, and the parents of brass students don't chase down counselors to scream at them. The brass kids at the camp were mostly laid-back junior high school boys who shot lazy hoops during their free time, plus one girl, a 14-year-old French horn player named Jody Kline, tall and even-keeled, a budding band-geek, who dressed in oversized boy t-shirts and Chuck Taylors and played basketball with the guys.

Jody was one of Corey's charges. She slept in the seventh bed in Cadenza, the only bed that wasn't a part of a bunk, the bed by the door. It wasn't because she had been the last girl to show up; she'd arrived early and had deliberately chosen that bed as if she'd known she would be the outlier and wanted as much distance from the others as possible. The other girls in the cabin, Miranda Bloom being ringleader, generally behaved as if Jody did not exist. And, it was true, Jody was simply not of their world. The other girls were string players, all six of them: three violins, two cellos, a viola. They wore eyeliner and sundresses from Forever 21; they had crushes on the pot-washers—a trio of college boys who helped out in the kitchen. The cutest pot-washer, a moody sophomore bassoonist from Oberlin named Damian, had been elevated by Miranda to the status of teen idol.

After lights-out Corey would listen to them through the thin wall that separated her small room from theirs. She could pick out their breathy individual voices, if not every distinct word. *Damian, blah blah, Damian.* Always the rise and fall of Miranda's nasal exclamations, then the pause, and the laughter that followed.

After a time there would be a small protesting voice from whichever of the weaker girls was being picked on at the moment—usually chubby Ashlyn Huang, the violist, an easy target, or frizzy-haired Harriet Albert, a tiny, skinny girl with a lisp and braces, a talented and hardworking violinist who was concertmaster of the orchestra, and therefore the innocent bullseye for much of Miranda Bloom's enmity—and then there would be more laughter, thinner and less genuine, but never a sound from Jody.

A few hours later, Corey would crack open her door and gaze over their moonlit, sleeping bodies. It was a cliché to think so, but in sleep the slack faces of these over-sophisticated thirteen-year-olds did look angelic, all except for Jody, whose face held the tension of pretense. Corey never let on that she knew Jody was still awake when she abandoned her watch and headed up the woodland trail for the Big House. There, the younger staff gathered each night around the enormous stone fireplace until the wee hours. Corey assumed that Maestro Kljucic, who stayed in a separate house off-campus with his family, was unaware of these gatherings, so the illicit act of creeping away from Cadenza each night was a recurring thrill, even though nothing remotely scandal-worthy occurred. Lizbeth, the cook, and her pot-washers would sometimes whip up an impromptu midnight snack, but more often than not it was just a few hours of drinking, flirting, gossip, and board games. Playing checkers with pouty Damian, whose long bangs were perpetually falling across his forehead, Corey was half-tempted to inform him of his exalted status as teen idol of Cadenza cabin. But she stopped herself; why feed his ego?

Besides, information was currency, and she herself had so little. Best not to spend it all in one place.

Pete attended some of the midnight gatherings and Corey kept a discreet eye on him when he showed up, which was about half the time, she observed. It was rumored he had a fiancé named Janine back in Iowa, and that were on-again-off again. They'd broken up for a while this spring, but were back together again. There was no wifi on campus, so Corey had sneaked onto the office computer to stalk Janine on Facebook: there she was, slender, with glowing olive skin, long dark hair, and cats-eye hipster glasses, posing with Pete in front of a coffee shop somewhere in Iowa. According to LinkedIn, she was working on a Ph.D. in a field so baffling that Corey could not even remember what it was called—something like Botanical Rhetoric or Boolean Logic.

One night, on her way to the Big House, Corey had seen Pete's moonlit silhouette at the top of Forbidden Rock, the only place on campus you could get a cell signal, and only on cloudless nights. But if he were speaking to Janine, the conversation had already ended. His arms were loose at his sides. He was staring into the sky. For a instant, Corey considered calling out to him, or even heading up the trail in his direction. But she'd second-guessed herself: a man did not climb Forbidden Rock and display his moonlit profile to attract the company of a low-on-the-totem-pole, second-rate-conservatory-graduate counselor. A man climbed the Rock to be alone.

Maybe that's why she was so attracted to Pete. Like her, he was an outsider. He was reserved, although not ungenerous with

his laughter when someone told a dumb joke. He was decent looking, but he wasn't super-sexy like Raul, the cello teacher from Brazil who maintained a perpetual five o'clock shadow on his cleft chin. He was confident, but not competitive like Benji, the under-eleven boy's counselor, a senior at Mannes, who had been a camper here for four years as a boy and reveled in his new position as a peer of his old counselors. He was never sarcastic like Eitan, whose humor was so biting that Corey found herself shrinking away from his line of vision, lest she somehow become included among the objects of his scorn. Whenever they were in a group, at some point, Eitan's gaze would light on her and she would feel him sizing her up, like a hawk considering a very scrawny rabbit. Inevitably he passed her over for one of the older, more accomplished staff. The relief was also an insult: she was not worthy prey. Most evenings Corey left the gathering without excusing herself or attracting attention from any of them—not Eitan, not anyone. Not even, or especially, Pete.

In the rigidly hierarchical world of classical music, Corey Irving, ersatz hometown prodigy, was accomplished enough to be admitted to the circle here at camp, but only *just*. And what else did she have going for her? She was smart, but not brilliant (like Janine). She was blonde, which usually counted for something, she'd found, but she was not beautiful, not the type of girl who would ever be called "hot". Her best asset, it turned out, was her ability to be invisible. She was someone who could slip in and out and not be noticed.

Cadenza Cabin was empty, predictably, when Corey arrived. She could hear the orchestra in the distance—they would go on for another half-hour, at least, with Ključic pausing every few measures for a jovial lecture, grandstanding for the benefit of the handful of parents who had crept into the darkened house to observe the dress rehearsal. Next, the laborious putting-away of instruments, and the campers' trek to the mess hall, where Corey was required to monitor them (no food fights on Parents' Weekend!) Until then the cabin was all hers.

She burst through the door, yanking off her t-shirt and bra in one fluid motion without breaking stride in her direction towards the shower.

"Cornelia! At last, I've caught up with you!"

Corey gasped at the sight of Miranda's mother reflected in the bathroom mirror like a stalker in a horror film. Instinctively, she pulled the disgustingly mildewed plastic shower curtain around her body, toga-style.

"Sorry to startle," said Mrs. Bloom casually, as if "startle" were an intransitive verb—as if she were not perpetrator and Corey not victim. As if they were having a perfectly normal encounter in some fitness club locker room on the Upper East Side. "I assumed you heard me behind you. Anyway, continue with your shower. We'll have time to chat when you're done. I'll wait in the girls' room—I bought a new duvet and sheets for Miranda's bed."

Corey considered her options: the only way out was through the girls' bunk room, unless she was brave enough to

climb half-naked through the tiny shower stall window into a thicket of what was probably poison ivy.

She decided to take a shower.

“Do I smell Herbal Essence?” trilled Mrs. Bloom above the thunder of the water. “Miranda loves the lotus fragrance, but of course I don’t let her use it. Because, you know, the *sulfates*. We use an organic salon product. Let me know if you want the name.”

Corey closed her eyes, rinsing out her cheap store-brand hair conditioner. There was no putting off the inevitable. She screwed shut the tap and grabbed her towel from the hook to wrap herself in. After a second’s hesitation she snagged a second towel—making sure it was not Miranda’s—for her wet hair. A towel-turban would, she hoped, promote the psychological illusion of a substantial height advantage. Like Marie Antoinette’s powdered wig.

Mrs. Bloom was standing beside Miranda’s bunk, sweating lightly from the effort of stripping and re-making her daughter’s bed. She admired her handiwork. The new sheets and matching bedspread were decorated with looked like a gigantic piano score.

“It’s the Moonlight Sonata. Adorable, right? Think she’ll like it?” she asked, as if she were truly interested in Corey’s opinion.

“Sheet music. Clever,” Corey said diplomatically, certain that Miranda would be mortified and would turn the sheets inside out the moment her mother went home to Manhattan.

“I suppose you know what I’m here to talk about,” said Mrs. Bloom, suddenly all business. She began stuffing Miranda’s old bedding into a large plastic shopping bag.

“Not really, no. But if it’s about your daughter’s orchestra seating, I don’t have anything to do with those decisions—”

Mrs. Bloom looked up at her with an expression so sharp that Corey felt herself cut off mid-sentence. After a dramatic pause, she said,

“It’s the sneaking out. At night.”

This was not the conversation Corey had been expecting. She clutched her bath towel tighter around her body and sat down abruptly on Jody’s bed, which was harder than she’d anticipated because, unlike the others, Jody had not brought along a thick memory foam mattress cover. The Marie-Antoinette-head-towel came unfastened and tumbled down her shoulders.

“I was going to bring the matter directly to Maestro. But Miranda has pleaded with me not to,” said Mrs. Bloom. Like many of the parents, she referred to Ključić by his title only, to avoid stumbling over his difficult name. The effect, to Corey’s ear, was weirdly infantilizing.

“Maestro *Klew-chich*.” Corey said automatically, with precise enunciation. Fourteen years studying classical violin repertoire had her a thing or two about Eastern European surnames.

Mrs. Bloom did not weather the correction gracefully.

“I can tell by the expression on your face,” she said angrily, “that you know exactly what I mean.”

“It’s nothing,” began Corey. Her mouth dry and her mind racing. “I mean, it’s a tradition. Everyone does it.”

Mrs. Bloom pursed her lips. “These are children. They are *minors*. I could have this camp shut down.”



A flood of shame overcame Corey, even though a small voice inside her head insisted, *but I was only a few hundred yards away*. There was no getting around it. She'd been wrong to abandon her duty, even if the rest of the staff had done the same. She imagined her own mother's voice: *If everyone jumps off a cliff, does that make it a good idea?* Mrs. Bloom had a point: the sleeping (or apparently not) girls could have been eaten by coyotes or raped. That is, if they even had coyotes or rapists in Vermont.

"I know," muttered Corey.

"My daughter's safety is my number one priority," said Mrs. Bloom. "As it should be yours while she is in your care."

"Of course. Yes. It won't happen again."

"Which is why I need you to report the girl to Maestro," said Mrs. Bloom. "The complaint cannot be traced back to Miranda. She's terrified of backlash. Which is understandable—you know how cruel girls can be at this age. And Miranda is so sensitive."

"Okay," said Corey slowly, wondering which girl Mrs. Bloom was talking about and what she was agreeing to. Also: Miranda Bloom, the sensitive victim of teen girl-cruelty? What universe was this? She decided to answer Mrs. Bloom as vaguely as possible to cover her bases: "Well, I will certainly keep a closer eye on the situation!"

"You know I'm *very* liberal," continued Mrs. Bloom. "Our entire family is—big time! Don't get the wrong idea. But this camp should be a—a sanctuary. For music. Miranda's violin teacher at home, Mr. White—do you know him? He's very big in The City. His students go on to places like Juilliard. The New

England Conservatory, even—" Mrs. Bloom waved her hands in circles. "—Curtis."

"Oh, I wouldn't know him," Corey answered blandly. "I'm from Albany."

"Of course you are, Cornelia," said Mrs. Bloom, as if Corey had just reminded her that she was a bug. "All you need to know is that Mr. White is highly respected. He's the one who recommended this summer program for Miranda in the first place. It was *his* idea. He attended as a boy and he is on the advisory board. He would be horrified, horrified. This is not what any of us expected."

"Listen, Mrs. Bloom? I apologize, but I think maybe you and I aren't both on the same page," said Corey. "To be honest, I'm not even sure what exactly you're referring to?" Corey instantly wished back the question mark at the end of her sentence. Mrs. Bloom was used to pushing people around, and now that Corey was cornered, the only course of action was to push back. "I don't know what illiberal or liberal thing you're talking about," she concluded firmly.

Mrs. Bloom drew herself up to her full height, which included several inches of persimmon-colored hair.

"Oh, you're not so innocent," she hissed, leaning in. Her breath smelled like peppermint. "Don't give me that. And don't think you can protect her. For whatever misguided reason you might have."

Corey shrank away, clutching her towel around her body. Not for the first time in her life she felt that she had been dropped into the middle of a game without a rulebook or nearly as much

information as the other players. It seemed suddenly urgent for her to protect whomever she was being shamed for protecting. But which girl? Not poor Ashlyn, certainly not Harriet. Dani, Chloé, Maya—unlikely. They were city girls, too afraid of spiders and field mice to sneak out of the cabin at night. Jody? Had Jody been sneaking out to some kind of assignation while Corey was with the other counselors in the Big House?

Just then there was surge of voices on the path outside. The screen door banged open and six girls filed in to the cabin: Harriet, Chloé, Maya, Ashlyn, Dani, and Miranda, who was at the rear of the pack hollering something Corey couldn't make out, to which the others were shrieking with laughter. On seeing Mrs. Bloom and Corey, Harriet stopped short, causing the rest to bump into each other like cops in a slapstick movie. Corey had forgotten that, because this was the parent-concert night, the girls would return to the cabin to change into their concert whites.

"Mom, what are you *doing* here?" cried Miranda. The others looked on, wide-eyed.

Then Miranda turned to Corey. "Klujic was looking for you after rehearsal," she said importantly.

"Really? What did he want?" said Corey.

Miranda shrugged.

Did Klujic even know Corey's name? He had hardly given her so much as a nod since she'd introduced herself to him at the staff orientation picnic weeks ago.

Maya, one of the cellists, walked around to the other side of Jody's bed and picked up the damp Marie Antoinette turban from where it had fallen to the floor.

"Why's my towel on the floor? And it's wet," she said unhappily. In the Vermont humidity, it would take a good 24 hours for that towel to dry.

"I'm so sorry, Maya. I thought it was mine," Corey said, standing up. Everyone stared at the damp spot where she'd been sitting on Jody's bed. Everyone, that is, except Jody, who was missing.

"Where's Jody?" Corey asked.

The girls were silent; then Miranda shrugged again.

"Where is she ever?"

Miranda and her mother exchanged a look, then Mrs. Bloom turned around and marched out of the cabin.

"Whoa," said Harriet. "Lookit these sheets!" (but with her lisp it came out "theeth theeths".) Everyone's attention turned to the Moonlight Sonata spread across Miranda's bed.

"*Theeth Theeths*," mocked Miranda, skillfully redirecting the unwanted spotlight away from the ridiculous sheets and onto the weaker girl.

"Theeth theeth!" The pack of girls guffawed, even Harriet, who held her hand over her mouth, to hide her braces, while she laughed.

Corey left the room and dressed quickly in her own concert whites: a long cotton skirt and a slightly frayed satin-trimmed t-shirt from her college orchestra days. One of the more annoying traditions at the camp was that everyone wore white and went barefoot during concerts—faculty and staff included. Which made sense, Corey agreed, for the few of them who were needed onstage—those who were brought in as ringers to double the parts

of instruments, like the brass and bassoon, where it was difficult to recruit competent middle-school age players. But it seemed a little ridiculous, counter-productive, even, when the rest of the staff, who served as ushers and kid-wranglers, appeared almost indistinguishable from the students in the dark. At twenty-two, without make-up and heels, Corey could pass for a high school girl in broad daylight, anyway. She looked about the same age as her campers, who (with the help of liquid eyeliner and mascara) also passed for high school girls.

She spent the next ten minutes cajoling the girls to get ready in time for the dinner bell, which meant assisting Maya and Chloé with their eyeliner and French-braiding Ashlyn's slippery hair.

"Do you want to borrow one of my white tops?" Miranda asked solicitously. She was still a few inches shorter than Corey, although they were about the same shirt size.

"No, thank you," said Corey.

"No, really. I have a lot. My mom went to Free People and practically bought the whole store."

Corey ignored her. Already, Maya, Ashlyn, and Harriet had been costumed straight from Miranda's trunk, like a lineup of puppets. What would have been a saucy mini-skirt on Miranda's curvy hips hung straight to Harriet's knees. Poor chubby Ashlyn had barely been able to fasten her button-down-the-back lacey vest.

"Ashlyn, this braid isn't working—I'm all thumbs today," said Corey. "How about we just do a half-bun and leave it long in the back?" Which would cover up the bursting buttons.

Ashlyn nodded gratefully. As long as she didn't inhale deeply, or move around much on stage, she would probably be fine.

In line for dinner, Corey found herself suddenly just in front of Maestro Klujic, who generally took weekend meals with his family at one of the restaurants in town. But, on concert nights he ate at the staff table. Corey assumed this was a strategy to avoid being accosted by parents, who were not allowed into the mess hall.

She wondered if she should say something. It would be prudent, she realized, to simply keep her back to him and hope he mistook her for one of the kids. But curiosity got the better of her.

"Maestro," she said, bravely. "I was told you were looking for me."

Klujic fixed his gaze on her. She could feel herself coming into focus before his eyes, which were an unnaturally brilliant shade of blue. He was still in his forties, younger than Corey's parents, but he was overweight, and his Brahms-like shaggy white hair and yellowish beard (he was a smoker) lent him an air of gravitas.

"Cornelia Irving?" she added nervously after a second or two. "I'm one of the counselors?"

The line ahead of them had moved on, and Lizbeth, who was standing behind the sneeze guard in her cook's hat and apron wielding a spatula, cleared her throat loudly. Corey moved up to the counter and helped herself to a wan-looking veggie burger and some salad—or, at least she struggled with the ineffectual salad

tongs for an awkward moment, then gave up, scooping up few spinach leaves and some chickpeas, which rolled around like marbles on her plate. Beside her, Kljubic was reaching for a hamburger, then another, then fries.

“Yes,” he said softly. “We need to talk about Oliver Hsu. But not here.”

Corey lowered her voice to match Kljubic’s. Like him, she kept her eyes trained on her tray. As if they were characters in some kind of unlikely spy thriller involving 10-year-old cellists.

“I’m actually not Oliver’s counselor,” she whispered. “That would be Benji Loftus.” She tilted her head in the direction of the staff table, where they were headed anyway.

“We’ll speak by the back door to the kitchen. In 15 minutes,” said Kljubic. “You and I.”

Then Kljubic sat down heavily beside Corey at the staff table, where his celebrity presence seemed to incite everyone to behave like caricatures of themselves. Benji reminisced self-importantly about Parents’ Weekend concerts during his own bygone years as a camper, name-dropping his old bunkmates who’d gone on to achieve fame or infamy (one had since triumphed at the Menuhin Competition; another was a now backup fiddler for Taylor Swift). Raul stroked the sexy cleft in his sexy chin and stared up dreamily at the ceiling fan. Eitan bantered sarcastically about the intonation foibles of Joshua Bell and Itzhak Perlman. Lizbeth, who had joined them at the table, sans hat but still wearing her chef’s apron, held forth tediously about the virtues of garlic scapes and kale pesto. The chatter rose in volume;

everyone was talking over everyone else. Only Corey and Kljubic were silent. She could feel him looking at her profile.

Finally, she stood quietly to clear her place. As usual, the rest of them kept up their talking while she backed away from the table, unnoticed, then slid her tray onto the conveyor belt.

It was still hours until dark, but already the tree frogs were singing. Corey could hear the distant hum of parental conversation—those who had not driven to town for restaurant dinners were still picnicking on the lawn on the south side of the Performance Barn—as she made her way around the side of the mess hall to the kitchen back door.

Kljubic was already waiting for her. He must have made a shortcut through the kitchen. It occurred to her, taking the whole of him in at once, that he was also wearing concert white. The two of them made a matched set. He wore white tennis shorts from which his thin legs protruded, slightly bowed, all the way to his hairy Birkenstocked toes. His ample belly was covered by his long white Nehru-collared shirt.

“Cornelia,” he said, fixing her in his blue-eyed stare, “The Hsus are upset, of course, but we are doing our best to placate them. And you will be relieved to know that the bow is fully insured.”

Corey waited for more, but Kljubic didn’t continue. “What bow?” she said. “You mean Oliver’s?”

“Naturally, there is a deductible, a few hundred dollars, and the camp will cover that. We stand behind our staff. But it will be difficult for the Hsus to find a replacement. A half-size cello

bow of that quality is very rare, you know. They purchased that one in Paris.” Then, uncharacteristically, Kljucic rolled his eyes. “For the little prodigy.”

Corey stood quietly. Something had happened to Oliver’s cello bow—what? And, evidently, the party line was that whatever had happened to it was Corey’s fault. Her heart began to pound. She cast her mind back to her near-collision with Oliver earlier that afternoon. Had he even been holding his bow? He must have had it with him; it wouldn’t have made sense for him not to—right? But she could not remember seeing it.

She opened her mouth to protest, but something held her back.

“There is a lot of pressure on these children,” said Kljucic.

“Right,” said Corey cautiously.

“Oliver seems to be spending most of his free time with my youngest daughter Natalja, in the frog pond.” Kljucic fingered his beard.

“Right, I know,” said Corey. “But I didn’t—I don’t remember. I mean, nothing happened—”

“Good thing. He could have broken a finger. Or something worse.”

Something worse. Corey’s mind flashed to a vision of Oliver staggering to the Performance Barn with his cello. Of course: he’d broken his bow on purpose, out of anger, or frustration, or the simple childish desire to get out of practicing. It must have happened moments before she ran into him in the hallway. And Kljucic seemed to be asking Corey to take the blame.

He was all but telling her that it would cost her nothing to help him protect Oliver from his own parents.

“Oliver will need to sit out tonight’s concert until we can wrassle up a loaner. Maybe one can be FedExed up from New York next week. It will mean a few days off for him.”

“That would be good,” said Corey. “Thank you,” she added, a little uncertainly. For what was she thanking him, for framing her as the klutz who broke a little kid’s priceless bow? Maybe for elevating her to the status of his co-conspirator.

Kljucic reached up and patted her on the shoulder. Her first instinct was to pull away, but she held steady. His palm, on her bare skin, was moist and warm and the sensation of it lingered as he picked his way down the grassy bank towards the Performance Barn, where other counselors would be readying the hall, setting up extra rows of chairs for the parents.

Tonight Corey’s pre-concert assignment was to traffic-cop the kids safely through Portamento Hall, the large shed where all instruments were stored, and into the Barn in time for their 6:40 call. The job was more stressful than it sounded because, in spite of their precociously overdeveloped fine-motor skills, these kids were frankly clumsy. They were at the age when they were growing so fast that they never really knew where their own limbs were. It was a dangerous mix: poor large-muscle coordination combined with pre-concert adrenalin and burgeoning hormones. Corey and whoever else was on duty (tonight, unfortunately, it was Eitan) were constantly righting about-to-topple cellos, redirecting flailing bows, and admonishing kids to slow down,

look where they were going, and for god's sake watch out for each other's instruments.

Corey found Oliver in the cello room, in the midst of all the hubbub, standing still in front of his cubby. He was gazing at his unopened cello case.

"Come on, buddy," she said gently. "From what I'm told you won't be needing that tonight." She placed her hand gently on his shoulder to urge him towards the door. "You can go sit in the audience section with your parents."

"I'm not 'buddy'," said Oliver, shaking away her hand. "That's a dog's name."

"Sorry, Oliver," said Corey. "I have a little brother and I call him that sometimes. My dog's name is Martin. I kind of always thought of 'Oliver' as a cat's name," she added, touching his shoulder again lightly. "You know, like the Disney movie."

Oliver did not react.

"Do you want to tell me what really happened to your bow?" Corey bent down, eye-level with the boy, but he would not look at her. "Was it on purpose, or was it an accident? Why did you do it?"

"It's all your fault," said Oliver. "If you hadn't bumped into me and broke it, I would still be playing tonight. Now my camp is ruined. And I'll probably fail my auditions in September. It was a really good bow. My dad paid \$12,000 for it."

"Well, that sounds very expensive," said Corey, boiling a little inside. She was more than twice Oliver's age, a conservatory graduate, and her violin was worth a good deal less than this child's bow. "But Maestro Kljucic told me the bow was insured.

He says he can get you a loaner until your parents replace your bow."

"Not if it was the only one in the world. It was, like, 200 years old. My dad says it's 'one of a kind'. I'll bet you don't even have a bow that good."

"You're right, Oliver. I have a pretty ordinary bow."

"My dad said you won't even get into trouble. And you probably ruined my career."

"Your career? Oh Oliver, that's so dramatic. You're ten years old."

"Yo-Yo Ma made his debut when he was *eight*!" said Oliver. "You know that when he was my age he was practically famous! You know that." Now he was shouting.

"Oliver," Corey touched him lightly on the shoulder and said his name softly into his ear, a trick she had figured out for dealing with her little brother when he had a tantrum. "Oliver, it's okay. You have plenty of time. Most of the kids here are a lot older than you—"

"—but they suck at music. Everyone sucks here. This whole camp sucks. My dad says it's not even second-rate. It's for morons. As soon as I'm old enough I'm going to Meadowmount. Like Yo-Yo Ma."

"Maybe you will," said Corey as evenly as she could manage. "But meanwhile you're here, right now. And you can still enjoy yourself. You had fun in the pond today with Natalja. Didn't you catch some salamanders?"

Oliver jutted his chin. "They aren't salamanders. They're *newts*. Red-spotted newts."

“You had fun, though, right?”

“Did you even know that they’re poisonous? Not the adults ones in the pond, the juveniles. They’re called ‘efts’, and they’re bright red, and they secrete toxic chemicals so their predators won’t destroy them. When they grow up, they darken up all except a few red spots, and they go back into the water for the rest of their lives. The red spots are a warning for fish not to eat them. Because they’re poison.”

“That sounds dangerous,” said Corey, humoring him. “But you caught them anyway.”

Oliver squinted at her. “We didn’t eat them, stupid.”

“Number one,” said Corey, “don’t call me ‘stupid’. And number two: don’t make up any more lies about me. I’m going to let this one go. I got your back this once, but don’t you ever do that again. To me or anyone else. It’s a stupid way to solve your problems.”

“You just said, don’t call people ‘stupid’,” grumbled Oliver. “Stupid.” He shoved his cello case back into the cubby and stomped towards the door.

Portamento Hall had emptied out. Somehow, Eitan had managed to shepherd all the kids to the Performance Barn on his own—without even a snide comment about Corey’s slacking. Probably because he’d seen that she was having a serious talk with Oliver. Or had overheard the boy shouting about Yo-Yo Ma. Gossip traveled like lightning through the small camp community. Now that everyone believed Corey had wrecked Oliver’s \$20,000

bow, the girl who could slip in and out without being noticed was suddenly notorious.

Corey walked barefoot along the sun-warmed flagstone path, following the sounds of the crowd to the Performance Barn. Inside, she scanned the auditorium for an empty seat. Seeing none that she could access without squeezing past the knees of dozens of camcorder-wielding parents, she climbed up the rickety steps to the hayloft, where a few of the pot-washers and other younger staff perched high above the crowd, their bare legs dangling between the balusters.

The view was excellent from the narrow loft. Corey took an empty spot on the splintery floor between Benji and Eitan. She hitched up her long skirt, modestly tucking the loose fabric between her knees so no one on the floor would have a view of her underwear.

“Good thing you’re not wearing a miniskirt,” Eitan whispered in her ear. She could feel his cracked lips grazing the edges of her hair. Corey leaned away but thanked him for taking care of the kid-wrangling.

“So you owe me one,” he said.

The concert was about to start. By now, everyone was seated noisily onstage except Harriet Albert, the concertmaster whose chair remained conspicuously, ceremoniously empty. A handful of the more serious-minded children were diligently scrubbing away at their orchestra parts. The rest chattered, or showed off flashy virtuosic passages from half-learned concertos. From the very last row of the violins, Miranda was poking Dani in the butt with her bow. Dani whipped around to give Miranda the

finger, causing Miranda's violin, which was dangling by its scroll from her stand, to swing precariously. The two convulsed with laughter at the hilarity of the near-disaster while their stand partners, a couple of younger boys from Benji's bunk, observed their behavior with a mix of shock and admiration.

Corey could see Oliver staring up at her from where he sat in the front row between his parents, who were dressed in smart dark blue linen outfits and pointy shoes. Both had excellent New York haircuts. The other parents—well-to-do, and from posh suburbs—looked like frumps by comparison. When Corey waved to him, Oliver turned his head away, fixing his gaze on the orchestra cello section. Until this afternoon he'd been principal cellist, a notable distinction, considering that he was the youngest boy in the camp. Oliver's exalted chair, of course, was not empty: Klujic had simply moved everyone behind him up. Now Maya (of the wet Marie Antoinette towel) was in Oliver's place, clearly thrilled to find herself in a position of glory with her proud parents videotaping from the audience. On YouTube, for all the world, forever, the principal cello seat of the all-camp orchestra would be hers. It was as if Oliver had never been in the orchestra at all. The gap had healed over instantly, leaving no scar. With nine other cellos in the section, the orchestra would sound about the same, plus or minus one boy and his half-size instrument.

That was the crux of it: there was always someone breathing down your neck. Someone ready to overtake you, or to take your place. It would make no difference whether you were eaten alive, or fell off the edge of the planet, or survived. This was true in orchestra, and life. All of the children understood, but some

felt it more deeply than others. It occurred to Corey that there was an inverse correlation between how luxuriously your talent had been cultivated and how precarious your situation felt. At her own conservatory, Freshman year—yes, just a state school, but one of the better state schools—the top violinist, a Russian boy, had thrown himself under a moving train during winter break of sophomore year. The incident was horrible for everyone, naturally; no one could fathom why he'd done it, *everything to live for* and all that. When they returned to school in January, Corey had taken his place as concertmaster. The orchestra sounded the same as it always did.

Corey watched Oliver lean into his mother's shoulder. His mother covered his small hand with her own, a tender gesture. No doubt Oliver's parents loved him, even if they had a funny way of showing it. (The Russian boy's devastated parents had started a scholarship fund in his name.) When Corey was a child, no one had ever tried to convince her that she was in competition with the specter of the *enfant* Mozart or the legacy of the pre-teen Joshua Bell. No one had even suggested that she was concertmaster material. She was like Miranda that way, lucky enough just to be included. Lucky, with so much less at stake, to have enjoyed a childhood oblivious to existential dread. Really, she just liked to make music. Beyond that, she would go where the river of life took her.

The cacophony paused as Harriet Albert—lispng, self-deprecating, hardworking-little-grunt Harriet—appeared from the back, wending her way through the low brass, the basses, and winds, towards the front of the stage. Harriet's head was high, and



her back straight. Her long crinkly hair, pulled off her face with single thin braid, gave her a the look of Pre-Raphaelite fairy. She was, unexpectedly, radiant. She held her instrument in front of her, like the crown jewel. (In reality, it was nothing special, a German factory-made 7/8-size violin, that Miranda, who owned a Vuillaume, had once mocked.) The children, whose hands were occupied with their instruments, drummed their bare feet on the wooden stage as their parents began to applaud. Even Mrs. Bloom, whose persimmon-colored hair made her easy for Corey to spot in the crowd, joined in the clapping.

Harriet reached the front of the stage, her borrowed, too-large skirt floating gracefully at her hips. She bowed deeply and the room hushed as she turned to face the orchestra. She nodded to the oboe, who played an A, and the wind instruments tuned: the woodwinds, then the brass. The oboist then handed off a second A to Harriet, who tuned the strings, then took her seat.

Now appeared Kljucic, and the thundering resumed. He had changed out of his tennis shorts into long white pants. He had also doffed his Birkenstocks. Barefoot, his long white hair and enormous yellow beard electric beneath the spotlight, he raised his baton and the orchestra launched head-over-heels into the first piece on the program, *Alla Hornpipe* from Handel's Water Music—a camp tradition.

Corey's heart swelled: what youth orchestra *didn't* play *Alla Hornpipe*, this cheerful, familiar music, and often, and often badly? But the 'badly' didn't matter: the music was something to inhabit unselfconsciously, a way of adding your voice to the

chorus of the universe. This music, it was the soundtrack of their lives.

The piece began in unison, the entire orchestra trilling together in the ascending melody. Then Jody and Pete played the horns solo together. They were so shockingly in tune with each other that Corey gasped—she was used to bracing herself for the entrance of the off-key French horns when a youth orchestra performed this piece. Jody and Pete kept their eyes locked on Kljucic, and Kljucic, with his arms above his head, his white Nehru shirt already transparent with sweat, smiled down on them like an ecstatic white-haired god.

Later that night—after the Mozart, after the Shostakovich, after the speeches, after the parents had at last found their way to the moonwashed parking lot with the help of keychain flashlights and glowing cellphones, after curfew, after lights-out, after all the giggling and the murmuring *Damian blah blah Damian* had finally ceased—Corey would pause, as she always did, to study their sleeping/not-sleeping faces, before slipping away in the direction of the Big House, with its glowing plate glass window and promise of camaraderie.

But this time she would turn away from the Big House. Instead she'd linger, silent and still in the twice-dark shadows, watching the girls creep out of the cabin, one by one. Miranda, Chloé, Maya, Ashlyn, Dani, and, Harriet. And also Jody. Jody wasn't off on her own, after all; she was with them.

Single-file, the seven girls headed up the moonlit woodland trail with Corey following them at a stealthy distance.

Jody said something that made the other girls laughed; Miranda punched her lightly on the arm, and they kept walking. They were on their way to the basketball court where the eighth grade boys and the youngest pot-washers (yes, Damian, too) were waiting. Was it alcohol, Corey worried. Should she alert someone? Was it sex, was it pot?

But the children were singing. They were in a circle, now, holding hands. They were singing a round:

*By the waters, the waters of Babylon  
We lay down and wept, and wept, for thee Zion  
We remember thee, remember thee, remember thee Zion*

Corey's voice ached to join them, but she held back from her invisible place in the shadows. She thought of little Oliver, by now fast asleep in bunk, his arms around a one-eyed teddy bear and his thumb tucked into his mouth. This time next year he'd be at Meadowmount, playing a bigger cello with an even-better bow. Miranda, who one would think might quit the violin, would become unaccountably serious, throwing herself into the study of music with a passion that would cause her voracious mother to ditch Mr. White for a step-up teacher. Harriet would at last reach puberty, discover boys and field hockey, and coast along for a few years (she would eventually get into Juilliard, but so would Miranda.) Pete would break up with Janine for good and marry someone else and stay in Iowa. Oliver would develop tendinitis at fifteen, quit cello, and grow up to be a cardiologist, simultaneously pleasing his parents and breaking their hearts. Eitan would

graduate from Juilliard, and move to Berlin, and then San Francisco. For years he would message Corey every few months for no good reason, until, when they were thirty-five and both divorced, and smarter, and better-dressed, and less ridiculous in every way, they would meet by chance at a party in Bay Ridge and pick up where they'd left off tonight, as if they were still young. Because (as they would know by then) thirty-five *is* still young. As for the others, some would die; some would get into drugs; some would turn out to be ordinary. Most of them would simply continue.

Corey halted her reverie there; it was too painful to go on. One of the girls had lit a candle (serious contraband), which glowed like a stronger version of the fireflies that twinkled, like their sweet young voices, beneath the pinprick stars.

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