

Applause. The pianist stood abruptly and circled around the piano, folding her hands in front of her, glancing at the boy center stage. The boy lowered his violin. As he had plodded through the movement, the corners of his mouth drooped lower and lower, his brow not far behind. By the time he scraped the bow over the strings for a final, aching wail, he was scowling.

Victoria's arms jerked at the noise, about to join in clapping. She let them drop – she was the only one in the wing. Leaning her head against the black wall that separated her from the audience, she squinted across the stage – it was hard to see clearly through the sharp light, which cut through the darkness of the theater. Dr. Czerny was in the other wing, along with the last of the underclassmen soloist. Czerny's arms were folded across his chest. He was scowling, too. Probably in nervousness. The boy was slowing things down.

Stepping forward with the pianist at last, the boy on stage tucked his violin under his arm and bowed slightly, grinning through his grimace. He'd played better in rehearsal that morning – he was just nervous. He was a couple years younger than herself (it was really unfair of her to call him “the boy” – he was probably sixteen), but he had only started playing in fourth grade. (Victoria has been taking lessons for four years before he started.) In past recitals, Czerny just threw him in different quartets. This was his first solo.

The applause petered out, but the boy paused, stiff, not walking offstage, even as the pianist sat down again and flipped through her music. His head oscillated (that was the only way to describe it) and Victoria could make out his eyes fluttering back and forth across the room. He sucked in his lips. He must've spotted what he was looking for. Victoria followed his stare to the second row, where the boy's mother was scowling tremendously.

In sixth grade, the boy's lesson was slotted right before her own. Victoria's mother dropped her off some fifteen minutes early. She had an appointment with an important man (from France), and this was the only time it could work. And Dad, of course, was teaching. Victoria didn't complain. It didn't happen often then.

Wheeling her cello case through the door was difficult. She tried to push the door open with her leg and shove the case over the steep threshold. She spotted a woman in the lobby – the boy's mother – who peeked up from her book at the commotion. Her frown deepened a bit, and she continued reading. Victoria manhandled the case through the doorway and shouldered herself through before it closed on her. The woman turned the page.

She leaned the case next to the door leading to Czerny's studio and plopped down on the couch opposite the woman. Swinging her legs and beating her heels against the couch, keeping beat to the song she only heard, Victoria tracked the long hand of the clock above his office door.

Between scrutinizing the clock and keeping her rhythm, Victoria peeked out of the corners of her eyes at the lady. She was very thin, and she wore lots of sparkling, metallic bracelets. Victoria's mom was thin. But Mom runs, Victoria thought. This lady just looks skinny. She was glad her mom never waited in the lobby for her. How embarrassing.

She fixated on the woman's book for awhile. It had another skinny lady on the cover, one Victoria had seen on news channels, smiling with too many white teeth. *Passing on Independence: Marla Weichmann's Guide for Single Parents.*

Victoria figured the woman must always wait in the lobby through her kid's hour-long lesson. She was always there on the couch when Victoria showed up, no matter how early she did. Mom just waited in the car.

Czerny swung the door open at 4:29. The boy shuffled out clutching his case and folder. The lady shut her book and stood, beaming at both of them. Victoria noted how her knees and legs managed to cling together as she rose. Victoria tried to rise the same way, ladylike. Balancing her folder on the top, she wheeled her case by them and into the lesson room.

"How's he doing?" Victoria overheard as she pulled her music out and placed it on the stand.

"Oh fine, fine. He's a better sightreader every time. I'll have to find some more difficult exercises."

Czerny's voice sounded false, too high and happy. Her parents didn't really ask about Victoria's progress much. He mostly volunteered information, and his cheeriness then was teasing. "When you guys watch her practice," he would say, addressing her parents, "you'd save five minutes of lesson time if you just told her to relax her wrist—"

"How'd it sound?"

Victoria started and blinked hard. "What?"

"I messed up a lot on the first—" he began humming the theme of his piece.

"Oh... oh, it was fine. Not many people know the piece, so they wouldn't notice. You did well."

The boy huffed and trudged to the door that led to the backstage rooms. It slammed behind him. Victoria winced, glancing out at the audience to see if anyone heard. The next girl had already started her piece.

No one in the theater seemed to notice the thud, but – finally – Victoria spotted her mom. She was sitting in the middle rows of the theater, behind most of the audience. A black sheet of

hair fell across her face, attempting to cover the silver glow of her phone. Victoria's stomach fluttered. She still didn't see Dad. Not that he would be sitting next to her.

Victoria resumed her lean against the wall, and her eyes travelled back to Czerny. He was leaning against the wall, too, brows drawn in concentration. He was wearing a tuxedo. He wore it every recital – she'd even seen him wear it when he played with the Chicago Symphony. But she bit back a giggle, because he looked odd. He wore a sport coat or a dress shirt during lessons (her favorite one was plaid green with brown elbow patches). He took pride in dressing... funky. When her parents invited him over for dinners (not since freshman year), Dad would tease him about it. *I always thought pink was your color* or *Don't be fooled, Tori – when he was my student, he wore cargo pants*.

Victoria smiled a bit. When Dad's "midlife crisis" hit, he started wearing pink, too. In fact, he started dressing just like Czerny. Mom used to joke how similar they were – that's why they hit it off even as student and prof.

When Mom saw Dad's new glasses last month – tortoise shell squares – she snorted. "That man forgets he's fifty." Mom always called him "that man" when talking to Victoria now.

Something brushed Victoria's shoulder. She startled and sucked in air between clenched teeth. She turned and, as if he had teleported, Dr. Czerny was standing next to her, watching the violist on stage. He glanced down at Victoria and back at stage, grinning.

"Did I scare you?" he whispered.

Victoria nodded.

"I realize I left the mic over here. I had to run over before she finished."

Victoria nodded again, staring at the girl on stage. Czerny rocked back and forth, shifting his weight to the balls of his feet and to his heels and to the balls of his feet and to his heels, as if he can make the song get up to tempo if he just speeds up a little. Victoria bit her lip.

"You're very quiet."

Victoria blushed. "I'm just nervous."

"Alright, well her piece is almost finished. You should go get your cello. Jessica was already warming up back there."

He patted her on the back as she turned wordlessly toward the door. She shuddered, attempting to shake off her discomfort. She pursed her lips as she walked through the band room that doubled as a changing room for the theater. Her cello case was in the far corner. *Why am I so awkward around him? His face was–*

“Ugh,” she sighed quietly, wrenching her thoughts away from that... uncomfortable stuff. She sat the cello upright and began tuning. Between final lessons and rehearsals and her own graduation party, she had seen Czerny too much this past month. Probably more than she’d seen her own parents – certainly more than she’d seen Dad.

But she didn’t really mind. Czerny has just sorta been there. Especially since sophomore year.

He was taking her and Jessica out to eat afterwards – his two senior students. Victoria’s stomach fluttered.