

# REQUIEM MURDER

JANET LANE WALTERS

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## DEDICATION

To my husband, Denny for helping me with my crazy characters and for all the years.

## Chapter 1

### Introit

On Groundhog day when Robespierre, my Maine Coon cat, jumped from his place on the window seat, one thought popped into my head. Company. Who? After following him to the kitchen, I watched him push his bulky, brown and black body through the hinged opening at the bottom of the door. Moments later I peered down the dimly lit stairwell. Robespierre had sprawled in the center of the third step and blocked my visitor's progress.

"Good grief, Katherine, I hope he's not planning to bite me again." Edward Potter, pastor of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, glared at the cat. His voice had risen to a high pitch. "Whatever do you feed him? He's ever so much bigger than Bitsy."

The temptation to say my pet fed on pastors was strong. I refrained and fought to control a grin that threatened to blossom. Teasing Edward usually results in a lecture delivered in an indignant voice.

With an air of disdain, Robiesperre stretched. His back rippled in a way I envy. Then he slithered around Edward.

When Edward reached the top of the steps, he turned and peered at the cat. "He's becoming more

brazen."

"Only toward selected guests. He ignores most people." I turned my head and Edward brushed my cheek with his lips.

Edward is a dapper little man with an ear for gossip and a penchant for turning even the slightest event into a fiesta or a disaster. He's astute about church politics. The coffers at St. Stephen's are filled through his ability to cosset and cajole the elderly population of the church, mainly wealthy women. I partially fit the category, being over sixty-five, and while not rich, I'm at least comfortable.

When he entered the sunlit kitchen, the expression on his face announced a problem. He walked into the living room. Unlike most of my guests, he considered chats at the kitchen table for commoners. In the living room, he perched on the edge of a Queen Anne chair, purchased years ago before antiques became the rage. In the past twenty years, stores selling every manner of old things have spread plague-like in the business district of the Hudson River village where I live.

"You're tense. How about a cup of mint tea?"

"Not all the tranquilizers in the world will calm me. It's a disaster, a complete and utter tragedy." His hands fluttered. The words rolled out like a sermon promising hell and damnation. "How will we maintain the quality of the services? Easter will be a disaster."

My forehead wrinkled. What in the world had stirred him into this state? The last time had been when one of the altar boys had spilled the communion wine. Had there been a fire at the church? A flood? A plague? The strident fire whistles had been silent for days. What had occurred? Knowing a full and dramatic scene would develop, I wanted mint tea.

"I'll heat the water. Then you can tell me about this tragedy." Mint tea is my all-purpose remedy, calming nerves and stimulating the mind, bringing alertness or sleep.

I retreated to the kitchen, filled the kettle and stuffed a silver ball with an assortment of dried mint leaves. While the water boiled, I assembled the pottery mugs, sugar and spoons on a wooden tray.

"Why will Easter be a problem?" I set the tray on a Duncan Phyfe table.

"We may have to cancel the season." He patted his thinning light brown hair.

I swallowed a laugh. "How can we cancel one of the main reasons for St. Stephen's existence?"

"Are you making fun of me?" His voice rose in pitch. "I'm absolutely serious." He accepted a mug. "Mary's husband has been transferred. It's a disaster."

I mentally sorted through all the Marys in the congregation and tried to decide which one's leaving would cause Edward to fall apart. Who had triggered the word of the day? On another level, the need to giggle soared. Perched on the edge of the chair and holding a tea cup with both hands, Edward looked like a child.

"There are about twenty Marys at St. Stephen's. Which one do you mean?"

"Mary Hensen, our organist. What will our services be like without the organ and the choir? Katherine, you have to help us until we find a replacement."

Twenty years ago I resigned my position as organist at St. Stephen's. My husband's sudden death had left me with a son to raise and enough money to cover three years of expenses. Once I finished my nursing course, my Sunday schedule had passed out of my control.

"Don't you think I'm a bit old for the job?"

Edward sighed. "I knew you'd say that. I have a list of people who are willing to play, but none of them want to direct the choir. Could you at least try?"

"What have you done about finding Mary's replacement?"

"I've called the Organists' Guild. They'll list us in their newsletter. I've sent notices to several colleges within commuting distance, but I really don't want a student. Our music program is something to be proud of and I dread losing our reputation."

Pride, I thought. "Perhaps there's a lesson to be learned from this."

"Perhaps, perhaps, but we must have music." He put the mug on the tray. "I'd like you to head the search committee. People respect your musical judgment."

"And the other members?" I've reached an age where I don't have to like everyone and avoiding those who annoy me has become a game. "A search committee is like a family. I won't spend time with people I dislike."

"Beth Logan. Judith and Martin Simpson. Ralph Greene. I believe that's a good balance."

Beth is a neighbor who is becoming a friend. For several years, we had worked together at the hospital. Last winter when I broke my leg, we had renewed our acquaintance. She volunteered to be my chauffeur on Sundays for church. I liked the young widow and found her six-year-old son charming.

The Simpsons are also neighbors. There's something strange about their relationship but their fifteen-year-old daughter, Marcie, had been my piano student until she'd grown beyond my ability to teach. With a sigh, I thought of Judith's frenetic energy and wondered how much I could tolerate.

The fourth member, Ralph Greene, was a man with a superb baritone voice. Though he took music seriously, he wouldn't cause any problems unless the committee decided on someone musically incompetent.

"Well?" Edward asked.

"You have a committee head."

"Splendid. We shall rise from the ashes."

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On Thursday evening Beth arrived to drive me to choir practice. Though I drive during the day, at night the lights of the oncoming cars blur and moth-like, I head toward them.

"Ready?" Beth asked. "You've got guts."

"What makes you say that?"

"Taking on the committee and the choir. Last Thursday, when Mary made her announcement, seven people expressed seven ideas of what the next Minister of Music should do."

"Good thing I'm temporary." I closed the door and followed her to a small green car.

Tonight a pair of cloisonné combs held her blonde hair from her face. Her jeans fit perfectly. Women in jeans that reveal more than they hide remind me of last summer and my tenant's murder. Rachel had nearly destroyed my friends and my family. My discovery of her body in the garden had triggered my protective instincts and had forced me to find the killer.

Beth's blue ski jacket made her pastel coloring glow. I seldom wear blue. Earth tones compliment the autumn shades the beautician adds to my hair.

When we reached the church, Beth held the door for me. Judith Simpson popped out of the reception room. "Tell her about the meeting, Beth. I'll head upstairs and catch a deep breath."

In the choir room, I ran my fingers over the keys of the Steinway and listened to mellow tones as perfect as the day I donated the piano to the church. A music folder lay on the bench with my name pasted on the cover. None of the pieces seemed particularly complex. Mary had also listed the hymns for the rest of the year.

At eight the choir members drifted to seats set in a semi-circle in front of the piano. By eight fifteen they were ready to begin. We ran through Sunday's offerings and several of the anthems for the weeks to follow.

Mary had chosen a group of Bach motets for the Passion Sunday Evensong, but since I'd no knowledge of the substitute organist's ability, the music remained on the table at the back of the choir room. There was no reason to push a person beyond their ability.

When we left to go to the church, Ralph Greene pulled me aside. He scowled. "You didn't start the Bach. We'll never be ready if we don't start the pieces soon." His deep voice filled the stairwell and the sound bounced off the stone walls of the hall between the church and the addition that had been added long after the church had been built.

"I'm not prepared to attempt the Bach unless the organist is competent. In the morning, I'll speak to Edward about hiring a group for Evensong."

"That won't do. The choir always does Passion Sunday. Our honor depends on keeping traditions."

The demand in his voice amazed me. "There have been exceptions in the past."

"It's not right."

"Then the committee has to act posthaste. Do you really think we can find a new organist in less than two months? Did Beth tell you about the meeting?"

"What's the sense of meeting when there's no one to discuss. Who needs to make a list of qualifications?"

We need an organist who can maintain the high standards of St. Stephen's program. I attend the meeting. It's tax time and I don't have room in my schedule." He opened the door into the sanctuary.

"Then you'll accept what we decide?" I ducked past him and slid into one of the pews while he headed down the side aisle to the choir loft.

The rest of the choir moved into place and the organist turned to wait for my signal. She played the opening notes for each part and the group hummed on cue. The blended voices filled the sanctuary and reverberated from the stone walls. The choir sounded strong; the organist tentative. She had no trouble with the hymns but fumbled through the anthems. Each wrong note she played caused me to grip the back of the pew. Could Edward be persuaded to hire another temporary accompanist?

After rehearsal we adjourned to the reception room for coffee and heart-shaped cookies in honor of St. Valentine, my temporary position, and the choir's monthly refreshment night.

I moved from group to group to chat with old friends and new acquaintances. The choir had divided into several cliques who acted like rivals for my attention. The new choir director would need better than average skills in meshing the dissenting factions.

The largest and loudest of the groups clustered around Judith Simpson. She sat on one of the brocade-covered chairs near the front windows and looked like a queen on her throne. The majority of the group was male. No real surprise. At one time or another, every male in the congregation, married or not, had flirted with Judith. Each had held her attention until she decided to blow them off with cruel remarks.

Her brown eyes slant, giving her an almost Oriental look. Straight dark hair cut to shoulder length adds to the image. As she spoke, her hands moved in exaggerated gestures. A constant flow of kinetic energy crackled as she stroked the new tenor's arm. He smiled.

Martin ended the moment of seduction by handing her a cup of coffee. Bearded, balding and overweight, he appeared to be a weak man, but beneath the surface lay a nurturing kind of strength. Did he mother his daughter as well as he did his wife?

Judith looked up at him. From across the room, I saw resentment on her face and in her body language. Her shoulders stiffened. Her mouth pulled into a tight line. Martin whispered in her ear. She nodded.

"Beth, Beth, darling," Judith called. "Are you coming to the Pub with us?" Her shouted invitation rose over the hum of conversation.

"I'm taking Mrs. Miller home," Beth said.

Judith waved at me. "Come with us and get away from this stuffy crowd. I need a drink before I perish. The well's been dry too long." Brittle laughter followed her words.

"Another time."

"Beth?" Judith asked.

"It's late. Marcie has school tomorrow. Your daughter's so conscientious she won't nap while she's watching Robby. I'll send her home."

Judith rose. "Spoilsport. Don't worry about Marcie. She'd welcome an excuse to cut school. No music classes on Friday. If it weren't for them, she'd be a drop-out." She put a hand on Beth's shoulders. "Take Mrs. Miller home and join us."  
Beth stiffened. "Maybe."

"I'll have a drink waiting for you. Maybe you'll find a man." She rubbed against Martin. "Three years since your husband's death. I don't know how you've survived. Men are so...so..."

Beth's face flamed. She reached for her jacket. I put on my coat. Judith, Martin and several other people strolled from the room.

Beth shook her head. "I don't know why I let her get to me."

"She likes to watch people squirm. Don't let her hurt you."

"It's not fair." Beth grabbed her music folder. "She has a string of men. Maybe I hope some of her allure will rub off."

"Have you ever watched a cat play with a mouse? That's what she does. You don't need her friendship."

Beth sighed. "I've watched her drive people out of the choir with sneers and gossip. I couldn't handle that."

"You're stronger than you think."

"Not if I lose my sitter by making her angry. Marcie's at my house as much as she's at home. Judith's wrong. Marcie's making A's and B's in all her classes."

Does even her own daughter bear the brunt of her viscous tongue? I pushed open the heavy oak door. I began to regret my decision to head the search committee. Who would be Judith's next victim?

"Judith, are you coming?" Martin's shout startled me.

"I'm feeding the cat. I want to catch him and bring him home."

Beth and I paused at the head of the walk. Judith had crouched beside the privet hedge that surrounded the garden between the church and the parish house that once served as the manse. A gray cat hid in the bushes.

"You're allergic," Martin said. "Come on. Everyone's waiting."

Judith dangled something above the cat's head. As he stretched, she raised her hand. "The party won't start until I arrive." The cat snatched the food and vanished. Judith rose.

"Your good deed." Sarcasm tinged my voice.

"I've named him Shadow and I'm determined to catch him. Maybe a bit of catnip will do the trick." She smiled. "Beth, I will see you at the Pub." A note of command filled her voice.

During the ride home, I thought about Judith and the cat. If Beth and I hadn't appeared, would she have

teased the animal into a frenzy? Beth, Marcie, Martin, the cat. Who next? How was Marcie handling her mother's behavior?

"Do me a favor."

"Sure," Beth said.

"Tell Marcie to stop by. I haven't heard her play since Christmas."

"I'll tell her when I get home."

"Thanks." If Judith's attitude had tainted her daughter, Martin should be told.

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By the end of February, the committee had eliminated all but three of the twelve applicants for the full-time position as music director. Though many churches are trimming their music programs, St. Stephen's can afford to expand. A trust fund insures the presence of a full-time director even if the minister can't be paid.

After our schedules for visits had been set, I stopped in the parish office to see Edward. The secretary, another Mary, showed me in. Edward jumped to his feet and held a chair for me. His large book-lined office had a small conversation area near the French doors that overlooked the garden. Last night's snow covered the lawn and the flower beds with a blinding blanket of white.

"You've found an organist," he said.

"We've selected three candidates and have set our first trip for next Sunday."

He rubbed the balding spot on the top of his head. "Can't the process be hurried? I can't believe we'll have an Easter season without a...an outstanding organist. It's never happened before."

"The substitute and I will bumble along. We won't have a new organist before fall."

"But the Passion Sunday Evensong --"

"I've found an excellent quartet, but I have to let them know this week."

His pout reminded me of one from a child who has dropped his candy in the mud. "If you must. This is such a disaster."

"Hardly." I rose. "Should I submit bills for our expenses or will you give us money from petty cash? We'll need money for gas and meals."

"Submit the bills. The Vestry prefers that. This group isn't as trusting as others in the past have been."

I left the office and headed home. Sunlight glared off the banks of snow lining the walks. Bits of old ice formed ragged patches on the concrete.

"Watch your step, Mrs. M." Pete Duggan, my neighbor and a local police officer, fell into step beside

me. His down jacket nearly matched his dark red hair. "Last time you had an accident, you got involved in a murder."

"Then I'm glad you're here. Once was enough."

His hazel eyes twinkled. "What happened to the knife?"

"What knife? I don't remember."

"Right." The knife he referred to, the one used to kill my tenant, lay on the bottom of the Hudson River.

We reached the corner. "I'm crossing here. I have to see Beth Logan about church business."

"Beth Logan?"

I laughed. "Don't tell me there's an available woman in town you don't know. She's a widow. She and her six year old son live in the old Perkin's house. Sings in the choir and is a nurse at the hospital."

"Haven't had the honor." He grinned. "Church business -- missing robes -- vanished communion wine?"

"Nothing criminal." I studied him and wondered when he'd settle down.

"So what are you up to?" he asked.

"Acting as temporary choir director and heading the search committee for a new organist."

"Good for you. Should keep you out of mischief."

"I'm crushed."

He laughed. "I don't believe you. Let me walk you to her house. Maybe you'll introduce me."

"Beth is not to be trifled with."

His eyebrows lifted. "You wound me. When I'm involved with a woman, I'm serious."

"For a limited engagement."

"Someday I'll surprise you." He held my arm and steered me across the street.

A child's laughter rang clear. "Bigger. Let's make it bigger."

"Then how will we get the head on the body?" Beth asked.

"Maybe I can help," Pete said.

Beth whirled. Her eyes narrowed. Then she saw me and her expression relaxed.

Robby eyed Pete. The boy's blond hair stuck out around the edges of his blue knit hat.



"Beth, this is Pete Duggan, a friend of mine. He decided to help an old lady across the street and found me instead. You're home early."

"It's a comp day. I have to work this weekend."

"Then I'm glad we don't begin our visits until next week. Just left Edward. He wants us to finish the search yesterday."

While Beth and I talked, Pete lifted the snowman's head and placed it on the body.

"Why don't you wait in the house?" she asked. "The snowman is my project. Your friend seems to have taken over."

"He has a habit of doing that. Let me help, too."

When the snowman had button eyes, a radish nose and a bright green scarf instead of Beth's favorite blue one that her son had tried to liberate, she invited us in for hot chocolate and cookies. The sight of a box of store-bought cookies made me wince.

"Pete, here's my key. There's a tin of fresh baked chocolate chip cookies on top of the refrigerator."

He caught the key ring. He looked at Robby. "Want to come with me? I think they want time for women talk." He winked.

"Egotist. It's church talk."

"Can I go, Mommy?" Robby asked.

"Let him. He'll keep Pete honest."

Pete laughed. "What's the matter? Don't you trust your favorite cop?"

"Are you really a policeman?" Robby asked.

"A policeman?" Beth echoed.

"I'm surprised you never met him when you worked in the ER. I'm sure he's been there a time or two. He's all right. Used to be my paperboy."

Beth tucked a scarf in the neck of Robby's jacket. The door closed behind them. She stood at the door and watched until the pair reached the top of the driveway. She turned. Sadness glistened in her eyes and I knew she'd thought about her dead husband. "Let's finish before they return."

"Do you have the next three weekends after this one off?" She nodded. "Good. There are five of us. I think we should take two cars. The first church is a two hour drive and more than a half hour of Judith's company and I'll start twitching. Then there's Ralph. I've finally contracted intolerance."

She laughed. A mischievous twinkle cleared the last trace of sadness from her eyes. "I've got intolerance, too. We'll take my car. It's small."

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When Beth arrived early the morning of our first trip, she was alone. "Where's Robby?"

"Pete's taking him to Sunday School and then to some indoor recreation place. He's quite taken with my son."

"And the mother?"

She wrinkled her nose. "He's indifferent. Maybe I'm too serious for him."

We walked to her car. A pale sun shone in a clouded sky. The air held a bitter chill.

Our trip took us nearly a hundred miles north of the Hudson River town where we lived. Roger Brandon was the first applicant.

After our arrival in the small upstate town, we parked across the street from a large red brick church. Martin, Judith and Ralph entered the church ahead of us. Morning sunlight streamed through a series of narrow stained glass panels. Beth followed me down the aisle to a seat in one of the center pews. The rest of our group settled in the last row.

Once the prelude began, I closed my eyes. Gooseflesh rose on my arms. Why was such a superb musician buried in this out-of-the-way place? In that instant I knew we had to have him and I revised the salary Edward had mentioned upward.

When the last note of the postlude ended, I remained in my seat so filled with music I was unable to move. Finally, I followed Beth to the vestibule where the other committee members waited.

"What did you --"

I shook my head to cut off Ralph's question. No sense airing our business for everyone to hear. We remained in the vestibule after the minister left his position at the door.

Judith's quick intake of breath signaled the approach of a tall, broad-shouldered man. Light shone through the stained glass windows to illuminate his handsome face and to burnish his red-gold hair. There was a mystical quality in his expression. He smiled at Judith and then Beth. He took my hand. "You must be the committee from St. Stephen's. I'm Roger Brandon."

I introduced myself and the others.

Outside, I pulled my coat closer. The temperature hadn't risen from the early morning chill. "Is there somewhere we can go to talk? We have some questions and I'm sure you do, too."

"There's a restaurant five miles out of town. Why don't you follow me there?" His voice was as rich and vibrant as the music he charmed from the organ.

"That would be terrific."

When we were in the car, Beth sighed. "Is he as good as I think?"

"He's brilliant...stunning...words can't describe. I want him at St. Stephen's."

"So will Judith. Did you see the way she stared?"

"Let's not worry about Judith's collection. First we have to see if he's interested. Then I have to convince Edward and the Vestry to offer more money."

The elegant restaurant had a small private room. As we talked, the distance from Roger's playing allowed me more objectivity.

Why was he so eager to leave his present church where he'd been organist for less than a year? Of course, St. Stephen's offers a challenge and exposure. Still, the longest he'd remained in one church had been two years. At thirty-two, he'd been musical director for seven churches. Though his gypsy ways troubled me, I remembered his tremendous talent and I coveted him for our music program.

Perhaps his many moves could be blamed on his youth. This thought erased my qualms.

Judith sat beside him. Her attempts to claim him failed. He gave equal attention to every committee member.

"When can you come?" Ralph asked.

"August," Roger said. "It wouldn't be fair to break my contract here."

Ralph frowned. "We need an organist for Passion Sunday and Easter."

I glared. "You know that's impossible." I turned to Roger. "Could you come to St. Stephen's as a guest organist, say in two weeks?"

"I'll see if one of my students is available to take over here."

I gave him my phone number. Before the waitress brought the check, Ralph pushed his chair back. "I have to get back. This is my busy season. I have two clients coming this evening." He strode to the door.

Judith made a face. Martin covered her hand with his. "Let's go. Do you want to hear Ralph complain for the entire ride home?"

Beth, Roger and I lingered over coffee and dessert. After the bill was paid, he walked us to Beth's car. "It's been a pleasure," he said.

"For me as well," Beth said.

"I could listen to you forever." As far as I was concerned, Roger had the job at St. Stephen's.

## Chapter 2 Kyrie

On the Wednesday after Easter, I stood in the kitchen and stared at the gloomy sky. The threat of rain had kept me from the garden and the spring clean up. I gathered the knickknacks I'd collected over the

years and dusted or washed wooden or porcelain figures, some musical and some whimsical. There was little for me to do around my apartment. Last year when I'd broken my leg, my son had hired a woman to help me. She still came in once a week to clean.

The phone rang. I sat in the window seat and reached for the receiver. Robespierre shifted to make room. When he wants, he can curl in a small space, but most of the time, he sprawls.

"Mrs. Miller, Roger Brandon here."

"What can I do for you?"

When he'd come to St. Stephen's to play, he'd created quite a sensation. Edward had been so impressed, he'd offered Roger the job even though the other candidates hadn't auditioned. I'd heard about the flap this caused with the Vestry, but Edward had prevailed. He usually does.

Roger laughed and the phone vibrated. Robespierre purred. I sighed.

"Maybe it's what I can do for you," he said.

"And what would that be?"

"The Vestry here voted to buy out the rest of my contract. I finish the end of May. It seems the job is wanted for the niece of the largest contributor when she graduates."

"How do you feel about that?"

He coughed. "It will give me time to settle in and organize music for the coming year. The program at St. Stephen's is larger than here. I called to see if you know a real estate agent I could contact."

"I know several."

He laughed again. "I knew you were the right person to call."

"Do you want an apartment or a house?"

"An apartment will be fine."

"Let me make some calls and get back to you. Do you have a price range? Apartments are few and expensive around here."

He named a figure that made me think he wasn't completely dependent on his salary.

"It's a shame I have a good tenant. I could have rented you the first floor of my house."

"That would have been great."

"When do you want to come?"

"I'm free most days."

"One problem. My apartment is a one bedroom so I can't put you up overnight. I can call Judith

Simpson. She has a guest room." Though I knew she would be glad to have first dibs on him, I didn't want her to scare him off. Still, I didn't want him to stay in a motel.

"Don't bother. I can drive down in the morning and back in the afternoon." He gave me his phone number. "I'll be waiting for your call."

I scratched Robespierre's head and chewed on an errant thought. Was there some reason other than church politics behind the contract buyout? Don't borrow trouble. The warning didn't comfort me.

My first call was to Tracey Stanton, a member of St. Stephen's. She had a thriving real estate business.

"Apartments," she said. "A rare commodity."

"It's for Roger Brandon, our new Minister of Music."

"Maybe I do have something. I've just taken over as rental agent for the Gulliver Apartment complex. There are two units opening in the upper building, not as nice as the river apartments, though. I can put a hold on one of them, but I'll have to list it by the weekend. Can he come before then?"

"I'll let you know which day will be convenient for him."

"Terrific. By the way, what's he like? I missed church the Sunday he was there."

A picture of Roger Brandon and the way the light from the stained glass windows had burnished his hair swept into my thoughts. "Tall, broad shoulders, red-gold hair, strong hands. Judith couldn't keep her eyes off him. Does that tell you anything?"

"What about her fingers?" Tracey coughed. "Forget I said that."

"I've yet to see Judith touch any man except Martin. She just shops."

Tracey laughed. "I'll remember that the next time she casts her eyes on one of mine. Tell me more about Roger Brandon. He sounds...attractive."

"He is, and smooth and charming. His voice is deep and mellow. He's the kind of man who when you're with him makes you think you're the only woman who exists. And his musical talent is beyond description."

"I've heard that. Why is he coming to St. Stephen's? If he's that good, wouldn't he aim for a bigger church?"

The question in her voice drew mine to the surface.

Why was Roger coming to St. Stephen's? Our music program has a reputation for excellence, but most organists of his caliber head for a big city position or hit the concert circuit.

"Let me go so I can call him."

"Thanks for the business."

Before calling Roger, I dialed the church. An idea had rooted in my mind but I needed Edward's support. He answered and I spoke. "Guess what happened?"

"Katherine, you know I have no patience for guessing games."

"Roger Brandon just called."

He groaned. "Don't tell me he's not coming. That would be horrible news."

"He's coming in June instead of August. His present church has decided to let him leave then."

"Why couldn't they have fired him before Easter?"

"They haven't fired him. They're buying out his contract."

"They're utter fools. I wonder if we can benefit from their foolishness?"

I leaned my head against the window frame. "We can. Perhaps he can relieve me of my duties in June and play for the summer services."

Edward made a humming sound. "How splendid, but the Vestry will never agree to pay three salaries for June."

"They'd only have his. The substitute wouldn't mind. She can't handle the stress and demands of the music. You can tell the Vestry I'm ready to collapse." I chuckled. "Maybe not. Several of the members would cheer."

"How can you say such a thing? You're quite well-loved at St. Stephen's. After all, we are a community of Christians."

"Who are people with likes and dislikes. If everyone loved me, I'd sprout wings. Don't ask the Vestry. Just inform them of the benefits."

"I might stir them up again, but I'll try."

"Good. I'll let Roger know."

"Katherine!" His voice squeaked. "You can't say anything until there's a decision."

"Would you like me to come to the meeting and hold your hand?"

He sputtered. "D...D...Don't...don't even consider the possibility. Every time you've attended, you stir a nest of scorpions. I will deal with the matter."

My smile broadened. It's been years since I've attended one of the sessions. The threat of my presence always stiffened his spine. "Thank you."

After hanging up, I went to the kitchen and brewed a pot of mint tea. When would Edward realize he was dealing with people and not a community of potential saints? While the tea steeped, I called Roger and then Tracey.

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The next morning, a beautiful spring day, shortly before ten, Roger arrived. As his dark sedan pulled up to the curb, I rose from the garden plot where I'd been cleaning away the debris of winter. Bright tulips, daffodils and hyacinths formed borders between the beds of just sprouting varieties of mint.

Robespierre stretched and ambled across the lawn to the yard next door where Maria Prescott was enjoying the sun with and the baby she and Paul had adopted in Spain. The cat sat on the edge of a bright blanket and stared at the infant. We all wondered how he would act when Carlos began to crawl.

Roger and I reached the steps to the porch at the same time. He clasped my hands. "Your directions were great. It's good to see you again." He stepped back and studied the house. "I like. A Victorian, right?"

"Thanks, and yes. Would you like to come in. Tracey called to say she'd be late."

"I don't want to interfere with your schedule."

"I haven't one. Come upstairs. I'm ready for a tea break."

He followed me into my "Painted Lady." "Why are you on the second floor?" he asked. "I like to watch the river, and there's a window seat in my living room that gives me a great view." I paused at the foot of the stairs. "Would you like a bit of breakfast?"

He shook his head. "I ate before I left and I'm sure I'll take Tracey to lunch."

"A cup of mint tea, then."

"There's no need to entertain me. You were working in your garden."

I laughed. "The weeds will be there tomorrow. That's the beauty of being retired. No schedules." He followed me upstairs and I showed him into the living room. While I poured heated water from an electric kettle, he played some scales on the piano. "Go ahead and play."

The notes of a Chopin Etude held me so spellbound I nearly forgot my mission. He played with a mastery I envied and I'd had my share of successes in my youth. How could the other church bear to let him go? He had manners, charm and talent.

After Roger left with Tracey, I returned to my garden chores. I marked the plot where I wanted to plant a few vegetables. My neighbor's sons would dig the ground after school. As I worked, I prayed Roger would relieve me of my choir duties. Dealing with the cliques and abrasive personalities exhausted me mentally and shortened the chains around my patience.

I carried a tray with my lunch to the porch and had just finished eating when Roger and Tracey returned. She waved and drove off. He strode up the walk.

"Success." He grinned. "The apartment will be ready by the end of May."

"I'll help you move in. Would you like to start your duties at St. Stephen's in June?"

He frowned. "Why? I'm not scheduled to begin until August."

"I'm ready to resume my place in the congregation."

"Maybe."

"I'll assist you if you'd like."

He cocked his head. "Thanks, but let me think about it. Would you mind giving me a rundown on the programs? I called Reverend Potter. He was effusive but vague."

His comment made me laugh. "You'll find that's his usual way. You've met some of the choir members when we came to hear you and when you were here to play." I stacked my lunch dishes on the tray. "Once you've moved in, I'll have a small dinner party for you."

He picked up the tray. "You don't have to do that."

"I seldom do anything I don't want to do. A privilege of age."

"You're younger in spirit than many people half your age."

His flattery brought heat to my cheeks. For a moment, I wished I could lose forty years. "You could be right."

He put the tray on the kitchen table and watched while I blended a variety of mint leaves in my tea ball. This afternoon, peppermint was my main choice.

"A question. Where do you buy your mints?"

"I don't, other than catnip. I used to grow that but my garden became cat heaven. Every summer, I pick and dry the leaves." I turned on the burner beneath the kettle.

He pulled out one of the kitchen chairs. "If I help, would you give me some?"

"I'd planned an assortment as a welcome gift."

For the next hour, we drank tea and I described the various choirs and the level of music the parishioners expected to hear. Then I mentioned the Evensongs.

"There are nine from September through May. The choir performs two and you'll select the guest artists for the others."

He refilled his mug, inhaled and sipped. "Any regular performers?"

"None. Would you consider giving a concert?"

He leaned forward. "How would that sit with the Vestry?"

"They'd love it. Though there's a music trust fund for expenses, they're a bit tight. Edward can help you with them. He's also talking to them about paying you for June and July."

"But I haven't said yes. I've a lot to consider. Is there a committee to select music?"



"You're it. You'll have to follow the liturgical calendar." I grinned. "The other thing is to select one of Edward's favorite hymns frequently. He'll give you a list."

He laughed. "That's called expediency. Will I be able to give private lessons?"

"As long as they don't interfere with your duties."

He rose. "I've rented a two bedroom apartment. Mrs. Stanton is arranging for one of the bedrooms to be sound-proofed so I can give voice and piano lessons at home. I'll call you when I have a moving date."

I rose and followed him to the door. "You have no idea how glad I'll be to see you settled."

He paused. "You don't have to see me out."

"The garden's waiting."

As we crossed the lawn, Robespierre ambled toward us. "Here comes my familiar and that walk means he wants to see me in the kitchen."

Roger stiffened and walked to the car. "Thanks for your help. I'll call you soon."

His tension puzzled me. Why was he in such a hurry to leave? When the cat angled toward Roger, he slid into the driver's seat and slammed the door. As he drove away, Robespierre batted my leg.

"I'm coming."

\*\*\*\*\*

The next afternoon, Beth dropped by while I sat on the porch with my neighbor, Sarah. Sarah's children, three of her own and two foster children, played in the yard. The two older ones, Larry and Jamal, supervised the younger ones by shouting commands.

"Beth, where's Robby?"

"Pete took him to Little League practice." She sank on the top step. "I think he's too young for that kind of competition. Pete laughs at me."

"Do you mean Pete Duggan?" Sarah leaned forward. "I didn't think he was interested in anyone under twenty-five and who wasn't female."

Beth closed her eyes, "He's adopted my son."

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "And the mother?"

"He tolerates me."

"You can change that," Sarah said. "Saw the new organist this morning. What a hunk. Just invite him over when Pete's around. He sure thrives on competition."

Beth smiled. "That's an idea."

I looked away. Though I think Pete and Beth are a great match, I wouldn't interfere. Match-making can be hazardous to your well-being. If the couples like each other -- great. If they don't, you lose two friends.

\*\*\*\*\*

When Roger called to give me his moving date, I frowned. He'd picked a Friday. If he'd waited until Saturday, I could have rounded up a crew to help.

On Thursday after choir rehearsal, I assembled a tray of cold cuts, salads, cake and rolls. The next morning I loaded the food, a thermos of iced mint tea and an assortment of dried mint in my car.

Ten minutes later I parked in front of the Gulliver apartments. Roger stood on the sidewalk and watched a crew of sullen men unload his furniture. Twenty minutes after my arrival the movers tackled the piano. My heart thudded against my ribs until the instrument was off the truck and being wheeled into the elevator. One look at Roger's face told me he had experienced the same palpitations. We rode the elevator with the upright that had been painted ivory.

While he directed the movers, I unpacked the boxes marked for the kitchen and put dishes, pots and pans and other assorted things on shelves. Roger appeared in the doorway. "You don't have to do this."

"I want to. I know how hard moving is. After my house was converted, I had a crew of family and friends to help with the move upstairs."

"You were lucky."

"If you'd waited until tomorrow, half the choir would have helped."

"But they don't know me."

"They will...Oh, your welcome dinner is scheduled for next Friday."

By one o'clock the movers had left. I arranged spices on the shelves and was amazed by the variety. He must like to cook. As I worked, I realized how little I knew about him. He had a knack of steering conversations from himself. There'd been time the day he'd found his apartment, but he'd plied me with question after question.

When I put the last jar on the shelf, I took the tray from the refrigerator and placed it on the alcove between the kitchen and the living room. "Lunch break."

"There's enough food to last the entire weekend," he said.

"That's the idea. Gives you time to shop at leisure. There are only delis within walking distance and their prices are outrageous."

He sat at the table and filled two glasses from the thermos. "Since you've organized the kitchen, all that's left is the music room."

"Good." I made a sandwich and put some salad on a paper plate.

"Let me have the name of your piano tuner so I can call him this afternoon. Tracey had a phone installed."

I raised an eyebrow. Duty above and beyond a real estate agent. Then I recalled how he'd charmed three very different women during the interview lunch. By Halloween he'd have half the women in the congregation fawning.

After lunch he made his call. Then he reached for my hand. "Let's take a walk."

"Anywhere in particular?"

"To the church, I'll give you a private concert."

Once again, the wonderful music he'd produced on an inferior instrument played in my head. I wondered what marvelous sound he'd evoke here. "A fair payment for a bit of lunch."

He laughed. "If this is a bit, I'd like to see sumptuous."

"Wait until Friday. Seeing all the spices on your shelves has challenged me."

As we walked along Main Street, he matched his stride to mine. I pointed out sites of interest. "These three blocks are known as Antique Row. The library is in the next block between an antique shop and a craft boutique. Judith is head librarian and she's always willing to make copies of music and flyers."

He nodded. "I'll remember that. She's the woman who sucks up attention."

His perception of Judith was on target. "Energy-filled is another way to describe her."

We turned at the corner and entered the short side street heading to the church. As we neared St. Stephen's, I watched Roger's expression change from interest to admiration.

The gray granite, Gothic-like building sparkled as though bits of silver were embedded in the stones. The carved oak doors appeared to have been gilted.

Roger halted and raised his eyes to the round stained glass window high above the street. "Impressive. I didn't pay attention to the building the last time I was here. The organ and the music were what I focused on. What a grand instrument."

"Sometimes I believe St. Stephen's is an ancient miniature cathedral transported here. There's such a feeling of age. I have a book at home that details the history. I'll loan it to you."

We strode past the privet hedge to the side door. "The main doors are locked unless there's a function. During the day, these are unlocked. Edward will give you a set of keys."

He held the heavy oak door for me. A rustling noise in the bushes made me turn. The gray cat the choir had befriended appeared on the walk and stared at us. Roger all but pushed me inside and closed the door.

I flipped the light switch and the gloom of the dark hall vanished. We entered the sanctuary. Sunlight

shone through the stained glass windows along the side walls and cast muted shadows on the oak pews.

Roger turned and examined the mosaic tiles of the nave. "It's more beautiful than I remembered."

As we headed up the dark right hand stairs to the choir loft, I switched on the lights. Roger sat on the organ bench and turned knobs and adjusted stops. Finally, he began to play scales. Notes swelled to fill the emptiness. I crept down the stairs and slid into one of the center pews.

Roger had his back to me. The organ bench sits flush with the balcony railing. A solid wooden back kept the organist from moving back too far.

The rich tones of the music vibrated through my body. As the piece he'd chosen moved to a finale, I found myself on my feet facing the loft. There was an almost sensual quality to his movements. The muscles in his back rippled beneath his tee shirt. The lights made his hair gleam like gold.

When the last note sounded, I fought to catch my breath. "Bravo! How did you know the Widor Toccata was one of my favorites?"

He bowed. "It's a show piece. You know, I'll have to remove the back of the organ bench. Having it there inhibits me."

If his playing was inhibited, how much more glorious could it be? I mentally gauged the distance to the stone floor and shivered.

"Do you realize how far you'd fall?"

He laughed. "I've no fear of heights." He dashed down the steps. We left the church together. When we parted at the corner, he pressed my hand. "See you next Friday."

"Not Thursday night?"

"Doubtful. I'll take the rest of this month to explore the area. I think I'll like it here."

As I strolled home, I thought of how little I'd learned about Roger, the man. The musician side of him seemed clear.

### Chapter 3 Dies Irae

On Thursday I began preparing for the buffet dinner I'd arranged to introduce Roger to selected members of St. Stephen's. Though several of the guests had offered to bring food, cooking is one of my pleasures and I remembered the rows of spices on Roger's shelves. I refused the offers.

Beth called and asked about coffee. Knowing my addiction to mint tea wasn't shared by everyone, I accepted her offer of the fixings and an urn. Then I asked her to stop at the liquor store and buy enough red and white wine, for a dozen people.

The number of guests was dictated by the size of my apartment. Though the rooms are spacious, I had

no desire to have people eating in my bedroom or a clique gathering in the dining room or the kitchen. If the weather had been nicer and the chance of rain nil, I would have used the yard.

When my "Painted Lady" had been a single family dwelling, my apartment had been the bedroom floor. The walls had been gutted. Five bedrooms and a bath had become four rooms and bath.

Besides the search committee, I'd invited Edward and Laura, Ralph Greene's mother, Bob and Betty Peters and Lars. The last three were the only members of the Vestry who have always supported me.

By Friday morning when Bessie came to clean, I was icing the chocolate cake I planned to serve as dessert. Jars of pickled shrimp waited to be decanted into a cranberry-glass bowl. A cheese ball chilled in the refrigerator. The aromas of roasting beef and ham flavored the air in the apartment.

"Sure do smell good in here." Bessie paused just inside the kitchen with her hands on her ample hips. "Must be having a party."

"To welcome the new organist at St. Stephen's."

Though my junior by ten years, white frosted Bessie's tight black curls. "I worked 'cross the street from the church yesterday. He sure do make pretty music." Her dark eyes shone. "Best I get this place slicked up."

"Don't push yourself."

She laughed. "You know me better. 'Sides one cat and one old lady don't make much mess."

As she worked, she sang. I added harmony to her melody. By the time she reached the kitchen, I'd completed dinner preparations. The unseasonable warm weather had made me decide on a cold buffet. At the moment, the temperature in the kitchen topped a hundred. While I have several window air-conditioning units, they weren't in place. I needed to corral my son and one of my neighbors for the grunt work.

Bessie cleaned the alcove of the L-shaped kitchen first. I fitted the ham and roast beef in the refrigerator, turned off the oven, and breathed a sigh of relief. When my guests arrived, the apartment would be cooler. I grabbed my purse.

"Where you off to?" Bessie asked.

"To have my hair done."

Her grin broadened. "You and your hair. When you gonna let it go natural?"

"Never." I closed the door and headed downstairs.

When I returned, I found a note from Bessie with a list of phone calls. I called my daughter-in-law and let the rest go until another day. Then I sliced the meats, moistened them with basting juice and arranged them on platters. Small bowls in the center of each plate held a special sauce. Chutney for the ham and horseradish for the beef. I heaped fresh baked rolls in two baskets, arranged the salads, decanted the shrimp and set out the rest of the appetizers.

A breeze blew the kitchen curtains inward and chased the heat from the apartment. A glance at the clock let me know I was on schedule.

Fifteen minutes later the plates, napkins and silverware rested on one end of the cherry table in the dining room off the kitchen. I headed to the bathroom, showered, dressed and cleaned away the traces of my preparations.

Then I chose jewelry to compliment the russet linen dress I wore. Earrings, topazes set in the center of gold wire flowers, and a matching pendant completed my costume. Not wanting to put on heels before the guests arrived, I carried them to the kitchen.

While I arranged the appetizers on the island table in the center of the long leg of the kitchen, Beth arrived. She carried the coffee urn and a bottle of wine.

"I'll get the rest from the car," she said. "Seemed silly to drive, but my other choice was Robby's wagon."

The picture that flickered in my thoughts amused me. "You'd have been arrested. You look under the legal age for drinking."

The blue flowers on the printed sundress she wore enhanced the color of her eyes. Her hair had been cut in a pixie-style that made her appear to be about sixteen.

After her third trip, she leaned against the wall to catch her breath. "I came early to help, but you're a marvel. I'd be running around doing a dozen things." She carried the coffee urn to the sink.

I laughed. "Every nurse should know how to organize."

"Sometimes I forget." She scooped coffee into the basket. "Where do you want me to put this?"

"On the alcove table."

"I won't plug it in until later." She crossed to the table where the appetizers sat and picked a shrimp out of the bowl. "Delicious." She popped a second one into her mouth and sighed.

"I wouldn't know. One bite and I'm sick for days. My husband loved them. Always said it wasn't a party without pickled shrimp."

She put the white wine in a silver bucket and poured ice around it. "Do you miss him?"

"Every day."

Beth's eyes closed. "I miss Rob too. I keep hoping the ache will stop."

"The gut-crunching pain faded years ago, but he held a part of me no one else has ever touched." I put my hand on her shoulder. "I think that's what one feels until someone or something fills the void."

"Did you ever consider marrying again?" She poured red wine into a clear glass carafe.

"Unfortunately, the only other man I felt that way about wasn't available until I'd grown accustomed to independence." As I spoke, I carried food to the dining room.

The doorbell rang. Beth opened the door and peered down the steps. She turned and giggled. "Quick, your shoes. It's Ralph and his mother."

By the time the first guests reached the kitchen, I'd stepped into my shoes and my role as gracious hostess. When Ralph presented a tin of butter mints, Beth's grin nearly ruined my dignified thanks. I put the gift on the buffet beside the hand-pressed wafers I'd bought at Sweetness, a candy shop up town. Bob and Betty Peters arrived just ahead of Edward and Laura. At the sound of Edward's voice, Robespierre charged out of the bedroom where he usually hid beneath one of the sleigh beds when I had company. He leaped on Edward's shoes.

"Katherine, call off the cat. Why can't I ever visit without being attacked?"

"Either he likes you or you've walked in something that sends him into ecstasy."

"He swears the cat wants him for dinner." Laura rolled her eyes. "I think it's the new shoe polish." She poured two glasses of wine, handed one to Edward and filled a plate with an assortment of appetizers. She joined Bob and Betty on the couch. Edward sat on the loveseat beside Mrs. Greene.

When the Simpsons arrived, Judith tried to grab Robespierre. "Oh, you darling cat," she crooned.

He made himself small and slithered under the couch. Judith is one of the people he avoids.

"Your allergies," Martin said.

Judith glared at her husband. "I wasn't going to sleep with him. I just want to feel his soft fur with my hands."

"More like his claws in her fingers," Beth whispered. She filled a plate with shrimp, cheese and crackers and some other items. Her mouth curved into a smile.

I turned. Tall, broad-shouldered Lars Claybourne filled the doorway. With a flourish, he handed me a box of Godiva chocolates. "You're as beautiful as ever." He kissed the corner of my mouth.

"And you're still a liar." Lars and I have greeted each other this way for years. He, his wife, Charles and I had been great friends. Even after his wife died leaving him with four young children, there'd never been a party here when Lars wasn't included.

His blue eyes twinkled. "Let me see what oddities you've assembled. Is there anyone you want me to charm?"

"You're mine tonight."

"Threat or promise?" He strode into the living room. Judith's husky greeting was followed by Lars' booming laughter. All here but the guest of honor, I thought.

Robespierre emerged from beneath the couch. He positioned himself at the top of the stairs. I walked to the door.

Roger reached the landing. He held a huge bouquet of flowers. "I know it's like bringing jewels to a maharajah, but I ran out of inspiration."

"They're perfect. I was so busy this afternoon, I never cut flowers for the buffet."

He reached the next to last step. For a moment, I thought he meant to step back. "Cat." His deep voice sounded as though he was being strangled.

"Are you allergic?"

He shook his head. "Phobic." He backed down several steps.

Judith appeared at my side. She laughed and grabbed for Robespierre. The cat dashed through the living room.

Roger walked upstairs and handed me the flowers. "Sorry. It's just...it's a long story."

"Lars, close the bedroom door." I smiled at Roger. "The next time you come, I'll send Robespierre to Maria's. He likes to watch the baby."

Judith handed Roger a glass of wine. "I'd love to get my hands on that gorgeous beast, but every time I come close he runs. He comes to you and you don't want him."

"He's perverse," I said.

Judith pointed to the island table. "Try the appetizers. The shrimp are divine and the cheese ball piquant." She turned to me. "When I retire from the library, will you give me cooking lessons?"

"If I'm still around. Surely that's years away."

She shook her head. "I told Martin that when Marcie graduates from high school, I'll have done my bit." She took Roger's arm. "Let me introduce you to people."

I clamped my mouth shut. Somehow, she'd become the hostess.

Beth entered the kitchen. "Go inside. I'll take care of the flowers."

"The vases are in the bottom of the china cabinet."

After pausing to greet my guests again, I joined Lars on the window seat. Martin sat on one of the Queen Anne chairs and Ralph sat on the other. Judith had drawn a folding chair beside the piano bench where Roger sat. He tasted the shrimp and kissed his fingers in appreciation.

Conversation flowed around me. I caught bits of several conversations and the meshings amused me. "Did you hear...Johnny took...seven strokes to reach...Beethoven's... five puppies." The juxtaposition amused me.

Beth crossed the room and sat on the floor near the window seat. She sipped wine and watched Judith's attempt to claim exclusive possession of Roger's attention.

"Beth, there's room on the bench," Roger said.

Judith rose. "She can have my chair and I'll sit beside you. There are so many things I want to ask you."



Sultry tones muted her usually strident voice.

Betty Peters glared at Judith. The older woman rose and walked to the kitchen. Martin stiffened.

"Quite a collection," Lars whispered. "Is it guts or did you forget?"

What did he mean?

Roger carried his plate to the kitchen. When he and Betty returned, she wore a smile. Chalk up another one who's succumbed to his charm.

Roger opened the piano. "Do you mind?"

"Of course not."

He played several short Mozart pieces. "This is a great instrument. I'll trade you upright. Mine needs to be tuned every month."

"No trade. I've had this one for more years than you've lived."

"Play something we can sing." Judith's voice held a note of command. "That will give you some idea of the quality of your choir."

"After dinner if Katherine asks. This is her house and her party."

Judith scowled and moved to stand behind Martin's chair. I wanted to laugh. She'd chosen Roger for her next flirtation and he appeared indifferent.

I rose and walked to the piano. "Shall we lead the way to the buffet?"

Roger took my arm. While we ate, the conversation centered on St. Stephen's, the music program and the food.

After dessert and coffee, the Peters, Ralph Greene and his mother left. Edward, Laura, Martin and Judith lingered near the piano and listened to Roger's rendition of a Straus waltz. Beth, Lara and I worked in the kitchen. The music stopped, and moments later Roger appeared with Judith a few steps behind.

"Katherine, thank you for inviting us." Judith pushed between Roger and me. "Lovely party." Her fingers crept along his arm. "I'll call and we'll set a date for dinner. You can hear our daughter play and let her know she's not talented enough for a career in music. She's not half as good as you are."

"She's only sixteen," I snapped.

Roger stared at me. "What --" He swallowed the rest of his question.

Judith laughed. "Of course you would champion her. She was your student. Her latest madness is a desire for voice lessons."

"They won't harm her," Martin said.

Judith stepped away from Roger and clamped her hand around her husband's arm. "We really must go. Beth, don't keep Marcie up too late. She has to go to the city in the morning."

Once the Simpsons vanished down the stairs, Lars kissed my cheek. "I'm on my way. Call you tomorrow."

"Thanks for coming." I turned to Beth and Roger. "Run along. I'll finish in the morning."

Beth shook her head. "The dishwasher's ready to run. I'll hand wash the wine glasses. Won't take long."

"Take less time if I help," Roger said.

As soon as the wine glasses were in the china cabinet, Beth kissed my cheek. "See you Sunday,"

Roger kissed my other cheek. "Thanks again and don't forget the recipes."

As they walked downstairs, I smiled. What a nice looking couple, I thought, but I wouldn't meddle. I locked the door and headed to the bedroom.

Chaos greeted me. My cat had shown his displeasure at being relegated to one room. One of the bedspreads had been pulled from the bed. My robe and slippers lay in a tangle. I scratched Robespierre's head. "You've been busy. You wouldn't have enjoyed the party." He purred. "The man's afraid of you. He should realize you're just a big fluffy fool."

\*\*\*\*\*

On Sunday after coffee hour, Edward cornered me on the stairs leading to the choir room. "Katherine, the dinner was superb, simply superb."

"Thank you."

"I nearly collapsed when I saw the Bob and Betty Peters."

"Why? I wanted Roger to meet several influential members of the congregation and they happen to like me."

"Because of what Judith did to them."

I grasped the railing. "Judith?"

He ran his hand across his bald spot. "Don't you remember? When their son, Alan, was in the choir he and Judith were friends. Then... well, I never thought the boy was stable."

My hand tightened on the railing. I'd forgotten the rumors of homosexuality that had spread after Alan's suicide attempt.

"Betty accused Judith of being behind the rumors. There was no proof but --"

He waited for me to ask for more information but I had no time for gossip. "Did you want something special? Andrew's waiting for me."

"Laura and I want you to come for dinner on Friday. Lars is coming."

I laughed. "No match-making. We're too old for romance. Besides it would be complicated sorting estates and Social Security."

"You're right."

I slid past him. "See you Friday."

"Roger stopped by yesterday and caught me in my study. I gave him a set of keys and the flyers Mary's collected about possible artists for Evensongs. You know, he asked for a list of my favorite hymns. I like him. He understands how to please people."

Expediency had been the word Roger had used. "I'm glad. What time for dinner?"

"Seven. Lars will pick you up."

\*\*\*\*\*

Beth picked me up for Thursday's choir rehearsal. When we reached the church, we found Roger in the choir room. "Bless you. Why didn't you call me?"

"I'm not taking over, just subbing for the sub. She sprained her ankle."

"I'll gladly cede my position."

"You're choir director until the last Sunday in June." He slid from the piano bench.

"Can you meet me tomorrow to talk about the Evensongs?"

"Can we make that Monday? I'm sitting for a neighbor's children tomorrow."

"No problem."

During rehearsal, Roger sat in the back of the room. At first I felt self-conscious but soon settled down. Since there were only three more Sundays before the choir year ended, practice was over early.

When the choir moved to the loft, I sat downstairs to listen. Roger's brilliant touch made the group sound better than ever. When they finished, I made a Vee sign.

Beth and Roger followed Judith and Martin downstairs. Judith abandoned her husband and took Roger's arm. "You are coming to the Pub, aren't you?"

Roger turned to Beth. "Are we going?"

"I'm taking Mrs. Miller home."

He shook off Judith's arm. "I'll tag along with them since there are some things I need to discuss with Katherine. Beth and I will be along later."

Judith's eyes narrowed. "Don't be too long."

Roger remained silent until we were in the car. Then he cleared his throat. "Does she always issue invitations that sound like commands?"

"Most of the time." Beth and I spoke as one.

Roger nodded. "It's nice to go out after choir, but everyone should be included, not just a select few."

"Amen."

"Good luck," Beth said. "Judith will perish if she can't have her exclusive clique that changes with her whims."

"I'm going to try."

Five minutes later I stood at the living room window and watched them drive away. They made an attractive couple, but would he offer the stability Beth and Robby needed?

\*\*\*\*\*

Several weeks later I left at six for my usual morning walk. Pete fell into step beside me. "You're up early," I said.

"I need to take off a couple of pounds."

"Too much beer?"

"Junk food." He winked. "Why can't I find a woman like you? One who likes to cook."

"Probably because you're looking in the wrong place."

He halted. "What do you think of this Roger Brandon?"

"Why do you ask?"

He didn't meet my gaze. "He's hanging around Beth. The other day when I brought Robby home from Little League, they were in the yard having drinks."

"What's wrong with that?"

"She has a son and...you know."

I glared. "I'm afraid I don't. She's a widow with a child, but she's young and needs a social life."

"I thought you'd understand," he muttered.

Could he be jealous? "Have you ever considered asking her out?"

He raked his red hair with his fingers. "Why? She has a son who needs her time and attention. Her energy should be focused on him, not some man. Children are dependent on their mothers for everything."

My hands rested on my hips. "I don't believe you said that. Beth would be stupid to she wait for Robby to grow up before she has a life. She needs a husband. He needs a father. Go jog. I'm going to the river."

I stalked away. I didn't like what I'd learned about him. Pete was a chauvinist. What right did he have to condemn a young woman to loneliness?

\*\*\*\*\*

At four o'clock that afternoon, Marcie appeared at my door. Her light brown hair was pulled back and fastened with a rubber band at her nape. Hardly a flattering style and her plain baggy dress didn't add anything attractive either.

"Come in. I've been expecting you."

Red colored her cheeks. "Sorry I took so long. Beth told me you wanted me to stop by, but I've been busy. Are you mad?"

"Never. I hope they've been fun things."

She shrugged. "Tests, baby-sitting, practice, avoiding fights with Mom." Robespierre strolled from the living room and rubbed against her legs. She stooped and petted him. "He's grown."

"Fatter. I feed him. Sarah's kids bring him treats. Maria feeds him. Have you met her niece?"

"She's in one of my classes. Shy but nice."

"Why don't you invite her over after school? I'm sure she could use some friends."

She rose and headed to the piano. "Mom doesn't like me having kids over when she's not there, which is about every day." She opened the piano, played some scales and then settled into "Clair de Lune."

Her touch was sure with a romantic flavor in the interpretation. I applauded. "I'm impressed. You've matured since Christmas. I'm glad you persuaded your mother to let you audition for the Saturday Julliard program."

"She didn't like the idea. Dad insisted. She's still upset." Marcie stared at the keyboard. "One of the teachers suggested I take voice lessons. Mom doesn't like the idea."

"Couldn't you use your baby-sitting money for lessons?"

"That goes in the bank for college."

"Isn't that why your mother's working?"

Beth made a face. "Every cent she makes goes for antiques. Last night she told me I'd have to get a real job this summer. No penny-ante baby-sitting. I already told Beth I'd watch Robby. What's wrong with Mom?"

"She's unhappy with Beth."

"She's always unhappy with someone." Marcie wrinkled her nose. "It's the new choir director. Mom wants him for her friend and she doesn't like to share. What am I going to tell Beth?"

"What did your father say?"

"That I should keep my promise." She kissed my cheek. "Let me go talk to Beth."

The resiliency of youth, I thought as she pounded down the stairs. What was wrong with Judith? She should be delighted with her daughter's talent.

#### Chapter 4

##### Tuba Mirim

Since the substitute organist was unable to return, Roger and I finished the choir season in tandem fashion. No matter what argument I tried, he refused to step into my shoes. He insisted my presence helped him ease into the new responsibilities. I must admit his request that I stay flattered me, though dealing with the choir members often made me want to scream. Judith's divisive tactics didn't help. Though she tried to pull Roger into her sphere, he resisted.

The one time I saw him lose his cool was on the evening of the last rehearsal of the season. Several members brought tidbits for the stray cat.

When Roger left the church, he stopped so suddenly I nearly plowed into him. He bypassed the group in a rush. His breathing took on the pattern of an asthmatic in the throes of an attack.

Judith laughed. "Are you all right?" Her dark eyes

"Just in a hurry," he said. "I've things to do."

"Are you coming to the Pub?"

"Not tonight."

With the end of the choir season, I settled down to a summer of quiet gardening and neighborly visits. What a change from last summer when my tenant had taken over my yard and very nearly my son.

Beth was a regular visitor. One afternoon in early August, she arrived alone. Today, she wore a troubled frown and she mentioned Roger. Though curious, I waited for her to speak. She poured a glass of iced tea and sipped.

"Where's Robby? Off with Pete?"

She shook her head. "Day camp for two more weeks. Then I don't know what I'll do."

"Did Marcie quit?"

"Unfortunately. Judith told Marcie to find a job other than sitting. Then after I'd made arrangements for Robby to go to camp, Judith screamed at Marcie for losing her job. Since I'm working this weekend, she will be watching Robby. I told her to bring him over to visit Robespierre. Do you mind?"

"I'll be glad to see them. Any idea what set Judith off this spring?"

"Roger. Who else? Just because I've been seeing him since he arrived she's miffed. You know how she is when there's a new man around."

"She wants first dibs. Are you and Roger serious?"

"Hardly. I think he wants a buddy." She frowned. "We've been going places since June and he hasn't kissed me. The other day when Marcie asked him to be her voice teacher, he kissed her cheek. I haven't gotten that far."

"Why would he do that?"

"Who knows? At least he takes me to some neat concerts and recitals. I'm becoming an expert on Baroque music."

"And Pete?"

"He's still Robby's friend." She wrapped her arms around her knees. "Is there something wrong with me?"

"Not that I can see. Finish your tea. This blend is guaranteed to raise your spirits."

She laughed. "You sound like Roger. He's your latest devotee."

"That's true. He's dropped by several times to help with the harvest. We had a delightful time."

"Guess he's charmed you, too. That's one of the problems. When I'm with him I can only see how wonderful he is. Then he leaves and I --" She shrugged. "Question myself."

Not exactly my reaction, but close. After every one of his visits, I remembered my vow to solve the mystery of his many moves. Then I saw him again and thought the vague questions I had were foolish.

"Are you going to the choir picnic?"

"When Judith called and asked me what I wanted to bring, I said I would. I guess she's in charge of the food."

"And everything else. It's at her house. I offered to help, but she said she knew I have an exhausting schedule at the hospital and she could manage very well. She told me to bring rolls. That's boring. Had a couple of recipes I wanted to try."

"Maybe at the next gathering."

"Unless Judith's in charge." She finished her drink. "I'd better go. Robby's due from camp and I have to take him to his baseball game. Pete's working this evening."

"Have fun."

She wrinkled her nose. "Robby loves the game and the excitement. I don't. I can't yell for or at him like the other moms. I've seen some sick behavior. Mothers screaming at their sons for striking out, missing a

catch. Sniping at the umpires for their calls.

"People tend to forget the game's supposed to be fun."

"You're right." She put the glass on the tray and headed down the street.

After she vanished, I considered her comments about Roger. He hadn't kissed her. He'd kissed Marcie's cheek. He came across as a virile man. He made a woman, even one my age, feel special. Was his charm part of an act? Had this been the reason he'd moved frequently?

A picture of a group of disillusioned women chasing a smiling Roger popped into my thoughts. Maybe I should look into the matter. But then, maybe Beth's expectations went beyond Roger's promise.

Before I set a plan of action, Maria called me over to see the baby. Watching little Carlos try to crawl and Robespierre's attempts to help him made me laugh.

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The choir picnic was held at the Simpson's house on the third Saturday in August. Most choirs hold their picnics in June or July, but many years ago, my sister had major surgery in June and I went to stay with her family. The picnic was postponed until I returned. Thus a tradition was born.

The day was perfect for the event. The temperature was in the mid-eighties, a light breeze and a scattering of clouds. The heat wave of the past few weeks had ended during the night with a wild storm.

I made potato salad as requested by Judith and a chocolate cake. Just as I finished icing the cake, Roger arrived. I checked to make sure Robespierre was in the garden with Maria and the baby. Then I popped the cake in the freezer to set the icing.

"What are you doing here?"

"I was sent to help you carry your contributions." He chuckled. "Judith said you'd bake a cake. I thought she was joking."

"It's a tradition for every St. Stephen's potluck event I attend. Pour yourself a glass of mint tea. I need to wash my face and comb my hair." And change into a different shirt and slacks, I thought.

"We have time. I definitely need the tea. I drove Marcie home after her voice lesson and stayed to help, but Judith's out of control."

"I guess you've never seen her in high gear."

He rolled his eyes. "She told me to do seven things and changed her mind eight times. If these affairs upset her so much, why does she volunteer?"

Several answers were on my tongue, but I left them unsaid. For control. To show off. I shrugged.

"I told her I was going home but she sent me here." He stuck his finger in the icing bowl and scooped a bit I hadn't applied to the cake. He winked. "Will you marry me?"



"I'm too old."

"Maybe I like older women." He filled a glass and drank. "Thanks for letting me stay. Anything to escape before she changes her mind. She exhausts me."

"And most people. How are Marcie's voice lessons going?"

A dreamy look appeared in his eyes. "She's so musical I can't believe it. Her voice is clear and pure. Frankly, her talent frightens me. I'm amazed she hasn't entered any competitions."

"Judith doesn't approve."

He groaned. "Maybe she's right. Some child prodigies fade. I never have to correct her twice for a mistake. She practices more than my other students combined."

"Is your schedule full?"

"Not yet. Two organ students, four piano, three voice. I wanted to give Marcie organ lessons but Judith says it's too much."

"Did you ask Martin?"

"What could he do? Seems to me what Judith wants she gets." He leaned his elbows on the table. "In September, I'll offer the choir private lessons. I'm helping Marcie with theory. I wouldn't want her to miss getting into a good school because she lacks exposure."

My laughter made him look up. "She's in the Saturday Julliard program. Ask to see her schedule. Enjoy your tea." I left the room to get ready.

When I returned I found Roger held captive by a large fuzzy cat. Robespierre sat three feet from Roger in his Sphinx position. The terror on Roger's face and the tension in his body made me grab the cat.

"Start ahead with the potato salad. I'll follow after I feed the beast."

Roger moved swiftly. He took the bowl of potato salad and edged past us. "Sorry. I was clawed by my aunt's cat years ago. I still have scars."

While I wanted to reassure him about my cat's gentle behavior, I knew he wouldn't listen. "Go ahead. I'll see you at the Simpson's."

I expected to see him charge downstairs but he moved cautiously. When I heard the downstairs door close, I put Robespierre down. "There's no hope for him. Don't torment." I fed him and took the cake from the freezer.

Roger waited on the porch. That surprised me.

He shrugged. "I figured it would be safe to wait."

"He really is gentle."

"That's what my aunt said."

"Even when the neighborhood children dress him in doll clothes he endures. He's been pushed in a stroller, ridden on a sled and walked on a leash. Maria's baby pulls his ears and tail. He's never bared a claw."

"I believe you. I just can't forget the way that cat attacked me."

"Have you ever considered aversion therapy? My son's a psychiatrist. That's not Andrew's specialty but if you'd like, I could ask him for some names."

Roger laughed. "I'll think about it. For now I'll just avoid the beasts."

We walked down the street and around the corner to the Simpson's house. Though not a Victorian in style, it was built during that era. It resembles a farmhouse, solid, square, with a porch that sweeps from the front to the side and one of the two entrances to a large kitchen. We weren't the first arrivals, but only a few of Judith's closest cronies were present. Roger and I entered through the gate and headed to the spacious backyard. The aroma of charcoal greeted us.

Judith spotted us. "Didn't I tell you she'd bring a cake? Put the salad on the table. I'll take the dessert inside." Her hands fluttered like the wings of a bird trapped in a chimney. I expected to be showered by wine from the glass she held. "Mrs. Miller, find a seat in the shade. Marcie, come get the cake."

Marcie stood at the brick grill. "I thought I had to watch the chicken."

"You heard me. Move it now."

Marcie walked over and took the cake holder. When she reached the kitchen door, Judith screamed. "How could you leave the chicken?"

"You asked her to take the cake inside," Roger said. "I'll see to the chicken."

Judith laughed. "Dear Roger, you're right. It's just there's so much to do. Martin's inside making hamburgers. It's too much."

"Draft the rest of us. There's no need for you to do everything."

"You're right. Here's Beth. She has the rolls. I need to tell her what to do with them."

She darted away and stopped at the table and added wine to her glass. I glanced toward the grill to see if Roger needed help, but Marcie had joined him. He smiled and patted her shoulder. She looked up at him. Martin arrived with the hamburgers, and suddenly, the yard filled with people who gathered in clusters. Judith, plastic glass in hand darted from group to group. The energy level rose steadily.

As I waited in line at the buffet to fill a plate, Pete and Robby arrived. The boy ran to where his mother stood with Roger. "We won. I hit a double."

"Great job," Beth said.

Edward and Laura arrived. "What a lovely couple," he said. "I have such hopes."

I didn't because I remembered what Beth had told me and I'd watched Roger charm a dozen women. I

waved to Pete and he strode over.

"Grab a plate and stay. There's an abundance of food."

Pete raised an eyebrow. "Mrs. M, I believe I will."

He watched Beth and something in his expression betrayed his interest in her. I'd applaud, but only if his attitude had changed.

Judith rushed over. "Mrs. Miller, I have a place reserved for you at the picnic table. Tell me what you want and I'll make up your plate. You shouldn't have to stand in line."

Her too sweet tone annoyed me. "I have two hands and two legs and I'll use them as long as I can." I stepped back but the aroma of her alcohol-laden breath washed over me. "Fix yourself a plate. Food might be a good thing to go with the wine."

I wondered about Judith's wine consumption. Did she have a problem with alcohol or was she using liquor to deaden some deeper problem?

"When I'm sure everyone is eating, I will." She flitted off.

Pete bent and put his head close to mine. "Our Mrs. Simpson is a bit unstable. Drinks too much. I've seen her and the organist a couple of times at the Pub bending their elbows."

"I think she's taking voice lessons with him. Maybe they're stopping off afterwards." Though choir practice hadn't begun, several people from the choir had begun private lessons with Roger.

"What does that have to do with them being at the Pub sans her husband?"

"I wouldn't know." After I carried my plate to the picnic table, I went for a hamburger. Several teenagers, children of choir members, sat in a corner of the yard. "Why don't you join them?" I asked Marcie.

"Mom told me to tend the grill. And they don't want me hanging around. They're ever so popular. I don't fit in."

Roger arrived for some chicken. He slid his arm around her waist. "Don't worry about them. They're jealous of your talent."

She smiled radiantly. "Do you really think so?" Her eyes glowed with hero worship and her voice rang with awe and pleasure.

When I left the grill, Roger followed me. "Poor child. She doesn't fit in with the crowd. How well I understand the feeling. Judith worries, but I've told her Marcie will come into her own. Then people will be sorry."

Was he giving me a hint of what his life had been? Nothing in his expression gave me a clue.

"It's clear she admires you, but she's young and can be easily hurt."

He laughed softly. "Marcie and I share a love of music just like you and I do. That's the basis of our friendship. She understands."

But Marcie was a teenager with all the fragility of her age group. With a mother like Judith and a father whose whole life centered around his wife, Marcie searched for approval. In trying to help, Roger risked harming her. Still, her adoration must be flattering and something hard to give up.

While I ate I noticed Pete had joined Beth and Roger. His rugged good looks stood in contrast to Roger's smooth handsomeness. Pete said something to Beth and she laughed. Roger instantly claimed her attention. I sighed. Another woman looking for male approval and just as likely as Marcie to be hurt.

Once I finished the main course, a problem because of the number of interruptions for conversation, I headed for the dessert table. Edward and Laura carried plates to the picnic table and sat across from me.

"Marvelous cake," Edward said. "I pray you'll make several for the bazaar. There's always a marvelous response to your cake."

Laura chuckled. "She's making three and we're raffling them. You'll have to buy a lot of tickets."

Edward groaned. "You know I never win a thing."

"If you don't win, I'll bake one."

"Marvelous, simply marvelous." He clapped his hands.

"Beth, it's not fair." Judith's strident voice caused me to look up and a number of conversations to stop. She weaved an unsteady path around groups of people. "You can't have them both." She held out a hand. "Roger, come with me. There's something we have to talk about."

Roger rose. Judith clung to his arm and steered him toward the house. Just in front of the picnic table, she stumbled. Roger caught her. She plastered herself against him and kissed him.

My eyes widened. This was the first time I'd ever seen Judith do more than flirt.

"I'm better than she is any day," she said.

Beth seemed to shrivel. Martin approached the pair. He pried Judith loose and pushed her toward the house. He beckoned to me and I followed.

When I opened the kitchen door, I heard Judith's strident voice. "Martin Simpson, don't tell me I'm drunk. I've only had a couple glasses of wine. I've never been drunk in my life."

"Just drink the coffee and eat some of the food. Then you can go back to the party."

"You don't understand. Send Marcie to me. I want to talk to her about her behavior today."

"You're going to eat while I go out and see to our guests. Mrs. Miller will stay with you. You don't want people talking about you."

"All right."

Martin appeared in the kitchen. "Talk to her. She'll listen to you." The door closed behind him.

I walked through the dining room and entered the living room that took up half the space on the first floor. Judith's loud wail reached me.

"Tom, I hate you. You hurt me. Why don't you love me?"

Who was Tom? I crossed the room and sat beside her. "Judith, it's all right. Tom's not here."

"Mom, he hurt me."

"What are you talking about?"

"Why won't you believe me? He hurt me but I'll hurt him back. He's out there in the garden with the pasty-face one. I know he wants to make me jealous. Then he'll hurt me again."

An old boy friend? An abusive relationship? In her drunken state had she confused the past with the present?

I handed her the coffee Martin had prepared. "Drink this."

She drained the cup. "That was awful. Did you put something in it again?" She tried to stand, wavered and then straightened. "Going to bed."

She staggered across the room and collapsed on the steps. What had Martin put in the coffee? Was she dead? I crossed the room, felt her pulse and was relieved to find it steady and strong. I left the house, found Martin and told him Judith was on the steps leading to the second floor.

He sucked in a breath. "I'll put her to bed. Thanks. She gets over-excited when there's a crowd."

I was about to advise him to seek professional help when Roger's boisterous laughter caught my attention. The scene with Judith didn't seem to have affected him. He sat at the picnic table and appeared to be holding court. For a moment I wondered if there was any substance beneath his shining surface. Then memories of the wonderful music he produced pushed that thought aside.

"Mrs. Miller," he called. "Edward was telling me about your battle with the Vestry over dancers in the sanctuary."

That had been years ago, but many of the same people who'd opposed the idea still controlled St. Stephen's purse strings. Even though they had no direct control over the music trust, they'd stomped on the idea of anything lacking what they deemed "dignity."

"That's a scene I'd rather forget."

He grinned. "You'll get your wish. Liturgical Dance will perform the first Evensong."

"How did you manage that?"

"A touch of flattery, a lot of ego-stroking. The second Evensong will feature medieval instruments and sacred music. For the third the choir will perform Mozart's Requiem. Stop by the office and I'll show you the entire schedule. I'm proud of the selections." He grinned. "I've allowed them to convince me to

do one of the performances."

"I'll do that. Where's Beth?"

"She took her son home. Marcie went with them so I imagine Beth will be back."

Edward and Laura headed toward the gate. Ralph, his mother and a few of the older choir members had already left. "Tell her I'll call. It's time for me to depart."

I located Martin. "Have Marcie bring my bowl and cake holder over tomorrow or whenever."

He heaved a sigh. "Thanks for seeing to Judith. It's been years since she's taken on this way. Since her mother died. I didn't realize how much wine she'd had."

I didn't believe him, but allowed him his fantasy -- for now. This wasn't the time or the place to discuss Judith's problems.

"At least you didn't send Marcie to her. The child doesn't need to be involved in that sort of scene."

"That's why I sent her to Beth's. By tomorrow Judith will have forgotten what set her off."

I wanted to shake him. Judith was sicker than he knew. To me, she had hovered between the past and the present and garbled them.

When I reached the house, Pete sat on one of the white wicker chairs. "Is there a problem?" I asked.

"Beth," he said.

"What happened?"

"I walked them home and hoped she'd invite me in. She sent me away. I didn't mean to cause a scene. If I'd known Mrs. Simpson would react like that, I wouldn't have stayed."

"I'm glad you have that much sense."

"That Roger's a real jerk, but she won't hear anything against him."

"Do you blame her after the way you've acted and the things I've heard you say? Maybe you'd better re-tune your attitude."

"Maybe you're right. I guess you're not into dispensing sympathy."

"I've had my fill of other people's problems today." I entered the house and closed the door.

## Chapter 5 Rex Tremundi

After the picnic, I saw little of Beth or Roger. Though the quiet days were welcome, my curiosity burned

to know what was happening. With Roger's capable leadership of the choir, there was no need for my involvement. Still, I wondered if Roger had managed to break up Judith's clique.

On the afternoon of the first Evensong, Lars came for me. "Are you ready for this?" he asked.

"I was ready twenty years ago, but the Vestry wasn't. So you suppose if I'd been a man they would have agreed?"

"For shame. Are you accusing our Vestry members of chauvinism? This year we have a woman on board."

"A first? Or is it a second?"

He shrugged. "Does it matter? There are seldom any members willing to give up their places. Let's go before all the good parking spaces are gone."

We parked a block from the church and strolled up the sidewalk. As always I was struck by the beauty of the building.

Edward stood at the church door. "Lars, Katherine, this is so exciting. A first in the history of St. Stephen's. Roger was so masterful with the Vestry. Wouldn't Katherine have been impressed if she'd heard his masterful address?"

Lars nodded. "Absolutely."

The twinkle in his eyes brought a smile to my lips. "I'm sure I would have been. Maybe I should have come. Members of the congregation are welcome to add their views."

"Good grief, Katherine. You would have found a way to antagonize them."

"Not me. My days of pushing for freedom of artistic expression and experimentation in alternate modes of worship are over."

Lars dug his elbow into my ribs. "We'd better find a seat. Looks like a good turn out." He dropped some bills in the offering plate that stood on a table beside the doors into the sanctuary.

Though I spotted several of my friendly enemies seated in rigid silence in the last few pews, I headed for a center seat. Watching those judgmental faces might be fun, but I knew Roger would accompany the dancers and his music mattered to me more than just desserts.

I'm not sure I enjoyed the troupe of large women who stomped through several biblical stories. My granddaughter was a talented dancer who often choreographed her own dances. She seldom uses awkward body positions these women did.

Following the program Lars and I joined the majority of the attendees in Fellowship Hall for a reception. I complimented the dancers on their energetic presentation and circulated.

Roger drew me aside. "I need to ask you a favor."

His smile made me want to agree with anything. "And what's that?"

"It's for the Mozart Requiem in November."

"You're brave to tackle it. What are you doing about soloists?" There were several singers who'd appeared at St. Stephen's in the past few years I could recommend.

"I'm working with four members from the choir. Ralph for one. He has an incredible voice."

"I'm not singing. Voice was never one of my strengths. Besides, I'd charge." Rumors had circulated about Roger's plans for the Evensong collections, but he hadn't been here long enough to understand their purpose.

He laughed. "That's not what I want. I'd like you to do something you're good at."

My smile deepened and my resistance melted. Age doesn't bring immunity to seduction. "I can't imagine what."

"I want to fill the sanctuary with sound by having the choir stand in the nave. Since I can't play and direct, I'd like you to be up front. Isn't the Requiem one of your favorites?" He grinned. "I'm sure you want it to be perfect."

More flattery and more warm feelings. "I'll try, but if it doesn't work --"

"I refuse to consider the possibility. We'll be a super team. Come to the church on Friday and we'll go over our scores."

"Why don't you come to the house for lunch?"

He arched an eyebrow. "The cat."

"I'll send him to play with Carlos." My hand rested on his arm. "He's really a gentle creature. Maybe he and I can help you over your fear."

"Phobia." He rubbed his hand over a faint tracery of scars on his left arm. "I've lived with this for a long time and I'm not about to change. If I lose my fears, my music might suffer."

"You could be right."

Judith's wild laughter rose over the hum of conversation. Roger tensed. "She drives me crazy by feeding that stray cat. The others have lost interest, but she persists. Comes every day and brings food."

Lars strode toward me. "Definitely an interesting program." He took my arm. "Ready?"

"Yes." I turned to Roger. "Friday at noon."

"Should I be jealous?" Lars pulled the door open and held it for me. "I believe half the female population is enamored."

"Only half?"

"That's enough to turn this place upside down. "What's up?"



"He wants a favor. The choir is performing the Mozart Requiem for the November Evensong. He's asked me to direct." I explained why.

Lars opened the passenger's door. "For that I'll delay my New Mexico trip. Why don't you come with me this year? You'll need a break after working hard." He caressed my cheek. "I can offer some interesting diversions and spectacular scenery."

For the past five years he has spent six months in New Mexico and six months here, though not in single stretches. Two of his children have settled there and two have remained in the East.

"What would your children think?"

"Whatever they want. Kate, we're both alone and available unless you're hiding something. You're retired. Why not?"

His question startled me. At one time, a year or so after my husband's death, I'd dreamed of life with him. His children, especially his youngest daughter, had made life miserable for us. Since then I've learned to cherish my independence.

"You know it won't work. We're both used to going our own way. I've no desire to spend half my year in the Southwest when my only child lives here."

"We could find a compromise."

I shook my head. "I'm too old for an affair or marriage. Those are diseases of the young."

His laughter boomed. "You're a wonder and probably right. At least one of my children would worry you were after my money."

Which was a considerable fortune. I understood which child. In the past few years I've developed a good rapport with the other three.

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Monday was one of those lovely September days with a bright sky and temperatures in the seventies. I was in the garden gathering the last of the tomatoes. Autumn, my favorite of the seasons, had arrived. The combination of the dramatic colors of the changing leaves, crisp days and nights is a stimulant for me.

"Mrs. Miller."

I turned and saw Marcie standing on the walk. "Hello, child."

"Can I help?"

"That would be lovely. Carry two of the baskets to the porch." I lifted the third.

Robespierre appeared and nearly knocked her over with the force of his greeting. Twenty-three pounds is a lot of cat.

Marcie put the basket down and bent to pet him. His purr became a rumble nearly as loud as a car engine. Finally she stopped scratching his head and followed me into the house. The cat ambled at her heels.

Upstairs, I spilled a little dry food into his dish. He believed he must eat every time he returned from a jaunt. I've learned how much food to add to his dish so he eats it all and leaves nothing for the ants who struggle to the second floor every summer.

Marcie sat at the table. I poured mugs of mint tea and waited for her to speak about what clouded her dark eyes. She sipped and stared into the distance.

Finally she spoke. "Is it possible to be happy, sad, angry and pleased at the same time?"

"Sounds about normal. They're all very human emotions. Do you want to talk about something in particular?"

"Maybe." She cupped her hands around the mug. "I think Mom hates me."

Hatred wasn't what I'd call Judith's attitude toward her daughter. Jealousy and envy was my reading. "Why do you say that?"

She released the mug and propped her elbows on the table. "It's like...I'm taking voice lessons with Roger. He's pleased with my progress and he told Mom. She was absolutely cold."

I held back a groan. Judith believes she's the only one worthy of praise. Someone should warn Roger.

"When I practice she makes awful remarks. My voice hurts her ears. I sound like a cat on the back fence. She doesn't like sopranos. Their voices are thin, not rich like hers. She's not fair. I've kept quiet, but someday, I'm going to tell her just how I feel."

Though I agreed with Marcie, I feared Judith's reaction if the child expressed her anger. "Will it help if you speak up?"

"I don't know, but her attitude hurts. When I'm at my lessons I put myself down. Roger yells at me for doing that." She sighed. "I hate to disappoint him. He's showing me how to tap my inner creative power. He's so wonderful." Her voice trailed away.

Having been affected by Roger's magic, her sighs were understood. I'm sure his effect on her had twice the potency as I felt. "Could you practice when she's not home?"

"I tried and she jumped all over me. 'If you think I'm paying good money for you to goof off, think again. I want to hear what I'm paying for.'"

Judith's strident tones invaded Marcie's lighter voice. Something had to be done, but what?

"Sounds like you're in a bind."

"She wants me to quit the Julliard program. She and Dad argued about how much it costs. I feel guilty. What if I'm not as good as I think?"

"You're very, very good."

"I hope so. Poor Dad. He always ends up being wrong. He apologizes. She sulks. Then she starts drinking. She has an alcohol problem, but she won't get help. How can she admit to being less than

perfect?"

Tears filled her eyes. I rose and put my hands on her shoulders. "It's not forever."

"Sure seems that way. Sometimes I don't like my parents."

Though I understood her pain, her revelation made me uncomfortable. I didn't know what to say and I felt grateful she had music as an escape.

"Dad's not so bad when she's not around. You know, the other day she overheard him complimenting me. She was totally nasty to him. Do you think she acts that way with Roger?"

"I doubt it. Not when she wants to impress him."

"She sure does. She's taking voice lessons and he's picked her as the alto soloist for the Evensong."

A groan escaped. Judith! She has a great sense of timing and she reads music well, but her voice is flat. Not in pitch but in tonal quality and there's a harshness that carries over from her speaking voice.

"Maybe the lessons will help."

Marcie shook her head. "If she practiced, but she doesn't think she needs lessons. She only takes them to spend time with him. She's such a prima donna. I think she expects us to bow."

To Judith, please. For the first time since Roger had asked, I regretted my decision to assist with the Evensong. Spending time with the choir and the emotionally draining dynamics of the group would take a toll.

"She makes me play when she decides to practice. Her voice hurts my ears. I don't think she likes music. Dad's the one who wanted to join the choir. She tagged along because she didn't want him to have friends she didn't pick." Marcie pushed the mug away. "Thanks for listening. I used to talk to Beth about Mom, but she doesn't ask me to sit as often. Why is everything such a mess?"

"Haven't the slightest idea, but you must do what's best for you. Right now that's finishing high school and finding a good college. You have a talent for making music. Don't let her steal your joy. In two years you'll be able to leave."

"If she lets me go."

"Your father will insist."

She shrugged. "He's as mixed up as I am. I love Mom, but I don't like her."

What could I say in response to such a statement? "Set a practice schedule and give it to her. Then, no matter what she says, follow it."

"That's exactly what Roger said. He's so wonderful and so totally understanding."

Once again her expression became dreamy. Anger drained away; her mouth lost the tight line. She had a

crush on Roger and she hadn't the social skills or the emotional maturity to handle her feelings.

"Don't mix your love of music with his person. When you work extensively with a someone that's easy to do. Andrew calls it transference, and it's a kind of love easily mistaken for something deeper."

"I'll be careful." The wall clock chimed the hour. She jumped up. "I've got to go. Roger's coming to dinner and Mom'll want everything perfect. Less than two years. You're right, I can do it."

After she left I decided I'd have to speak to Martin and maybe Roger. Finding the right words would be hard and even then, would either of them do a thing to change the situation? Especially Martin. His protectiveness of his wife seemed to be the ruling force of his life.

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The next day as often happens in September, a steady drizzle fell. As I started dinner preparations, the doorbell rang. Robespierre and I reached the door at the same time. Beth and Robby, clad in identical yellow slickers, stood on the stairs.

"Hope you don't mind," Beth said. "I need to talk to someone."

Her voice was tight and controlled, but her eyes made me think she was about to cry.

"Glad to see you. Can Robby have some milk and cookies?"

"Mommy, please, her cookies are sooo good."

"Two and a small glass of milk. Then you can play with Robespierre."

After Robby was settled at the table with his snack and Robespierre as his companion, Beth followed me to the living room. I switched the radio to my favorite classical station so the music would blur our conversation.

"I guess you've heard."

"I hear a lot of things. Just which bit of gossip do you mean?"

"About Roger and me."

"That you're a couple."

She made a face. "Not any more. Last evening, after he had dinner at the Simpson's, he dropped by. I'm not to wait after choir for him. I'm too possessive. He needs breathing room. When I told him that was fine with me, he accused me of sulking."

The hurt in her voice troubled me. She and Roger had been a couple since June. "I can't imagine you being possessive. I thought the two of you were just friends."

"It went a little further than that. Sure I had hopes, but I didn't push. He's the one who calls or just drops by. He's been coming to the house for dinner several nights a week, including Thursdays and then we go to choir and the Pub together. I thought I was being nice."

"You were."

And what about Roger, I wondered. What kind of game was he playing?

"Any problems before this?" I asked.

She nodded. "After the choir picnic I took Robby home and stayed there. I just couldn't stand people's curiosity or chance another encounter with Judith. He thought Pete stayed. I'm sure Judith will gloat. She brags about seeing him."

"For voice lessons. She's the alto soloist for the Requiem."

Her eyes widened. "Why her?"

"Who knows. It's not that she's incompetent. She'll know her part. Her timing will be perfect, but there won't be an ounce of emotion in her delivery."

"I don't understand him."

"He seems to enjoy stirring the pot."

"What do you mean?"

"Marcie stopped by. She has a crush on him. He gives her advice on how to handle her mother and he's helping her with a college search. Then he plays up to Judith." I sighed. "I wish he didn't make such beautiful music. It may not be worth all the trouble he's causing."

She straightened. "It's not his fault. It's hers. Why does she want him when she's married?"

My thoughts filled with Judith's drunken ramblings. "Maybe she has him confused with someone else. I've never seen her act like she does with Roger during one of her flirtations. She was always content to tease."

"She's sick."

Indeed she was and I'd begun to think alcohol was an attempt to escape inner demons. A poor choice. But I wasn't sure of Roger's innocence either. He was a vain creature who liked to be stroked, in some ways like the cats he feared.

"I guess you're free again."

Her face flushed. "Looks that way. Pete asked me out. We're going to dinner Saturday night and taking Robby. It's not a real date."

"At least he recognizes you're a mom. I think Roger resents Robby."

"Maybe." She smiled. "I'll stop by and let you know how things go." She entered the kitchen. "Robby, put Robespierre down. Time to go home and make dinner."

After they left I wondered if I should speak to Roger when he came for lunch. Was he manipulating people and enjoying the animosity he stirred? Not that Judith needed any help to make misery for others.

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The leaves on the trees outside my windows had just begun to change colors. From the window seat where Robespierre and I sat, I watched sunlight sparkle on the Hudson River. The clock chimed the half hour. Roger was due at noon. I lifted the cat and carried him downstairs. Maria had agreed to keep him for the afternoon.

I trudged across the lawn and rang the bell. Maria answered. Robespierre leaped from my arms and trotted upstairs.

Maria smiled. "Mrs. Miller, you must come and see. El nino sleeps but soon he will wake."

In the nursery Robespierre sat on the floor in front of the crib. As soon as Carlos stirred, the cat began to talk. The baby gurgled and Robespierre answered.

"That's the most I've ever heard him talk."

"They do this much. Paul laugh when he hear them. Soon he will come home for lunch and there will be much laughter. I wish you could be here to see."

"I'm having a guest so today's not a good time."

"We will have the lunch or dinner soon. I will tell you when."

At home I put the finishing touches on lunch. Today I was serving open face turkey and ham sandwiches with a piquant cheddar sauce, salad and fudge brownie ice cream balls.

Roger was prompt. As we ate, we talked about the weather, the arrival of autumn and the town. There were no openings for the subjects that troubled me and I didn't want to be rude.

After lunch, we went to the living room. I opened the desk and spread my copy of Mozart's Requiem. Roger sat at the piano. As we reviewed the score and marked dynamics, he played segments to illustrate his intentions. His musicality seduced me from thoughts of other matters.

"I'd like you to start sitting in on rehearsals soon," he said.

How long could I postpone becoming part of the erratic emotions of the group? "Mid-October should be soon enough. You'll have time to beat your interpretation into their vocal cords."

He laughed. "I'll give you a reprieve, but you're right that I'll need to smooth the rough spots. They are an excellent group."

"What about the soloists?"

"I'm working privately with them. They'll be ready by rehearsal week."

Though I wanted to ask about Judith's progress, I refrained, especially since my inclination would be to tell him to find someone else. If he reduced the emotional flatness of her voice, he'd be a miracle worker.

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When Beth arrived to pick me up for my first rehearsal of the Mozart, the sparkle that had been missing from her eyes for weeks had returned. She wore jeans and a white sweater that made her look like a teenager.

"You look happy."

"I guess I am." She smiled.

"Just guess."

"Roger stopped by last evening to borrow my car, except he didn't. He stayed for dinner and after Robby went to bed, we talked. He apologized for his neglect and explained what had happened. Since Judith is one of the soloists, he has to keep her happy. To do that he had to spend some time with the Simpson's."

"There are other altos in the choir who are more capable than Judith of making the concert a success."

"Then why did he pick her? We all know what a purist he is."

"To keep her from making trouble is my guess. If he spends time with her, maybe he'll diffuse her attacks on his virtue."

Beth laughed. "Sometimes you're wicked. He said she called him after the picnic. He didn't tell me what she said, but I think he's afraid of her."

"Maybe, maybe not." I shook my head. "I'm beginning to see him as her male counterpart."

Her eyes widened. "How can you say that? He's a special person and wonderful. He stayed after Robby went to bed and...well...I think I'm in love."

I waited until she parked the car in front of the church. "Don't just think. Be careful and be sure."

"I will."

As we walked toward the church, we heard Judith before we saw her. "Come on, Shadow. You're mine. No one else cares."

We rounded the corner and watched Judith's attempts to entice the cat from its hiding place. Our arrival startled her and she dropped the food she held. The cat darted from the hedges, grabbed the morsel and vanished before Judith could act.

She glared. "Look what you did. I nearly had him." She laughed. "I was taking him to rehearsal. Wouldn't Roger have had a fit."

"It's not funny," Beth said. "You shouldn't tease him so."

I wondered if she meant Roger or the cat.

## Chapter 6

### Recordare

Beth and I hurried to the door and left a sputtering Judith behind. When the oak door closed, the laughter I'd stifled burst free. "I can't believe you criticized her. Are you prepared for her reaction? She doesn't get mad, she gets even."

"Not really. The words were out before I thought." Beth's blue eyes looked troubled. "I was right. Roger told me why he's afraid of cats. He was savaged and he had to have the rabies series. You know how gruesome they used to be."

Rabies shots, at least years ago were nothing to be enjoyed, but the disease was worse. Though I wanted to warn her to be careful about her renewed friendship with Roger, she wouldn't listen. Until the next time he froze her out, she was his willing acolyte.

Rehearsal was an eye-opener for me. Roger drove the choir hard, but he didn't spare himself. I studied his directing style and marked my score with the changes he'd made since our lunch meeting. My directions should conform to his expectations.

Seeing the way he drove the choir and himself made me realize how he'd attained the spectacular results with the choir and the organ. He didn't have as much natural talent as Marcie, but he disciplined every ounce and pushed himself with fierce determination. At times his sharp comments troubled me.

A loud noise startled me. I looked up to see he'd slammed the keyboard cover. I cringed. That was no way to treat any instrument. Roger pointed his finger. A flush covered his face.

"Tenors, watch me," he roared. "Are you tripping in dreamland? You should have this section memorized. I find you ragged and unprepared. Do you want to be the joke of the community? The success of our performance depends on your squeezing out every ounce of music you possess. I will not tolerate this."

He prowled the area in front of the piano and reminded me of a caged panther I'd once seen at the zoo. His tantrum shocked me, but I noticed none of the choir members seemed affronted by what appeared to me to be an inappropriate reaction.

"Sopranos, you're slurring your esses. We've worked on that fault for weeks. Pay attention to your diction. Judith, were you asleep? You're the section leader and if I can't depend on you to keep your section together, I'll look for someone else."

Judith's expression frightened me. Her eyes narrowed and her mouth thinned. While the alto's entrance had been slow, they'd blended well.

He paused at the piano and struck four notes. "Try this section again, and this time, pay attention."

They did. The difference amazed me.

Since there was no need to mark my score during the repeat, I studied the expressions of the choir members. The anger had faded from Judith's face and she eyed Roger like a glutton contemplating a seven course meal. Beth also watched him with rapt attention. The fervor of her glance nearly



embarrassed me. Was she falling in love and was he worthy of her devotion?

When rehearsal ended and the choir dispersed, Roger caught up with me at the sanctuary door. "What do you think?"

"I'm astonished. It's nearly perfect."

"That's not acceptable." Though he smiled, his eyes and the tone of his voice were dead serious. "Come with us to the Pub and we'll go over our scores. You can point out the rough spots."

"Can't we do it tomorrow?" Though I hadn't been a participant, the currents of a dozen conflicting energies had exhausted me.

"Best done while it's fresh. We could stay here, but we'd be keeping Beth, too. I'm depending on her for a ride. My car's in the shop."

Was that his reason for courting Beth? The idea lodged in my thoughts. What could I do if that was the case? Beth was so enthralled she'd never believe me.

"I'll go, but I won't stay late. I need my rest." And a break from the charged atmosphere Judith always generated.

He laughed. "You've more energy than most women half your age. If all older women were like you, I'd...change my dating habits."

Flattery works. My doubts slipped into a holding area. As we entered the choir room where Beth waited, he took my arm. "Oh, Beth, I forgot to tell the soloists I want to see them on Monday. Remind me to tell them."

"I will."

I tucked my score in my handbag. Roger held his in his hand. We walked downstairs and to Beth's car where Roger folded himself into the back seat.

When I entered the Pub the aroma of cigarette smoke brought on a coughing fit. A television at the end of the bar blared. Numbers flashed on a board. The crowd gathered at the bar and in the booths along the walls talked and laughed in loud voices. Most of them didn't look old enough to drink. Roger steered me into a second room, a bit brighter, a tad less smoky and found seats at a large center table. Judith waved and headed to the bar.

Roger held my chair and sat beside me. Beth took our drink orders. I handed her money. He didn't. More than half the choir had come, a change from the days of Judith's exclusive invitations.

He spread his score on the table. "Did you bring yours?"

I extracted my copy from my capacious handbag. "I'm not sure I can concentrate here."

"If you mean the noise, I tune it out."

"You've greater powers of concentration than I do. Probably my large curiosity is the cause. I like to listen to what others say and hear their secrets."

He laughed and pulled a bowl of popcorn closer. "But you seldom give anyone's secrets away."

"Because they're not mine."

Beth returned with our drinks. "Don't forget to mention the soloists' rehearsal. You'll have to call Ralph."

He waved her away. "Remind me later." He pointed to one of the passages I'd heard tonight. "This needs work."

"A bit. Though there was a vast improvement after your lecture." I pointed to a second section. "The basses overpowered the other sections here. You may have to ask several of the men not to sing."

He nodded. "Or have the other sections a bit more fortissimo. Let me think about this."

Judith sauntered across the room with a glass of amber liquid in her hand. "I don't believe you're discussing business here." She stood behind him and pressed her body against his chair. "Aren't you going to relax?" She ran her fingers along his neck.

He grasped her hand. "Let me be."

"Roger, we're here to socialize and have fun. I need to talk to you. Let's take a walk."

"Judith." Martin rose. "Let me get you some chili or a crock of onion soup."

She stroked Roger's neck. "Later we'll have our little talk, all right?"

Maybe the other choir members were used to her behavior because no one looked up. Roger's eyes held a trace of disgust. Martin's body language shouted anger. Tension gathered and my unease peaked.

"Let's do this tomorrow. My head's pounding. I can't handle the noise, the smoke, the confusion." I pushed my chair back and tucked my score away. "I'll bring a tape recorder next week. Then we can play it back."

"Good idea." He patted my hand. "The atmosphere is a bit heavy tonight."

A bit, I thought. More like a storm approached and I wasn't sure there was a way to stop trouble from visiting the choir.

"I'll take you home." Beth turned to Roger. "Do you want --"

He lightly caressed her hand. "Come back for me."

"Don't bother," Judith called. "I'll drive him home. I have some things to discuss with him."

"We walked, remember." Martin said.

Judith sank on a chair. "And whose idea was that?"

The answer was lost when Beth and I exited the second room and entered the noisy bar. I rubbed my temples.

"Are you okay?" Beth asked.

"An overdose of Judith."

"What did you think of the rehearsal?"

"The Mozart is shaping up nicely...Does he often have temper tantrums?"

She frowned. "The tenors and altos weren't paying attention. He's so dedicated and hard working that these things really upset him."

"He has to remember they're volunteers."

"I know, but he puts himself under pressure. He needs someone to take care of him."

I stared at the moon. Not full yet, but her idea was crazy. She was a good nurse and a natural nurturer and those qualities put her in danger of being trod on. "Don't fall into a trap. He might be the kind of man who delights in having a harem."

"Mrs. Miller, what do you mean?"

"I've noticed how many women, not just the choir members, fuss over him. Even I feel flattered by his attention. What does he give you?"

"Companionship. Affection -- at least I think he does. Music appreciation." She sighed. "I'm ready to move on. In the past year I've dated two men. They didn't want what I want and that I have a son bothered them. Roger's at the house a lot. He's lonely and so am I. Life can be a drag when you're not part of a couple."

"What about --" I cut off my question, but I wondered why she'd forgotten her hurt and anger of several weeks ago.

"About what?" she asked.

"Pete." I hadn't meant to mention him, but I needed to divert the conversation from Roger.

She shrugged. "He comes and takes Robby places. He acts like a big brother to both of us."

And that was a good place for him to start. "How does Roger treat your son?"

She frowned. "Fine. Of course he doesn't play games with Robby, but he's a much more serious person. Robby kind of stays out of his way. Unless Roger comes for dinner, he waits until Robby's in bed."

"Does he return your favors?"

"I don't understand what you mean."

I shook my head. Maybe she didn't see loaning her car, playing secretary or buying his drinks as favors. I pray she doesn't end up playing Martha while some Mary steals him away.

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Several mornings later as I walked through the fallen leaves on my way to the river, Pete fell into step beside me. His dark auburn hair needed a trim and he looked like he hadn't slept. "More weight loss activity?" I asked.

He made a face. "You would ask that. Couldn't you just think I wanted some time with you and this is the best chance I have? I figure you'll be giving up your walks soon."

"Only during blizzards and ice storms."

He linked arms with me. "How close are you and Beth?"

"Why do you ask?"

He kicked a pile of leaves. "Roger the perfect man. You know what I mean."

"I'm afraid I don't."

"Beth, Robby and I did things together for a couple of weeks. Seems Roger was busy. Guess he's unbusy these days. When I stopped by to take them to dinner, he was there so I took Robby. The boy's upset. He doesn't like Roger and he's afraid to tell his mother."

His voice held distaste and every time he mentioned Roger, his hand tightened on my arm. "Are you sure he's not picking up your dislike? You're his hero."

"I try not to say anything."

"You don't have to. Children are experts at reading body language."

"Then you might be right. I don't like him. It's taken me until now to figure out why."

Would Pete have a view of Roger's character that would help me understand my growing uneasiness?  
"I'll bite."

He studied the ground. "I like...maybe more than like Beth. I've fought my feelings since the day we built the snowman. I could have left that day and never given her a thought. Except I couldn't. I decided Robby needed a male influence, so I hung around. But that wasn't the real reason...She treats me like I'm one of Robby's friends."

"Serves you right." Containing my laughter caused me to choke.

He pounded my back. "Not funny, but you're right. I had this idea about not getting involved with some man's leftovers."

I stopped so abruptly he nearly fell. "What a stupid bit of logic."

His grin was sheepish. "Yeah. I know that. Think I was afraid. She looked good to me that day. Still does. Guess it's too late. She and that creep look happy with each other."

"Maybe, maybe not." How could I tell him that though Beth had bought Roger's excuses, they were subject to change? Knowing my young friend, he'd try to force Beth to see what she needed to discover

on her own. "Keep cool. Be her friend. One problem is that she thinks he needs her."

"You mean if I act like I can't handle my life, she'll come running?"

"You're not that good an actor. Remember your undercover experience."

He groaned. "Not my thing."

"Just be there when she needs you."

He kissed my cheek and jogged away. I walked to the river and tossed pebbles in a tide pool along the bank. Ripples spread in concentric circles. Just like life where a single event can spread and infect many lives.

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On Friday night, I invited Charles, Laura and Lars for dinner and bridge. This would be our last chance for a game before Lars left for New Mexico. We dined on corn chowder, Yankee pot roast with Boston cream pie for dessert. As usual Edward complimented the cook with effusive comments.

After we cleared the table, we went to the living room for cards. Loud thumping sounds came from the bedroom.

"Good grief, Katherine, do you think you're being robbed again?" Edward asked.

"It's Robespierre announcing his displeasure."

Laura chuckled. "I guess he smells your shoe polish."

"What's he doing?" Lars asked.

"Something mean. Sometimes he acts like a spoiled brat. If we ignore him, he'll settle down. Deal."

Two hours later I brought out dessert, coffee and tea. Edward tasted the cake. "Delicious, but not as delicious as your famous chocolate one."

He leaned forward. His eyes and expression registered gossip mode. Under the table, I kicked Lars. He rolled his eyes. Laura groaned but kept eating.

"So what do you think about our choir romance? Isn't it sweet?"

"Are you talking about Beth and Roger?"

"Who else? They look so sweet together. Wouldn't it be absolutely perfect if they got married. Then he'd be sure to stay."

Lars and I exchanged a glance. I coughed to keep from laughing. Laura gestured toward the bedroom. "Release the cat," she mouthed. I shook my head. Robespierre or not, Edward would persist in sharing his views.

"What makes you think there's a romance?"

"One only has to look at them when they're together," Edward said.

"And that'll make him stay here?"

"Why not? Beth has an excellent position at the hospital and her sweet son likes school. She'll never move."

"I'm not sure that's true." What I wasn't sure of was that this was a viable couple. "If she owned her house, I'd say you were right. Still, what's to keep him here when the city's so close. He'd be a hit on the concert circuit."

Edward groaned. "Please don't say that. We need him here. When the Bishop comes for confirmation, we'll be the envy of all the churches."

"Pride," I said. "And one must be prepared for the worst. Besides, it could be that they're just friends. Roger doesn't seem to be marriage-minded and he's not fond of Robby."

"You'll see."

Laura rose. "Now that you and Katherine have tried to arrange lives, I think it's time to leave. As usual, the food was wonderful and the game fun."

"Absolutely delicious." Edward said. "It was sweet of you to have us."

Lars and I walked them to the door. When they had reached their car, he put his arm around me. "Must you always needle him?"

"If only he wasn't so sure and so full of pride. Besides, he'd think it odd if I didn't poke holes in his fantasies. Thanks for coming."

He put his fingers on my lips. "Don't toss me out yet. Let me give you a hand in the kitchen and try to persuade you to at least visit me this winter."

"We'll see." I hid a yawn with my hand. "First, let the beast out of his cage."

A moment later Robespierre bounded into the kitchen. Lars followed with a pair of shredded panty hose in his hand. "Your bedroom's a disaster area and I hope you weren't planning to wear these again."

I glared at the cat. "You're not funny."

Lars laughed. "He's spoiled."

"You're right. He thinks he's punishing me."

Lars began loading the dishwasher. "Come spend New Year's Eve with me. I hate hanging around with my daughter and her husband. She says she feels guilty about leaving me alone."

"Can I bring the cat?"

"Send him to Maria's."

"I'll think about it."

"That's what you always say. If you appeared on my doorstep, I'd probably have heart failure. At least write. Your letters are filled with amazing stories and some of them about people I don't know."

"Hang around me long enough and you will."

"What's your take on Edward's latest match-making scheme? He nearly convinced me."

I put leftovers in storage containers and passed the empty dishes to Lars. "He's wrong. Roger's using Beth. She's going to be hurt."

"Don't meddle."

"After last summer I've sworn off. I'll just be an observer."

"Good." He shook his head. "Your vow will last until someone you love gets hurt. What's wrong with Roger Brandon? I thought you believed he was the greatest. I remember hearing you say you coveted him."

"Musically, he is, but he's not so great as a person. I've seen the pair together and there are no sparks. He borrows her car. She feeds him. She runs errands for him. When we went to the Pub after choir, she bought his drink."

Lars' laughter filled the kitchen. "You went to the Pub at night? How many passes did you fend off?"

"I was well chaperoned. More than half the choir was there."

"I'm glad you got home safely."

"Beth brought me." I laughed. "I didn't even finish my drink. Too much noise, too much smoke, too much Judith Simpson."

"Aha. Don't blame you a bit."

Once the food was stored and the dishwasher started, Lars kissed me good night. After putting the bedroom in order I went to bed. My dreams were filled with attempts to untangle a web. I woke feeling groggy and before taking my walk I drank several cups of tea. Many more dreams filled with such frustration and I'd have to do something about the tangled lives in my sphere. The problem centered around which line to follow.

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October slid toward November and on hearing that a frost had been predicted, the time had come to cover my mint beds with straw. Though most of the plants are hardy, some aren't and I'd rather err on the cautious side. I filled my garden barrow with straw and started the mindless chore. As I worked, I saw Marcie and waved. She ran across the street.

"You look pretty today."

"Thanks."

She wore jeans and a pink sweater that made her porcelain skin glow. Her brown hair had been curled at the ends.

"So what's been happening?"

"A lot," she said. "The Saturday music program is challenging. My teachers want me to enter some competitions. They rave about my improvement." She grabbed some straw and joined me in my work. "It's because of Roger and the way he's been helping me learn how to tap my inner power."

"Have you decided on a college yet?"

She shook her head. "Roger and I are making a list of the ones with solid music programs and their requirements. I'll spend this year mastering what I need for auditions. I might double major in voice."

"What about something more practical?"

"If my voice is half as good as Roger says, I won't have to worry."

"And your parents?"

"You know Mom. She doesn't want me to compete, to attend the Saturdays, to have lessons with Roger, to major in music in college. She's always reminding me of how much older he is than me." She bent and carefully spread the straw. "She doesn't get the picture. He can help me get what I want. Does that sound selfish?"

"A little, but I understand what you mean."

"He loves music as much as I do."

She followed me as I pushed the barrow to the last bed. "I'm sure you enjoy talking music with him. I know I do. Maybe your mother would like to see you spend time with your peers." So would I, but unlike Judith, I wouldn't try to bully her.

"So she says." Marcie laughed. "They're infants. I don't enjoy the things they do. All they want to talk about is boys and who's doing what with who. Boring. I'll be sixteen next month but I feel ages older than they are."

What could I say? While searching for words, I finished my chore. "You must have classmates who know what they want."

"And like me, they're busy laying their foundations. That's what Roger says."

The rest of her conversation focused on what Roger said. My head ached and I tuned her out. Once the tools were in the storage shed, she left. As I walked upstairs, I wondered if I'd missed anything important.



## Chapter 7

### Confutatus

As the rehearsals for the Evensong continued, my role changed from observer to participant. Thank heavens I'd worked with the choir last spring and had oiled rusty skills. Roger drove me as hard as he did the choir and himself. He even spent an afternoon showing me his particular style of directing. I must admit I savored the challenge and was infused with a desire to excel.

Something in Roger's aura troubled me. I understood his passion for music and for perfection. That wasn't what bothered me, but I couldn't finger the cause.

His likeness to a caged jungle cat grew stronger. Several times I observed temper flares, usually over petty things. A dropped hymnal during rehearsal of the Sunday offertory evoked biting remarks. A member arriving five minutes late for rehearsal produced a tirade on loyalty. The explosions were quick and ended as rapidly as they arose.

Most of the time Beth acted as a buffer between Roger and a growing number of disgruntled singers. Did he appreciate her efforts to diffuse potential problems? I had my doubts.

The pressure of the coming performance began to effect everyone. Even the most placid members caught Roger's feverish push for perfection. My prayers became a plea for the explosion to wait until after the performance.

And one more element waited to be added to the volatile atmosphere -- the soloists.

On The Thursday before rehearsal week while Beth parked the car, I hurried to the church. I intended to ask Roger to let up on the pressure. The sound of Judith's voice with all trace of stridency gone halted me on the steps. Her words brought a rush of anger.

"We just won't tell her what we've planned. Come on, Roger, you have the right to spend an evening without her. She's not your keeper."

"You know what I feel about after choir activities. Everyone should be included."

She made a purring sound. "You're too nice. Tonight's for a special group chosen by me. Do you really think your position is secure? With one snap of my fingers you could be gone. I've only invited the people you need to impress. People who could help advance your career. Not everyone's from the choir."

My hand tightened on the railing. He paused for a long time.

"Come on, cut the strings before you're stuck in the widow's web. She's a sweet, young thing, but --" She laughed, a low throaty sound. "Besides, Martin's away for a few days."

"What do you mean? Where is he? Doesn't he realize how important these last rehearsals are?" Anger tightened Roger's voice.

"His mother's in the hospital. He had to drive upstate to see her."

"Will he be back next week? We've four rehearsals scheduled and I need every voice present."

"Martin? He's Mr. Dependable. Don't worry. He'll be here. He told me seven times to reassure you about that." She made a derisive sound. "He's not the most vital voice for the Requiem."

She paused. Was she waiting for Roger's assurance of her importance?

"About tonight?" she asked.

"Just this once," he said.

The heavy oak door closed with a bang. Someone clattered up the steps. A moment later an out-of-breath Beth arrived. She reached for my wrist. "You're flushed. Are you all right?"

"Just lost in thought." And angry with the pair who'd already arrived.

"I'll get the car after choir. I had to park two blocks away. Must be something going on."

"A meeting of the bazaar committee." A meeting I would have attended but for my commitment to Roger and the choir. Her arrival had startled me and I hoped it had shocked the pair in the choir room. When we entered Roger was seated at the piano studying his score.

Judith turned from the bulletin board. "Mrs. Miller, can I put you down for a chocolate cake for the after concert party?"

"Of course."

"And Beth, why don't you bring wine? I know how busy you are with your job and your son. I'm sure you don't want to spend your free time cooking."

"Put me down for chips and dip. One of the women I work with brought a recipe I'd like to try."

"Nothing too outré, I hope. I suppose you won't have a problem with dip." She smiled. "It's hard to be a gourmet cook when you have a small child. Their taste is limited to hot dogs, hamburgers and macaroni and cheese. How I remember those days."

Judith was no one to talk about cooking skills. I'd eaten a number of the meals she mentioned at her house when Marcie was my piano student.

"And what are you bringing?"

"Guess you haven't heard. The Wilsons have to leave the minute we finish singing. Justin's coming home from England. I told them to stop by the house if they get back early enough."

"It will be good to see him again."

She laughed. "Two years at Cambridge should have changed him from the studious lump he was." She approached Beth with a cat-like glide. "He's a year or two younger than you, but I definitely can fix you up."

Beth glanced at Roger. "I'm content with my life as it is."

Judith's sly smile annoyed me. Roger stared at the keyboard. Beth's shoulders stiffened and she walked to her seat. Had she guessed she was about to be dumped -- again?

At the break before we moved to the church, Beth cornered Roger. I didn't hear what he said but her expression told me she was hurt. For the rest of the rehearsal, she was quiet.

As we headed back to the choir room, Beth handed me her music folder. "I'll get the car. Looks like we're not going out tonight. Roger said he's too tired to even stop by the house."

One of the regular Pub goers started to speak and then coughed. I headed upstairs and waited until Roger was alone.

"What are you doing to Beth? She's been running interference for you for weeks. Doesn't she deserve the truth?"

"I'm in a bind. Look, Judith is upset about something Beth said to Marcie. Judith's also on edge about the performance. She's a soloist and I have to keep her happy until after the Evensong. Once that's over --"

"Judith's married."

He laughed. "I'm not interested in her that way. She's too old."

His interest in Judith wasn't what bothered me. Judith's desire formed the core of my concern. I've watched her flirtations for years. There was something different in her pursuit of him. Something that disturbed me and I didn't know why. His response added to my worries. His laughter had been detached and made me think he was a cold-blooded observer roiling the pool and waiting to see the results.

As I left the choir room, Judith appeared at the foot of the steps. "Roger, hurry up. Everyone will be waiting at the house." She put her hand on my arm. "After Beth drops you off, why don't you walk over to the house?"

"It's rather late and I'm up early. Another time." I wanted no part of whatever game she'd chosen and I'd pick Beth over her any time. I hoped Beth had waited in the car. Soon enough, she'd learn she hadn't been included, but Roger owed her an explanation and some consideration.

When I reached the car, I knew she knew. Her eyes filled with tears but her voice held anger. "What did I do to them?"

"Nothing. This is a Judith game and the first time he's given in to her manipulation."

She shook her head. "Not the first time. I thought Roger and I were friends...even more. Any time he was bored, I was there. When he needed a car, he borrowed mine. I even paid the check when we went out to dinner. He used me."

"You let it happen."

"Never again. I quit. I'll call him tomorrow and let him know I won't be performing with the choir any longer."

"A bit drastic and the explosion that's waiting to happen will fall on you. Plus, Judith will gloat and get a

rush from pushing another person from the choir. Don't let her run your life."

"Am I supposed to act like nothing happened?"

"That's the adult way."

She sucked in a breath. "You're right. Would you come in for a bit?"

Though I wanted mint tea, classical music and my cat, I nodded. She needed a friend. "For a bit."

When we pulled into the driveway of her rented house, Pete's car was parked at the curb. Beth slammed on the brakes and jumped out of the car. "Something's happened to Robby."

I turned out the headlights and pulled the key from the ignition. Then I followed Beth to the house.

She flung the door open. "Pete, Marcie, is Robby sick?"

Pete caught her in his arms. "He's fine. I stopped by to give him a new helmet for bike riding. A guy I know individualizes them. Robby asked for a story. Since I was free I paid Marcie and sent her home."

"I'll pay you back."

"Not to worry. Mrs. M, how are you? Any murders with missing weapons to report?"

"Not at the moment."

Beth stepped from the circle of his arms. She looked puzzled and thoughtful. "I'll make a pot of coffee." She walked to the kitchen.

"Already done," Pete said.

I started to follow, but he caught my arm. "How come she's not at the Simpson's? Marcie said her mother was entertaining the choir."

"Just a select few."

"I thought Beth was part of the inner circle."

"Not any more."

"She okay?"

"Disillusioned."

"You told me to stick around. You were right. I'd like to pop him a good one."

"He didn't act alone. Judith helped." I moved away. "Coffee waits."

Beth had three filled cups and a coffee cake on the table. "Looks home-made," I said.

She shook her head. "A box mix."

"Better than the ones at the grocery store unless there's a bakery."

Beth sat next to Pete. "How would you like to go to the party after the Evensong with me?"

Though I knew why she'd asked him, I was pleased. She couldn't allow Judith to force her from the choir or let Roger's defection pull her down. Pete grinned. I hoped he wouldn't be angry when he learned there was a bit of bravado behind her invitation. Still, he was sharp enough to know and understand.

"Sure. Why don't I bring Robby? He might get a kick seeing his Mom and listening to the music. Then you'd only need Marcie for the party."

"Not Marcie. Judith has her booked for the day. Blanca, Maria's niece is watching him. Bring her along. She likes music. Robby wants her to teach him to play the guitar."

After eating a slice of coffee cake, I rose. "Time for me to head home."

Pete stood. "I'll walk you home. Wouldn't want anything to happen to my favorite sleuth." He winked and turned to Beth. "Mind if I drop back?"

"Please do." Beth smiled. She stood at the door and watched until we reached the top of the driveway. This time, I thought she'd learned the truth about Roger and I believed she'd mend quickly.

Pete held my arm. "Thanks again for the advice."

"Just be careful. She's feeling kind of fragile right now."

"I'll be cool. Friendship. This is a first. Sure hope we don't get stuck on that step."

I laughed. "I think you can handle it."

He walked me to the door. Before I had the key in the lock, Robespierre burst through the pet door. He rubbed against my legs and butted Pete.

Pete squatted and rubbed the cat's head. "I know I haven't been around lately, but your person's short on dead bodies."

"I wish you wouldn't joke about this."

"You having premonitions?"

"Nothing like that. Once was enough."

He turned and jogged down the street. At the corner, he waved.

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The next afternoon I walked to the church to discuss the drive for the Food Cupboard with Edward.

Every November the local churches collect food and money for perishables. This year I was the chairwoman for St. Stephen's and I was on a mission. After I heard how much money had been collected at the first two Evensongs, I decided to petition the Vestry to donate the offerings from the Requiem for the drive. Knowing how seldom the members agreed with anything I proposed, I decided Edward should make the pitch. First I had to neutralize Roger's appeal to Edward's pride.

Roger had persuaded the Vestry to give the choir the money from the first two programs. It seems he had an idea for the choir to tour England. While that was a nice thought, in the twenty-five years since the Evensong programs had started, the offering had always been donated to special charities.

Edward listened to my pitch. "Katherine, I just don't know. Just think how glorious it would be for the choir to sing at Westminster Abbey, St. Paul's or St. Stephen's in London."

"That would be nice, but think of how many hungry people could be fed with the offering. When Charles and I began the programs, we wanted the offerings to be donated to worthy causes, not for pride and vanity."

He nodded. "As usual, you're absolutely right. There's something about the way he sells his ideas that sways the Vestry. I'll remind them of the purpose of the events. At least they have to vote on each of the offerings."

"Thank you."

Edward and I stood at the French doors and looked into Memorial Garden. The grass had browned and the bushes were bare except for the row of holly along the privet hedge.

Edward opened the door. "We're extending the wall in the spring."

Beneath the stones in the wall that stands in the center of the garden are the ashes of former members of the congregation. The names are engraved on metal plaques.

"Why?"

"There are requests for more spaces than we have left."

"What happens when the garden's a solid wall."

"Neither you nor I will see that day." He sighed. "The Vestry shouldn't have sold the land behind the church. We would have had space for any number of projects."

"You can't blame me for that Vestry decision. Happened before either of us came here."

He laughed. "Katherine, you're so refreshing." he turned and entered his study.

The side door of the church opened and Marcie ran out. Her face was flushed and her hair mussed.

"Want to walk home with me?" I strode across the garden.

She stared at her shoes. "Can't. Mom's picking me up and I'm late."

"How was your lesson?"

"Fine."

Something was wrong. Her voice was barely above a whisper. What had Judith done now?

"I thought you had your lessons at his apartment."

"That's voice. Dad said I could take organ lessons. This was my first."

A car door slammed. Judith marched up the walk. Anger radiated from her. I stepped into the shadows cast by the towering hedge.

"Where were you? I've circled the block five times. Your lesson was over at four."

Marcie's shoulders slumped. "We were...talking about music and I forgot the time."

"So what else is new? You are totally inconsiderate and your father encourages your behavior. Well it's not going to continue. Get in the car and wait for me. I have to talk to Roger."

"Mom, don't say anything to him, please."

"Do you think we spend our time talking about your petty problems. We have more important things to discuss." Judith strode away. "I matter to him. You don't."

After she entered the church, I stepped onto the walk. "Courage, child."

Marcie looked up. "She's chasing him and she doesn't realize how foolish she looks to people. She's too old for him." She scuffed the toe of her sneaker. "Mom likes young men. That's why I don't bring boys home. I get so embarrassed about the way she acts. My friends laugh at her."

I didn't know how to reply to that. I struggled to find an answer.

"I wish she was dead." Marcie whispered the words.

"Marcie!" There had been anger and desperation in her voice. Before I could say any more, she scurried to the car. Surely she wouldn't act on her anger.

As I walked home I wondered if Martin knew how his daughter felt about her mother, or if he saw the real Judith.

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Several days later the discovery of some overdue library books sent me uptown. The walk was a welcome break in my day. Since rehearsal week was in full swing and the first two practice sessions had lasted until nearly midnight, I had skipped my usual morning walk.

The soloists had joined us and my fears about Judith had been realized. The tonal quality of her voice had remained expressionless. Roger didn't seem to notice, but several of the choir members had made faces when the quartet sang. His lack of concern puzzled me. What kind of hold did she have over him?

At the library I browsed in the new arrival section and hoped there were somethings that would strike me. Since my taste in reading is eclectic, there usually were several choices. Three books seemed interesting. As I approached the check-out desk, Judith emerged from her office and stood on the small landing that overlooked the main room.

"Mrs. Miller, I need to talk to you about Marcie."

The note of demand in her voice nearly made me refuse, but curiosity won. "Let me check out these books."

"I'll be waiting."

A short time later, I climbed the short flight of stairs to her office. She stood by the window. When I entered she whirled and startled me.

"You've got to stop encouraging Marcie to believe she can have a career in music. I've tried but she won't listen."

I leaned against the door. "She's extremely talented."

"So was I. I wanted to be an architect. My teachers encouraged me but I learned that wasn't a woman's field. Neither is music. To be a real woman, you have to know how to attract a man." She laughed. "I've mastered that."

"But Marcie's not you."

She paced from the window to the desk. "He won't let her do it. He stole my dream. How else did he get what I wanted?"

"Who are you talking about?" I asked.

She ignored my question.

The doorknob pressed into my back. My thoughts centered on escape, but I wouldn't turn my back on her. The way her eyes glittered scared me. She moved to within inches of my position. The smell of alcohol made me cough.

"No one can steal another person's dream."

She whirled and stalked away. "A lot you know, but you never understood. He hurt me and you won't believe me. He'll hurt her too."

"Who? Martin?"

"Why would Martin hurt me? Don't act dumb. You know who I mean. I fixed him once." Her eyes held a wild excitement. "I'll fix him again. You'll see. Then maybe you'll believe me."

I shifted the books and reached for the doorknob.

"Judith, I have to go. I promise I'll talk to Marcie."



She turned and, as though she had just realized I was there, stared. "You. Are you spying on me again? I saw you hiding in the bushes at the church. You're always prying into what isn't your business."

A frisson of fear slid along my spine and radiated along the nerves. How foolish. What could happen in a public place?

"I wasn't spying. I had a meeting with Edward and he wanted to tell me about the new memorial wall. We had just stepped outside when I saw Marcie. She looked upset and I wanted to see if she needed help."

"She should be upset. She's trying to take him from me but he doesn't want her. She's just a silly child. She won't listen but she'll be sorry. So will you if you don't stop spying on me."

"Judith!"

She laughed again and the sound chilled me. "He hurt me. He hurt me but he won't hurt me again."

I opened the door and ran down the steps. My hands shook and I held the books against my chest. Instead of going home, I walked to Sarah's house. Maybe the ordinary chaos there would help me forget Judith's craziness.

Sarah opened the door. "What's wrong? You look like you've found another body."

"Just had a shocking experience."

"What?"

"Make me a pot of mint tea and I'll tell you." I followed her to the kitchen where she put water on to boil. I stared at the wall and tried to come to grips with the scene in Judith's office. Who had she meant? Roger? Some man from her past? When the tea was ready, I sipped and sighed.

"Now tell me what's wrong," Sarah said.

When I finished the first cup, I related my encounter at the library. "She scares me."

"And for good reason. Maria and I had lunch at the Pub today. Judith was there and her lunch was a liquid one. Avoid her."

"Wish I could. Unfortunately I'm directing the choir for the Evensong Sunday and she's one of the soloists."

"Next time before you volunteer, tell yourself Sarah will have me committed to the hospital over the mountain."

"That might be the wisest solution."

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That night at rehearsal, Judith acted as though the scene in her office hadn't occurred. Her open friendliness did nothing to relieve my edginess in her presence.

## Chapter 8

### Lacrymosa

As the last strains of the organ faded from the air, the audience attending the Mozart Requiem began to leave the sanctuary. From the expressions on their faces, I knew we'd been a success. I kept the choir in their place until the aisles cleared. They disbanded and headed to the choir room to disrobe before gathering in Fellowship Hall for the usual reception.

I felt drained physically and exhilarated emotionally. A buzz of conversation flowed from the open door of the hall where most of the attendees gathered. My legs felt rubbery and beads of perspiration formed on my forehead. I slipped inside and collapsed on one of the chairs set against the wall as the adrenaline rush that had carried me through the performance ended.

Edward bustled over. He beamed. "Katherine, you were just...magnificent." His booming voice caused people to turn and stare. "You and Roger must work together again. I've never heard the choir sound more...magnificent. What a magnificent idea to have the choir in the nave. The music soared."

I'd identified his word of the day and vowed not to use it. One of my teachers had said if you wanted to make a word yours use it ten times. At Edward's rate of usage, he'd make all the descriptive adjectives his and leave none for the rest of us.

"I don't think I could do this again. I'm feeling my age and then some. But you're right. The performance went well."

"Not just well --" Roger entered the room and diverted Edward's attention. "I must tell him how --"

He missed two chance to use his word, but I wasn't disappointed. In fact, laughter threatened to spurt like champagne from a shaken bottle. If I became hysterical, I'd attract more attention than I deserved. While I'd been the visible partner, Roger had been the one who'd made the production a success.

"Nicely done, Kate." Lars handed me a glass of white wine. "You look wilted."

"Just catching my breath. This robe weighs as much as my cat and that was harder work than I remember."

He touched his glass to mine. "Just standing all that time is an effort at our age."

"Lars! We're not even septuagenarians yet." The wine took the dryness from my throat and added a bit of giddiness to my voice. "I'd better shuck this robe. I stopped in here because I couldn't move another step."

His hand at my elbow provided a gentle support. "Why don't we skip this party? I'll take you home and make a Lars' omelet deluxe."

"Sounds wonderful, but it's the party for me. The traditional chocolate cake is in the fridge. We won't stay late, but I want to hear the tape. After the first few notes, I heard nothing."

As we crossed the room, people stopped to tell me how much they'd enjoyed the program. Since I'd played only a minor role in the success, my response was low key.

"I'll pass your compliments to Roger and the choir. They did all the work. I was just stage dressing."

Betty Peters pulled me aside. "Nicely done. Why did he give Judith a solo? She doesn't need the spotlight. Hasn't anyone warned him about her? He'll be her next victim and he's such a nice man."

I shrugged. "I only stepped in to direct. He made all the decisions." I squeezed her hand. "How's Alan?"

She beamed. "He and Nancy just gave us our first grandchild. A little boy."

"Then you have a lot to be thankful for."

She nodded, but the bitter line of her mouth remained. Some people don't forgive or forget.

Lars tugged on my arm. "Kate, we're going to be late."

After I shed the robe, I felt lighter and rejuvenated. As we walked downstairs, I heard voices and I paused.

"Judith, we've got to go," Martin said. "People will be arriving in a half hour and we should be there to greet them."

"You go ahead. I'll wait for Roger. He has my car. Check to see that Marcie followed my directions to the letter."

"You know she will."

"If she knows what's good for her."

"It wasn't fair for you to make her stay at home. She would have been as proud of her mother as I am."

"You're dreaming. She's jealous of me."

"Why do you say things like that?"

My ire rose. I stepped forward. Lars gripped my arm. "Kate, no."

"I have to do something before she ruins that child's life."

"It's not your problem." He groaned. "I forgot. The world's problems are yours."

"Not true. Just those I care for."

He laughed. "Just half the world then. Please don't interfere. Remember the last time you spoke to someone about their child."

"How could I forget?" That action had been one of the triggers for my tenant's murder. "I know you're right but --."

By the time we reached the hall, the Simpsons were gone. Several choir members walked out with us. The air was chilly and I shivered as we walked to the car.

As soon as we reached the house, I put the kettle on and made some selections from my stores of mint. Apple mint, a pinch of catnip and peppermint. I'd need a calm center to endure several hours at the Simpson's.

"One cup and I'll be fine. Two and it's party time."

Lars chuckled. "Kate's cure-all. Blend some for me to take to New Mexico. Every night, I'll drink a cup and wonder what you've managed to get yourself into."

"Life is meant to be experienced." I poured steaming water into the teapot. "When do you leave?"

"Tuesday morning. Are you up for an airport trip?"

"No problem. Why the middle of the week?"

"Bonnie's fussing about being cheated out of time with me. She was upset when I delayed my departure."

Especially because I was the cause. "And Don?"

"He thinks his sister's acting like a spoiled brat. Don't ask what he thinks about her husband."

"I won't."

"The young man is an opportunist and that's kind."

"I wish you weren't going."

"I wish you were coming with me, but I'll be back in three months." He touched his mug to mine. "Here's to friendship, a forever thing."

When we finished the tea, we put on our coats. Lars carried the cake container.

We stopped beside his car and I frowned. "We're driving? Why? It's only two blocks and parking will be at a premium."

"It's cold and we're taking advantage of our age." He handed me the cake container. "I spoke to Martin at the reception. He promised us a spot in their driveway."

"But we don't plan to stay that long."

"Don't argue." He started the car.

Since there might be a need for a quick getaway, perhaps driving was a good idea. Who knows what accusations a drunk Judith would make? I needed to let Martin know about her threats and once more urge him to get help for Marcie and himself.

One spot remained in the double driveway. Lars pulled in and stopped the car. Martin stepped outside at

the kitchen entrance. When he saw it was us, he waved. "Had to chase two cars."

"Thanks."

Cars lined both sides of the street almost to the river. Lars took the cake and we entered the front hall. Our coats joined the others on the long deacon's bench. Lars handed the cake container to Marcie.

"Truly magnificent."

I giggled. "I hope he's used it ten times."

Lars laughed and most of the people in the living room and those clustered around the bar and buffet turned to stare.

"You've done it now. How are you going to explain?"

"Tell them you got fresh."

"You wouldn't."

He winked. "Watch me."

I grabbed him and pulled him into the living room. We found seats on one of the three couches. When the house was built this space had been two rooms. Martin and Judith had taken the partition out.

"What would you like to drink?" he asked.

"White wine and club soda. I'm saving my calories for food." With thirty seven choir members, the spread would be large. Since Roger's arrival, nine new members have joined the choir.

"So am I," Lars said. "That's the best thing about these affairs."

"You get the drinks and I'll pick the appetizers."

As I took two plates, Marcie put several dishes on hot plates. The front door opened. Roger strolled in with Pete and Beth close behind. I put the plates down and went into the front hall to greet them.

Pete saluted. "Mrs. M, you looked like a bat in that black robe."

Roger snorted. I laughed. "Glad to amuse."

"Robby's words."

Beth took off her coat and stuck her blue scarf in the sleeve. She'd changed from the slacks she'd worn to the Evensong to a blue dress that ended at mid-thigh.

Roger's eyes widened in appreciation. "Beth, you look great."

"Thanks. Do you remember Pete?"

"Sure. Robby's buddy."

Pete slipped his arm around Beth's waist. "And his mother's...friend."

Roger strode away. Pete winked and I grinned.

Beth held a bag. "Where should I put this?"

"I guess on the buffet."

"Good news." Roger's voice rose above the clamor. "Choir rehearsal is canceled for Thursday. You all deserve a day off." Applause followed his announcement. "I have the tape. After I get a drink and some food, you can hear how great you were."

As if on cue, Edward's "magnificent" was heard.

"Not again," someone said.

Lars chuckled. I laughed.

Marcie grabbed the bag from Beth. "Don't laugh at Roger."

"Not Roger. It's Edward. Magnificent must be his word of the day."

"What's this?"

"Chips and dip."

"I'd better get a bowl for the chips. Mom would have a fit if I put the bag on the buffet."

"You've done a good job."

Judith emerged from the kitchen. "Don't give her the credit. She only followed my directions. I suppose she's whining about missing the performance."

"Not a word."

She looked into the living room. "Roger, you have the tape. Let me show you how to use the machine and get you a drink." She stopped at the bar and poured two glasses of Scotch over ice. She drank hers and refilled her glass.

"I need food first. You know how hungry a performance makes a person." He put the drink down and headed to the buffet. He stood behind me. We both filled plates with assortments from the variety of appetizers.

I scooped a chip into Beth's dip and ate. "Delicious." I added some to both of the plates I held.

Roger followed my example. "You're right. It's great."

By the time I'd traded a plate to Lars for a drink, the tape began. All conversation stopped. As I listened to Roger play the Introit, gooseflesh covered my arms. Brilliant, lush. He was more than good, but I refused to use Edward's word.

Everyone in the room appeared rapt, except Judith. She tapped her foot against the carpet in a steady rhythm. The Requiem began. The choir sounded full and rich. The soloists were wonderful, except Judith. Her emotionless voice flattened the quartet. I looked at Roger and saw agreement in his expression.

Judith sipped her third or fourth glass of Scotch and preened. Occasionally, she stroked Roger's arm. Marcie stood beside her father in the doorway leading to the dining room. Every time her mother sang, she flinched. Not that I blamed her.

"Magnificent." Edward's voice sounded over the last note. "You're to be congratulated, all of you." He rose and headed to the buffet. "Now for what we really came for, the food."

Roger bowed. "I'm proud of you but wait until Passion Sunday."

"We were good, weren't we?" Though Judith had included everyone, her stance and her expression shouted "me."

A dozen conversations began. Lars and I joined Laura and Edward at the table. Martin and Marcie carried food from the kitchen and removed the remains of the appetizers.

As we ate I noticed the number of times Judith went to the bar. Lars and I had filled our plates with some new dishes and some old standbys. I must admit to eating more than I should have. The portions were small but the variety was vast. Lars returned for seconds once the crowd around the table thinned. My eyes said more but my stomach protested.

Judith waved me to her side. "Would you like to cut your famous cake?"

"Why not." I followed her into the kitchen.

Marcie sat at the table cutting a pan of brownies. Martin filled a large coffee urn.

"What did you think of your mother's performance?" Judith strutted across the room. "Pretty good. Makes your voice look weak."

I picked up a knife and began to cut the cake. Stay cool, child, I prayed.

Judith whirled. "I'm waiting, Marcie." A smile played across her lips.

"You were all right."

"All right. What do you mean by all right?" Judith's voice rose in pitch and I felt sure the sound carried to the dining room. "What would you know? Don't you wish you had a voice like mine?"

"No."

Silence followed Marcie's answer. My fingers curled around the knife. Why had the child been so blunt?

"I guess you think you could have done better."

"I'm not an alto."

"Just because you can pick out a few tunes on the piano doesn't mean you know a thing about music."

"You were flat. Your voice had no expression."

"Flat. You wouldn't know flat. Not with a voice that pulls the fillings from my teeth."

"Then you have a tin ear." Marcie pushed the brownie pan away.

Martin entered the kitchen. He looked from one to the other. He took a step toward his daughter and then one toward his wife. At any other time, his indecision would have been comic.

"I'm tired of you putting me down" Marcie said. "I'm tired of you messing up my life. I know what I heard. I have perfect pitch." Marcie rose. "Ask Roger since you believe everything he says. Though after what I saw Thursday night when Dad was away, Roger might lie. You're too old for him. Good thing you passed out before he laughed in your face."

In two strides, Judith reached her daughter. Before either Martin or I could act, she slapped Marcie. "Ingrate. Just don't look to your father and me for college tuition. You're on your own."

Marcie fled from the kitchen. Judith whirled to follow but Martin caught her arm.

"Judith, we have guests."

She made a face. "I meant what I said. Not another dollar for classes in the city or music lessons with Roger." She pulled free. "I'll tell him he's not to see her again." She straightened. "I need another drink and to see to our guests. And I need to tell Tom --" The door closed on her words.

Martin slumped against the counter. "I don't know what's wrong with her these days."

"She needs help. Call Andrew. He might have some suggestions."

"She'd never go."

"Then for starters why not ALANON for you and Marcie. Your daughter needs help in dealing with this."

"We can't go."

"Why not?"

"It just wouldn't do for everyone in town to learn what's going on."

Did he think no one heard Judith and Marcie?

"Who's Tom?"

He frowned. "Her oldest brother. He died years ago."

"Why does she confuse Roger and him? Do they resemble each other."



"Never met him. He died before Judith and I met and she doesn't talk much about him."

I picked up the knife and finished slicing the cake. "Let me talk to Marcie. She needs someone who will listen to her. She'll go to college. You and I can work something out."

"Thanks."

Lars met me at the stairs. "Kate, I'm ready to leave."

"I need to talk to Marcie."

"I heard a bit of her outburst. Everyone did. Marcie ran upstairs."

Judith's laughter drifted from the living room and startled me. She sounded as though the scene in the kitchen had been an illusion.

When I reached the top of the stairs, I found Marcie in Roger's arms. He patted her back. "She'll forget this by tomorrow. How often have I told you to use tact with her?"

"She hates me." Marcie said.

"Not true." He stepped back but she followed him like a moth seeking heat. "This is my fault. I shouldn't have given her a solo. She doesn't handle pressure and she's in constant need of reassurance."

Marcie looked up at him. "She'll make me quit my lessons."

"She won't. She's had too much excitement and too much to drink today. She's your mother. She'd never hurt you."

She pulled away. "Why does everyone protect her? You. Dad. You don't know what she's like."

"Marcie," I said. "There's something I'd like to tell you."

Roger retreated to the steps. She clutched his shirt sleeve. "Stay."

He bent and whispered something in her ear. She nodded. As he passed me he patted my arm. "Do what you can to calm her."

Marcie's eyes were tear-swollen. The side of her face where Judith's blow had landed was red and I feared by tomorrow there'd be a bruise. I stepped into the bathroom and wet a washcloth with cold water. "Put this on your face. Later, you might want to get some ice."

She looked at me. "I hate her. I wish she was dead."

"I know. It's all right to feel that way. Her actions were completely wrong. Has she ever hit you before?"

She shook her head. "Never."

"Don't worry about college. The money will be there."

"That's not what I'm afraid of. I can play at a church or give lessons. How can I live with her? She's crazy."

Though I agreed, I didn't tell Marcie. "People like your mother are jealous of those who are talented. She had a dream when she was young but she didn't go after what she wanted. Some people can't stand to see another succeed when they've failed. They attack and they hurt."

Her eyes widened. "That's exactly what she does. You saw her in the kitchen. She's always screaming things at me, but that's the first time she got physical."

That was a relief. "I wish there was some way you could leave."

"That's hard when you're just a kid. She's never heard of privacy. She snoops, even reads my diary, so now, I just make up dumb stuff." She gulped a breath. "Why can she hurt me again and again and no one does anything? I've thought about reporting her but who'd believe me?"

Marcie was probably right. Judith's position in the community and Martin's refusal to believe his wife would do anything wrong would play a factor. Since this was the first time there'd been physical action, I wasn't sure anything would be done.

There were foster homes and some of the ones I've seen wouldn't provide Marcie the things she needed. Marcie lived for music. The system seldom provides for special talents. That was up to the individual foster family, not something the county would provide.

"Let me think about this and try to find a solution. Now, why don't you get ready for bed?"

She hugged me. "I'll be all right tonight. At the rate she's drinking, she'll pass out. Thanks for everything and I'll come by soon so we can talk."

"Good dreams."

She tried to smile but tears filled her eyes. "I'm not sure I want to sleep." As she closed the door, she spoke softly. "If she was dead..." The door closed.

I started to knock on the door. Then I shook my head. She was angry and hurt but she wouldn't act on her anger. I was sure of that.

Lars waited for me at the foot of the stairs. "What was that all about?"

"Tell you later. Where's Judith? I need to ask her several questions." Something Martin had said in the kitchen had tickled my curiosity about Judith's brother. The answers might lead to a way to help Marcie.

"She's gone. When Roger came down, she pounced and dragged him off for a walk." He shook his head. "I've never seen so many people pretending they're having fun. Edward and Laura left before Judith's outburst and the innocence went with him."

I knew what he meant. When Edward attends an affair, all is surface and sweet though often trouble rumbles deep.

"Then I need to see Martin. Why don't you fill a plate with an assortment of desserts and we'll take them home?"

His eyes twinkled. "Sounds good. That way no one will know how much we eat."

I backed into someone and turned. Pete grabbed my arm.

"Careful, Mrs. M. Don't want any more broken bones. Beth and I are leaving." He shook his head. "This has been an interesting evening."

"Always."

"Is Marcie all right?" Beth asked.

"For tonight. She went to bed."

Beth sighed. "I wish there was something I could do. She's a good kid. What happened?"

"This isn't the time or place." A number of people stood nearby.

Beth put on her coat. "You're right. Tomorrow, maybe."

She and Pete headed to the door. I went to the kitchen. Martin sat at the table with a glass in his hand.

He looked up. "Is she all right?"

"Marcie? For now, but you have to do something before Judith destroys her."

"What can I do? I love my wife and I love my daughter." His gaze slid past me. "A mother should be proud of her daughter...She has to be...It's only right... She loves me...She has to."

When I saw his concern was for himself and Judith, I left. Roger strode into the dining room. The look on his face was that of a man who'd seen something that both frightened and fascinated. He nodded to me, walked to the bar and poured a drink.

Lars waited in the hall. "Ready?"

"Very." I reached for my coat. A gasp escaped. Judith was sprawled on the steps. At first I thought she was dead. Then I touched her wrist and realized she'd passed out.

"Should I carry her upstairs?" Lars asked.

"Let Martin see to her."

Lars opened the door. Once we were in the car, he spoke. "Promise me you'll stay out of the Simpson's affairs."

"I intend to do just that."

"Good. I don't want anything to happen to you while I'm away."

## Chapter 9

### Domini Jesu

Monday was spent in recovering from the exertions of the Evensong and the aftermath. I consumed at least a gallon of mint tea and spent hours sitting in the window seat staring at the river and stroking Robespierre. He seemed to sense my uneasiness and only left my side once during the day.

Mulling over the scene at the Simpson's probably raised my blood pressure ten points. Not that I'm in danger of a stroke. I suffer from hypo, not hypertension.

Before I decided how to act, I had to know what had set Judith off. I'm sure she wouldn't tell me. The few crumbs of information I'd gleaned had told me little.

My fears centered around Marcie. Though on the day of her first organ lesson, I had cautioned her about confronting her mother, the child had been emotionally battered too often. I wasn't sure she'd heard what we said.

Lars came to dinner. His presence brought comfort. We avoided any mention of the Simpson's, St. Stephen's and Roger. He invited me again to come with him and once again, I refused.

On Tuesday I drove him to the airport. This was not one of my favorite trips, but has become less hectic since I discovered an alternate route home. This route didn't have me mentally biting my fingernails for fear of missing a turn and ending up on the George Washington Bridge bound for New York City. That had happened once.

Since we'd left at the time I usually take my walk, late that afternoon, I decided to walk uptown and do some Christmas shopping.

The air was cold but the sky was bright and cloudless. One of those late fall days that make you think of summer until you step outside.

At the corner, I met Martin. "Early dismissal?"

He teaches English at the local high school and once a month, the students are let out early. He didn't look like he'd been to school. A stubble covered his chin and he looked drained.

"Personal day. Judith's been sick for the past two days."

"Too much Evensong party?"

He shook his head. "That's what I thought yesterday but today she's complaining about sharp pains in her head and her eyes are sensitive to light."

"So you stayed home."

"Someone had to. Marcie couldn't miss school. I couldn't leave Judith alone, not when she's sick. She rarely misses a day of work and she tried to hide this from me. I was getting ready for work when one of the librarians called to ask if she'd be in today. I didn't know she was out yesterday."

"Has she seen a doctor? Headaches can be the sign of a serious problem."

As we crossed the street he took my arm. "She has a real distaste for doctors. Her father was one, and he never approved of anything she did. Wanted her to be a secretary, a teacher or a nurse and forced her to give up her dreams. She was never right and her three brothers never wrong."

"Are her brothers doctors?"

"One is. The other's an engineer."

"And the third?"

"He's the one who died but I think he was studying archaeology. He died when he when he was in college. Some kind of accident. Judith seldom talks about her family. She's not close to them."

We continued the walk in silence. Speculations flowed in my thoughts. Was her dead brother the one who'd stolen her dreams? Was he the one who'd hurt her? How had he died? Maybe her father had been the one. I didn't think I'd ever learn the answers, certainly not from Judith or Martin.

"Why did you leave Judith now?"

"I have to hit the drugstore." He shook his head. "I could have sworn we had a bottle of pain relievers, but when Judith went for some she found the bottle empty. I wanted to wait until Marcie came home from her voice lesson but you know how impatient Judith can be when she wants something."

And how eager he was to please her. "I thought Judith ordered her to cancel her lessons with Roger."

"She never said that."

"Not in those words, but you were in the kitchen when your wife exploded. And all because Marcie dared criticize her voice."

He shook his head. "It wasn't like that. Marcie was upset because she had to stay home and prepare for the party. She insulted her mother and then accused her of something that didn't happen."

"Judith was out of line."

"She has no tolerance for criticism. That's all she heard when she was growing up."

"But she's an adult and she pushed Marcie into what the child said. Then she hit her."

He didn't meet my gaze. "Marcie deserved that slap. A mother has a right to discipline a child who lies. Judith has never been alone with Roger."

Any further comments on my part remained unspoken. I'd heard Judith tell Roger that Martin was away. Another thought struck me. Marcie's evaluation of her mother's voice hadn't been what had angered Judith. What she'd said about Judith and Roger had. Martin's ready defense of his wife meant he wasn't ready to listen.

How much did Martin remember about Sunday and Judith's behavior? Had he deliberately forgotten or had his wife put a different slant on the scene? I thought of the desperation in his voice when he'd tried to assure himself of her love.

We reached the Main Street corner. Martin left me and headed for the drugstore. I entered the bookstore to head for the children's section to look for Christmas presents for Sarah's gang. Though I wanted no more involvement with the Simpson's, I couldn't abandon Marcie.

When I finished my purchases, instead of going home, I continued up the street toward the Gulliver Apartments. I needed to tell Roger I'd not be available for Passion Sunday and to talk to him about his relationship with Judith and Marcie. Though I could have called, I preferred a face to face meeting.

He needed to be told about the trouble he'd caused and I wanted to know if his actions had been deliberate. With someone as unstable as Judith, games could prove dangerous.

When I reached the block where the apartment complex was located, I saw Marcie across the street. She ran with long strides, lowered head and bookbag hitting her back.

"Marcie."

She didn't stop. Either she hadn't heard my call or she'd ignored it.

I watched until she was a block away. Then I continued on my way. When I was almost to the apartment door, I heard the squeal of brakes and turned. What was Judith doing here?

She jumped from the car. "You!"

Her tone and narrowed eyes reminded me of our encounter in her office at the library. My shoulders tensed and my heart fluttered.

"Hello, Judith."

"What are you doing here?"

"Since I was uptown, I decided to stop and visit Roger. You must feel better. Martin and I walked uptown together. He said you were ill."

She looked every one of her forty plus years. Her haggard face bore none of her usual carefully applied make-up.

"Martin believes what he wants to believe. He thinks I'm sick. That's what he'd like me to be."

She stumbled on an elevated bit of sidewalk. I caught her arm and steadied her. Alcohol laden breath caught me in the face.

"Are you sure you should be out? If you're sick --"

Her laughter cut off my words. "Good old Martin. He stayed home from work today, not because I'm sick, but to keep me a prisoner. I fooled him. I flushed the pills down the toilet. So of course, he had to rush off for more."

I backed away. "Why did you do that?"

"Do you think I stayed home from work for some silly reason? We had a plan. We were going to spend today together." She straightened. "What are you doing here?"

"I need to talk to Roger."

"Is Marcie still with him?" She waved her hand toward the apartments. "She'd better not be. She sneaked off to be with him but I caught her. She'll be sorry."

"She left a few minutes ago. You must have passed her. She looked upset."

"She should be. I told her to cancel her lessons and never see him again. She disobeyed but I caught her when I called to let him know I was coming, he said he was in the middle of a lesson. I knew this was her time so I demanded to speak to her. She said Martin gave her permission. He wouldn't do that. He does what I tell him. So does Roger. Look at the way he dropped dear Beth."

"Then I guess he sent Marcie home."

She leaned against the wall that edged the walk. "She wants to take him away from me. He wants to make me jealous. He's always making up to the girls. But Marcie? Who could be jealous of her? She's not even pretty. I am. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, Judith."

"I'm leaving Martin. He drags me down. Roger wants me."

What was churning in her head? How had she parlayed Roger's lukewarm attentions into his wanting her? Had something happened during their walk to imprint that idea in her mind? He hadn't looked to me like a smitten man.

She straightened and jabbed her finger at me. "I warned you not to spy on me. I'm glad Mozart is over so no old busybody will be sneaking up the steps to the choir room and eavesdropping on private conversations. Why must you stick your nose in everything?"

"How many drinks did you have before you left the house?"

"That is none of your business." She spoke slowly and precisely. "Are you saying I'm drunk? You're wrong. Why did you turn my daughter against me? Did you know she's after Roger? Beth too. They're not going to have him. I'm the one. He's mine."

She stepped toward me and I backed almost to the door of the building. I wasn't about to enter the foyer where no one could see us. The glare in her eyes scared me. While I searched for an escape, I prayed for a way to divert her attention from me.

She moved closer. The expression on her face made me think of Robespierre the only time I've seen him angry. A stray dog had wandered into the yard. Before I could chase the animal, Robespierre had jumped from the porch railing onto the dog's back.

My knees felt shaky. My heart pounded. I searched the street hoping to see someone I could call for help.

"You shouldn't spy on me. That's not a nice thing to do."

"I'm not spying. I was here first." A dumb thing to say, but the words popped out.

"Judith," Martin said.

I sucked in a breath. I hadn't seen him approach but his presence was welcome.

"Judith, what are you doing here?"

"I came to pick up Marcie. Her lesson should be over by now."

"She isn't here. I met her at the corner. We saw your car go flying past. Get in. We're going home and I'm driving."

I studied him. Had he finally admitted Judith had an alcohol problem? Did he realize she'd been about to attack me?

She thrust her lower lip into a pout. "I have to tell Roger he can't give Marcie lessons."

"You can do that another time. Mrs. Miller, would you like a ride home?" he asked.

The thought of being in a car with Judith repelled me. "No thanks. I have an appointment." I waited until their car had vanished before I entered the building and pressed the buzzer for Roger's apartment.

"Who's there?"

"Mrs. Miller." My voice shook with the aftershocks from the meeting with Judith. The buzzer sounded. I entered and rode the elevator to the second floor. He waited at the open door of his apartment.

He looked masculine, mysterious and unlike the Roger I was used to seeing at the church. A black tee shirt spanned his broad chest and shoulders. His sweat pants were also black.

"What's wrong? You look -- Are you ill?" He held my arm and steered me to the couch in the living room.

"I'm fine. I just had an interesting and eerie meeting with Judith."

"She must have come to pick Marcie up."

I studied his handsome face. Did he really think that? What about the things Judith had said?

"She came to see you. She stayed home today so she could spend the day with you, except Martin didn't go to work because he thought she was sick. He kept her a prisoner. She's leaving him."

"What?" He shook his head. "You're joking."

The astonishment on his face told me he hadn't considered this. He sat on the couch beside me.

"I wish I was joking. She thinks you want her."

He groaned. "That's insane. I never gave her any... How did she get that idea?"

"By twisted logic. She told you to cut Beth off and you obeyed her. Martin always does what she said



and so do you."

"All I wanted was to keep her calm for the performance."

"Are you sure? Why did you choose her as a soloist?"

He groaned. "I didn't mean to but one day when she was here for her lesson, I mentioned that I was using choir members for the quartet and --" He shook his head. "She accepted but I didn't ask her."

"It might be best to avoid her and to stop Marcie's lessons."

A look of astonishment flashed in his eyes. "Trust me, I've never encouraged her."

Though I wanted to believe him, his expression seemed wary. "I'm serious about the need to avoid her."

"But she belongs to the choir and she's influential in the church."

"Not as much as she thinks. I know she's driven people from the choir, but she's never influenced a vote taken by the Vestry. Drop her and drop Marcie's lessons. I'm afraid for the child."

He looked away. "That's a hard thing to ask me. Teaching her is a joy. She's so musically gifted it's my pleasure to help her."

"I know. She was my student until she grew beyond my abilities. I'll agree the situation's not the same, but to keep her as a student will do more harm than good."

"All right, I'll call her. I just wish there was another way." He moved to the alcove. "Would you like some tea."

"I need to go home. Just be careful."

As I hurried down the street, I wondered if he'd listen. For his sake, I hoped he would. But if he enjoyed poking ant hills and watching chaos erupt, he'd continue his games.

Once I reached the house, mint tea headed my agenda. I carried a full pot to the window seat. Robespierre curled beside me.

"That woman is insane. Does Martin realize how close she stands to the edge of madness?"

Robespierre blinked and purred. The soft rumble eased the tension that held my body in a vise.

The ring of the phone startled me. "Hello."

"Mrs. Miller, it's Martin. I want to apologize for Judith's behavior. She's not herself these days."

To say the least. "She was drunk this afternoon."

"You couldn't be more wrong. She hasn't had a drink since Sunday. She's ill and I've persuaded her to see a doctor. She has an appointment next week."

Was he anosmic? The smell of alcohol on her breath had been overpowering. My patience with him had ended.

"Why are you burying your head in the sand?"

"You don't understand."

But I did. He didn't want to believe me. If he did, he'd have to act. He wanted to believe Judith loved him, that she was a caring mother, that she wasn't an alcoholic.

"Since Judith's ill, why don't you send Marcie to stay with me for a few days? All this turmoil must be effecting her studies."

"I can't do that. She has to help me care for her mother."

"And risk being abused because Judith is angry with her?"

He snorted. "I know it seems like Judith resents Marcie but that's not true. She loves Marcie. She's proud of her. Since she's sick, she's unhappy with everything and everyone."

Judith was ill but the problem wasn't a physical one. Martin couldn't face an illness caused by his wife's past frustrations, enhanced by alcohol and something deeper. Before Judith destroyed her daughter, a solution had to be found. The answer lay with Roger, and I wasn't sure he cared about anyone except himself.

Guilt assaulted me. He was at St. Stephen's because his music was enough to tempt the angels. I'm not an angel but I had coveted him.

After hanging up I made dinner. While I forced myself to eat, I considered the problem. Who could I ask to help diffuse the situation that rumbled toward us like an avalanche? Martin and Roger were no help.

Edward? A logical choice but his Pollyanna attitude wouldn't allow him to see trouble until it slammed into him.

I scraped my barely touched dinner in the garbage. What about Pete? No crime had been committed and he didn't like Roger. There'd be no help from him.

The phone rang. I felt so drained I nearly ignored the sound, but I couldn't. Curiosity always forces my hand.

"Mrs. Miller." Beth's voice rang with happiness. "I need to ask you a favor."

"So ask."

"Let me explain. Since the night I was...you know when...anyway, Pete's been here every evening. We want to go away this weekend. Could you watch Robby?"

"I'd love to. Are you two serious?"

She laughed. "I think so. We've talked about so many things and we have a lot of the same views. I

know it's happening kind of fast but he really cares about Robby and me. He says he loves me." She paused. "He told me about his chauvinistic attitude when we first met."

"Weren't you angry?"

"Yeah, I was, but he ate crow and he told me how much his ideas have changed. He loves me. I can't believe it."

"Do you love him?"

"Yes, but I'm scared. I knew Rob from grade school and we kind of grew into love. This time I feel like I'm flying down a ski slope."

"There are many ways to fall in love."

"Except, you know how my emotions have been bouncing like a kid on a trampoline. There was Roger's rush and the letdown. And Pete acting like a big brother. When we're here Robby's always present, even when he's asleep. We need to get away and see what develops. Do you think I'm awful?"

My hand rested on Robespierre's head. "Not a bit. Just remember there are no perfect marriages." I smiled. "Some come close but some of my friends could have benefited from a weekend or two with their intendeds. Might have prevented a great deal of unhappiness."

She chuckled. "You're wonderful. Pete said you'd understand."

"The world changes and I've learned to accept new ideas even if I don't practice them." I thought of Lars and smiled. "Though one never knows. I'm glad it's Pete and not Roger."

"That was a mistake." She sighed. "Roger cares for Roger. What a head trip he ran on me. Now he's doing the same thing with Judith."

"Maybe, maybe not. I'm not sure who's toying with who." I related my afternoon encounters with the pair. "Something about this troubles me and I can't come up with an answer."

"To Roger or Judith?"

"That I'm not sure about either. She's an alcoholic and Martin protects her. For some reason, she's been set off. Roger's part of the problem, but I think there's something from her past."

"Is there anything I can do? Maybe keep Marcie here?"

"I offered. Martin refused. If Marcie comes by your place, listen to her and try to keep her from reacting to her mother. We both know until Judith admits there's a problem, nothing can be done."

"I'd like to slap some sense into her."

"Don't." Fear filled my voice. "Just remember how unstable she is."

"Thank heavens there's no choir rehearsal this week. How did Roger react when you talked to him?"

"He's useless. While we talked like he agreed with my suggestions, I got the feeling he'll do exactly what he wants. I wonder if he knows the contents of the pot he's stirring?"

A short silence followed my comment. Then Beth spoke. "I'm afraid he knows and enjoys. He likes attention and taking chances. What better way than toying with Judith?"

"And to my regret, he makes such beautiful music. I feel guilty."

"Why?" she asked.

"I saw how often he changed churches but I coveted his presence at St. Stephen's so much I didn't press the committee to check his background. I knew once Edward heard him there'd be no other choice."

"I see what you mean, but would anyone have told us what he was really like?" She made an odd noise. "You know, he called this afternoon and asked to borrow my car. Wanted to come to dinner. Just like nothing had happened. Just like he'd never discarded me. I think he's amoral. What are we going to do?"

"I'm not sure."

After hanging up, I tuned the radio to my favorite station. Music formed a background for my thoughts. I made a mental list of options beginning with another talk with Roger.

## Chapter 10 Hostias

The next day as I prepared to walk up town for another attempt to convince Roger to avoid the Simpsons, an unexpected visitor arrived. My daughter-in-law knocked and opened the door. "Is this a bad time?" Ruth asked.

"I was just headed to the church."

Robespierre wound around her legs. She bent to pet him. "I should have called but I decided to drop by and invite you to lunch."

Since she seldom acts on an impulse, I wondered if there was a problem. Were she and Andrew experiencing fallout from last summer's near disaster? A glance at her serene face dispelled that notion.

"There's no special time for me to be at the church."

"Good. There are so many things I want to tell you. We missed you last Sunday. I need a favor."

"Ask away."

"After lunch. It's payment in advance."

"Sounds interesting." I reached for my handbag. "On the way back you can drop me off at the church."

Robespierre followed us downstairs and to her car.

"What are you brewing now?"

There was no reason to tell her about Roger and the Simpsons. She'd tell Andrew and my son would instantly decide I was in danger.

"I've made a decision. Once I finish my stint as Food Cupboard chairwoman, I'm taking a sabbatical from volunteer activities."

She held the car door for me. "Why don't you take a real vacation? Go somewhere exotic."

"I've thought about that. Lars wants me to come to New Mexico."

"That would be wonderful for you...About your meeting. Just tell Reverend Potter you have a life."

"He's not the problem. Roger's been hinting about Passion Sunday and I've had enough choir exposure to last the rest of my life."

"Give him our compliments on Sunday's performance. He, the choir and you were great. Andrew rushed us out before the reception. You know what he thinks about them."

"Hives of hornets flying around waiting for a chance to sting. Buzzing about nothing of value." Her laughter joined mine.

She parked in front of the Witchery, a local restaurant with a scrumptious lunch menu. I fished two quarters from my handbag and fed the meter before Ruth reached the sidewalk.

She shook her head. "This was supposed to be my treat."

"Don't worry. I won't grab the check."

She held the door. I paused and looked around. The decor always made me think of Halloween. A variety of dolls dressed as witches were displayed on ledges around the room. While we ate soup and quiche, Ruth told me about the classes she was taking toward her Master's in American Literature.

"It's fun. A lot of reading but I've always had my nose in a book, only now, there's a purpose to what I read."

"And what does Andrew think?"

A smile lit her plain face and exposed a hidden beauty. "He's changed so much from last year. Surely you've noticed that. Sometimes he argues interpretations and he helps me study for tests."

I wonder if she knew how deeply he'd been enmeshed in last year's mess. I knew he'd confessed his infatuation and the possibility of a law suit. Had he told her he'd been intimately involved with my tenant? Something I'd unwillingly witnessed.

"Sounds like he's back on track."

She nodded. "I think he is. He's been helping Ted get his life straight again."

"That's good."

"Now, tell me what's going on at St. Stephen's and why you have to talk to Roger Brandon, other than to refuse center stage. I hear a purpose in your voice when you mention his name."

"I need some answers from him to solve a developing situation. There's trouble brewing and he's at the center of the problem."

"Are you putting yourself in danger again? Inviting house breakers in? Taking tea with a killer?"

"I've never been in danger."

"You'll never convince Andrew. He worries about you."

"This is different. I need information from Roger." I rose and reached for my coat.

She caught my hand. "Do you want me to wait at the church and drive you home?"

"No telling how long I'll be."

She paid the check. "I completely forgot to ask my favor. Could Andrea spend the weekend with you? Andrew and I want to get away."

Why not? Though I'd volunteered to watch Robby, another child wouldn't be a bother. Andrea hadn't spent a weekend since school started. One of the children could sleep on the couch, the one non-antique piece of furniture I own.

"If she doesn't mind sharing Robespierre and me."

"Why would she have to share?"

"I'm watching Beth Logan's son. She and Pete are also going away for the weekend."

"Congratulations. You've finally matched him with a lovely woman."

"There's nothing definite."

"Wait until I tell Andrew. There are times when I think he envies Pete's freedom."

But Pete is ten years younger and not married. I prayed my son had learned a lesson last year. Envy is all right. Emulation isn't.

We left the restaurant and drove to the church. I waved as Ruth drove away. Then I headed for the side door. Even before I reached the sanctuary, I heard the vibrant tones of the organ. For the December Evensong, Roger was performing a solo concert, a treat I desired, but not if he continued his games. If they didn't stop, I would take steps to see him removed, even if it meant traveling to every church where he'd been Minister of Music.

I entered the sanctuary and closed the door carefully. Then I slipped into one of the pews and turned to watch him. He slid from a Bach Prelude into the Widor Toccata. His fingers flew across the keys. Music filled the sanctuary and reverberated from the stone walls. His body moved from side to side and occasionally, he leaned back. My heart thudded against my ribs. He had removed the back of the organ bench and there was nothing to prevent a plummet to the stone floor.

When he finished the dazzling piece, I applauded. There might be deficits in his character but never in his mastery of the music.

He turned and leaned toward me. I gasped.

"Mrs. Miller, don't come up. What time is it?"

"Two thirty."

"I've an appointment at three."

As he entered the stairwell, his voice vanished. Was half an hour enough time for me to learn what I wanted to know and to extract a promise?

"...do for you?"

"A number of things. Have you thought about what I said yesterday?"

He shuttered his eyes. "Actually, I have, and you're probably right since you know these people better than I do. The problem's partially solved since there's no choir rehearsal this week. Besides, Martin called to say he and Judith were dropping out of choir until they learn why she has these headaches."

"What about Marcie?"

"You know her mother's forbidden her to have lessons with me."

Though his statement should have brought relief, my edginess remained. The underlying anger beneath his words alarmed me.

"She's still a child and under her parents' guidance. And there's her crush on you."

"What has she said?"

Again, something in his voice brought a vague uneasy feeling. "I haven't seen her since Sunday except at a distance. I'm concerned because of what Judith believes about you and her. She's unstable and -- well, I'm afraid of what she might do."

He arched an eyebrow. "Should I be afraid, too?"

"Maybe. It wouldn't hurt to be cautious." I leaned against the end of a pew. "Why have you moved so many times?"

"I'm looking for the perfect place. I believe I've found it at St. Stephen's."

How many times had he said those words?

"There won't be much chance of that happening if the business with Judith explodes. I've watched her for years. Her pursuit of you is different than her other chases. She just might be in love with you, and you know what they say about a woman scorned."

He shrugged. "I'll take my chances. Why should I be interested in someone ten years older than I am?"

"Why do you like to stir ant hills?"

He arched an eyebrow. "Is that what I do?"

"I wish you'd take this seriously, but since you won't, there are a few things I have to do."

"Is that a threat?"

"I don't make threats."

"Guess you won't be directing the choir for Passion Sunday. It's the Magnificat."

He dangled temptation but I didn't bite. "Absolutely not."

"Shame. We're a great team."

Since there was nothing more to say, I left and walked over to the parish house to see if Edward was available. Perhaps I could rock his boat. He'd gone home early so Mary and I had a nice little chat about the church and the coming events. At a little past three, I waved to her and headed outside. Then I realized my handbag was missing. A quick check revealed I hadn't left it in the office.

The sanctuary. One of the pews. While I'd listened to Roger, I must have put it down. I hurried to the church.

As I reached for the door into the sanctuary, I heard Roger's voice. I paused and wondered where he was.

"Please, baby, don't you know what you do to me. Can't you feel the power we're raising. This is the best way to tap the awesome power we hold inside. Did you read the book I gave you?"

I frowned. Was he alone? I couldn't be sure.

"Haven't I always been right? Have I ever hurt you?"

This time, I thought I heard a faint response. Who was with him?

"Baby, doesn't that feel good. You're ready for me, and lord knows, I'm ready for you. Just touch me and you'll know. Let's reach for the power. If I hurt you, I'll stop."

His voice came from the changing room just off the sanctuary. A thick carpet covers the floor. A nice place for a tryst. I reached for the door and drew back. Instead, I let the door into the church close with a bang and scurried to the pew where I'd sat to listen to Roger. I kicked my handbag under the kneeler.

"Roger, I think I left my handbag here." I opened the sanctuary door.

He stepped into the hall and closed the door behind him. "Mrs. Miller, what did you say?"

"I must have left my handbag when I was here earlier. Hope I didn't interrupt anything."



"Not a thing. The cleaners just delivered Edward's vestments and I was hanging them up." He grinned. "And trying out some lines for the Spring Follies."

His words hadn't sounded like dialogue for a family show. "I don't think it'll get past the Vestry."

He followed me down the hall. "You're probably right. I got carried away. It's the villain tempting the heroine. Edward wants the part of the bad guy. Guess I went a tad too far."

"I believe you did."

"Let's find your purse."

When he took my arm, I was glad I wore a heavy coat. Otherwise, he would have noticed that I flinched. His lies had slid like butter over a steaming ear of corn.

"Thought you had an appointment."

"They never showed. Meg Harrison and her fiancé were supposed to select music for their wedding." He ushered me into the sanctuary and with little effort found my handbag beneath the pew.

"Thanks."

"You should be more careful."

I smiled. "Then I'd better not listen to you play. When I do, I forget everything."

When we passed the changing room, the door he'd closed was ajar. He strode past without a glance. We parted at the end of the hall. He went up to the choir room and I left the church. At the end of the walk, I paused. A girl wearing a bright pink jacket very much like Marcie's ran down the street.

The air carried a bitter chill that signaled a coming storm, but the cold I felt clear to my bones had nothing to do with the weather.

When I reached home I immediately called Edward. Laura tried to hold me off.

"He's working on his sermon and can't be disturbed."

"Do I ever call for foolishness?"

"No."

"Then let me talk to him or I'll have to appear at your door."

"I'll get him."

Moments later Edward spoke. "Katherine, whatever is wrong? Laura said you were upset and demanded to talk to me. Not another crisis, I hope."

"There's one brewing." I told him what I'd overheard and what I suspected. "You must speak to him."

He laughed. "Roger and Marcie Simpson. She's a child. Besides, he wasn't at the church this afternoon."

He left at noon. I drove him home. And Katherine, we did talk about the Spring Follies. He's writing the script. You must have heard him trying out lines."

"Then it'll be X-rated. I know what I heard."

"But Katherine, he's doing such a splendid job here. Just don't start trouble. Won't I make a splendid villain?"

"A super one. Just talk to him."

"I will."

When I hung up, I felt frustrated and angry. Proof had to be found before anyone would listen. I couldn't imagine gathering a committee to spy on Roger and dragging Edward to the church the next time Marcie arrived for a lesson was out. Edward would be sure to let something slip.

I glanced at the clock. Beth would be home from the hospital by now. She knew Roger better than anyone. Could she give me any clues? I filled a tin with cookies, fed Robespierre and headed to her house.

She looked at the tin. "What's this? A bribe? He promised he'd be good." She frowned. "Please say you haven't changed your mind about this weekend."

"Seems I'm having a pajama party. My granddaughter is joining us. Send a pillow. I've plenty of blankets."

"I'll add that to my list. Are you sure two children won't be too much?"

"Andrea will love having a younger child to boss around. She'll probably involve him in one of her dance creations."

We walked to the kitchen where Beth poured milk and put some cookies on a plate for her son. "Another only child. Rob and I were, too." She smiled. "If things work out between Pete and me, maybe Robby will be spared that fate."

"There'll be a big age difference."

"But he won't be alone."

She called Robby to come for his snack. Then she poured the coffee. The sound of the television tuned to a children's program was loud enough to cover our conversation.

"Has Marcie been by lately?"

She shook her head. "Not since the last time she sat. But Judith's ill. Martin turned down my offer to help."

"There's nothing either of us can do there." I sipped the coffee. "I've a story to tell you and some questions to ask."

"Sounds serious."

"I'm afraid it is." I related the things I'd heard Roger say that afternoon and his explanation. "I've a feeling something bad is going down and I pray I'm wrong. Did you and Roger ever...Were you...how close...?"

She shook her head. "We indulged in a couple of heavy petting sessions but he never...He had a number of reasons that sounded right at the time. Robby. No protection. Is that what you want to hear?"

"I'm afraid so."

"How does this fit what you said? Oh no. Do you think he and Marcie..."

"I don't know. She has a major crush on him, and even I know how charismatic he can be. It's not only Marcie. I know of at least two girls in the junior choir who take piano lessons with him." I poured more coffee. "Has he ever mentioned tapping your inner power?"

Her forehead wrinkled. "Maybe once when we were involved. He said something about the power not being there. I asked him what he meant and he said he shouldn't have to explain. If I felt what he did, I'd know. What will you do?"

"Make some calls. Check his resume. Maybe take a trip upstate. Then take what I learn to Edward and the Vestry. They'll hate me again."

"They shouldn't, especially if your suspicions are true."

"Edward likes to think the best of everyone and he hates having to deal with sticky problems. The Vestry doesn't like to be stuck in a rocking boat."

"Can you can't let this rest?"

"Would you?"

She shook her head. "I know I don't have any influence at the church, but I'll back you."

"Good...Now, tell me where you and Pete are going."

While she talked about their plans for a weekend in the City and the play they wanted to see, I set my priorities. Tomorrow, instead of a walk, I'd drive upstate to ask questions and demand answers about Roger and why the church had bought out his contract. That should have alerted me to a problem, but I had wanted him at St. Stephen's.

After dinner, I listened to the news. Rain was predicted for tomorrow. I hoped it would hold off until I returned. Even if it didn't, my trip was necessary.

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My start didn't take place as early as I'd planned. A fitful night had kept me in bed later than usual. The day was raw. A pewter sky showed glimpses of an orange, sullen sun.

I reached the red brick church, the site of Roger's previous situation, and parked at the curb. For several minutes, I sat in the car and framed the questions I needed to ask. Would the answers confirm my suspicions?

Finally, I left the car and entered, not the church, but the attached building and followed arrows to the office. When I entered the room, a young woman in her early twenties seated behind a metal desk looked up.

"Can I help you?"

"I'd like to speak to the pastor."

"He won't be in until around two. You should have called." She frowned. "Are you new in town?"

"I don't live here and I left home this morning before your office opened."

Her frown deepened. "Maybe I can help you. The secretary's out of the office, too. I'm Barbara Clary, Minister of Music."

"Katherine Miller. I'm from St. Stephen's. Roger Brandon, the former organist here is there now."

A look of disgust appeared on her face. If I asked the right questions, she might be the one to supply the answers.

"He's a good organist."

"And I think, a bad man."

Her hands clenched. "I...I'm not sure what you mean."

I sat in the chair across from her desk. "I need some answers about why he was dismissed here. They're vital to someone I care about."

Her gaze slithered past my face. "The position here was always to be mine. My uncle..."

"I know about that. Roger made sure we knew. I'm just puzzled about why a church would let a superior musician go and replace him with an unknown."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Then I'll tell you what's happening at St. Stephen's and maybe you'll be willing to share what you know." As I related the things I'd observed and my fears for Marcie and the other people whose lives he'd touched, she began to look like a trapped animal.

"He promised --" she began.

"Tell me." Steel entered my voice.

"It's...I was so dumb...I thought he could help me...It was the summer he arrived...He was teaching me relaxation techniques and they really worked. He wanted..." She shook her head. "He wanted to have sex. I turned him down and he dropped me flat."

She paused for a long time and I feared she wouldn't say anything more. "And," I said.

"When I was home for spring break, I heard from my little sister about the classes he was holding at the church. She got defensive and refused to talk. That night, I came to the church." She looked like she was going to be sick.

"What did you see?"

"He had...He always wore these black clothes to do the exercises. My sister and three other teenagers were with him. In the church parlor. There's a carpet there. They were naked. He was touching them and asking them to touch him."

"Meld your inner power with mine and yours will grow," he said.

"I screamed. They all jumped up. I threatened to tell everyone about what they were doing. My sister said she'd kill herself if I did. I believed her."

I reached across the desk and took her hand. "Then what happened?"

"I went to my uncle and told him I wanted the position and I wanted to start in June right after graduation." Then I went to Roger. He told me he'd found another church. I made him promise not to do what he'd done here. He promised and I believed him."

"He's excellent at convincing people to believe what he wants."

She sucked in a breath. "What are you going to do?"

"I have to stop him and I may need to call on you to confirm my story."

"I'd rather not, but if there's no other way, I will. I wish he was dead."

"That's one solution."

She shook her head. "Not a very good one though."

"Thank you for sharing this with me." I rose and walked to my car.

How could I stop him? He had a most convincing persona. Just outside the town, I pulled off the road and was sick.

## Chapter 11 Sanctus

When I arrived home at a little after two, I made a pot of mint tea, selecting those guaranteed to ease my nausea. So Roger had played his games before. I thought of Svengali and Rasputin and shuddered. Roger Brandon seemed as much an evil genius as they had been.

Once the tea finished brewing, I picked up my copy of his resume and letters of recommendation and began making phone calls. Though the ministers I spoke to tried to remain vague, they all admitted to having heard rumors about strange behavior on Roger's part.

By the third such conversation, I snapped. "Was it fair not to let people know? Your letter of recommendation positively glows."

He cleared his throat. "Rumors can't be passed on as truth. No one made a complaint and you'll have to admit he's quite charming."

"And evil."

I slammed the receiver down. This seeking of an inner power and the seduction of vulnerable young women had to be stopped. But how? And here at St. Stephen's, they hadn't all been young.

He'd charmed his way into a dozen or more lives. Beth. The Simpson's. Betty Peters. Tracey Stanton. Even I'd fallen for his charm as well as his music.

While I sipped tea, I brooded over my options and realized I had none. I had to confront Roger with my knowledge and I had to go alone.

Edward would sputter. By the time he calmed down, he'd have found a way to explain Roger's behavior away. And he would believe anything Roger told him.

The Vestry would demand proof. In writing. Probably in triplicate.

Judith would laugh and turn on her daughter. She would deny Roger was interested in anyone except her. Martin would accept whatever she said.

I could call Pete, but what could he do? Unless a crime had been committed, he had no power to act. And one hadn't been committed -- yet.

My gut clenched and I swallowed several times. Roger had to resign from St. Stephen's but without making the reason public knowledge, he'd be free to play his games in another church. I had to speak out and not allow his charm or Edward's fear of scandal to divert me.

When the teapot was empty, I felt calm. I couldn't tarry any longer. I put on my coat and made my way downstairs. Dark clouds stained the pewter sky with fingers of black. Robespierre charged from the backyard and wove a pattern around my legs. I bent and scratched his head. The wind whipped my coat and carried a metallic smell and taste.

"Sometimes one has to do the impossible," The cat meowed. I straightened and headed to my car.

"Katherine." Sarah stood on the walk across the street and waved. "Where were you this morning? I called to invite you over for coffee. It's been weeks since the last time."

"I had an errand."

"Come over now. I have great news. Bob has a new account and a promotion. I know the school bus is due, but I'll set the boys working on their homework."

"I wish I could, but there's something I have to do."

"Why don't you come to dinner?"

"I'm not sure how long I'll be. I'll call you when I get home."

After parking in front of the church, I strode up the walk. A glance at the French doors showed the lights were on in Edward's study. I prayed he wouldn't see me. I needed neither his assistance nor his interference. This battle was mine.

The side door flew open. Marcie bolted from the church and ran toward me. Her face was ashen and her eyes wide.

"Child, what's wrong?"

She threw herself into my arms. The force of the impact nearly sent us both crashing to the ground. Too late. Too late. Guilt flooded my thoughts. Why had I waited? I should have come directly to the church.

"Let me take you home."

"Not there. She hates me. She'll kill me." She pulled away, ran to the bushes and threw up.

I handed her some tissues. "We'll go to my house then."

She didn't resist the suggestion, but stumbled along beside me. As we drove away from the church, I glanced at her a number of times to make sure she hadn't passed out. Her eyes were dull and her expression flat. She looked so pale and drained, I knew she was in shock.

Damn him. Anger toward Roger settled like a hot coal in my chest. One I'd feed until I spoke to him about his past and his future. But first, Marcie needed my help.

When we reached the house, even Robespierre's hearty greeting didn't remove the bleakness from her eyes. I led her upstairs and settled her on the couch. Her hands and arms were ice cold and I realized she wasn't wearing her jacket. I wrapped an afghan around her and made a pot of mint tea. After sweetening a cup with honey, I held it to her mouth and she drank.

"No matter what happened to you today, it's not the end of your life. This morning, I took a trip upstate and learned about the things he's done. I was too late to save you, and for that, I'm sorry. He'll pay. I'll make sure of that."

Tears rolled down her cheeks. Convulsive sobs shook her body. I held her and let her cry. Robespierre jumped onto the couch and curled on her lap.

"I...thought...he...was...wonderful." At first, her words emerged between shuddering sobs. Then as though her vocal cords had been primed, words flowed nearly as fast as her tears.

"He was teaching me to tap my inner powers and it felt so good. Then he gave me this book that had ...pictures, but I didn't think he wanted...wanted..."

Her body shook. I held her close. The cat rumbled.

"We did breathing exercises. At his apartment, we lay beside each other on the floor. Then he started...touching me...to awaken the power. I felt all quivery inside."

She stopped to gulp a breath. I waited for her to continue.

"Two days after the Evensong, I went to his apartment for my lesson. He asked me to touch him. Then he kissed me and I felt so...I wanted to do what he asked me." She gulped a breath.

"Then what happened?"

"Mom called. She said she was coming. I got dressed and ran home." Her hands formed fists.

"Yesterday, we met at the church. We were doing our exercises. He unbuttoned my blouse and...he kissed and touched me. He wanted...wanted what the book showed...I wanted it too."

Her tears began again. Robespierre rubbed his head against her chin.

"You came. I was angry. He left me and...It was like I woke up. I ran out of the church." She looked at me. "I'm an awful person."

"You're not. But why did you go to the church today?"

"To tell him I wasn't taking lessons with him any more. I should have called but...I wanted to tell him what he was doing was wrong."

"What happened?"

"He was practicing. It was wonderful. I went up and he kept playing. I told him how great he sounded." She shuddered "He said that was because he was in tune with his inner power. I backed away. I don't want lessons any more. He moved toward me. 'But there's so much more I can show you,' he said."

She shivered. I sat beside her.

She sucked in a breath and began talking again. "He kissed me and I couldn't think. He led me downstairs to one of the pews. He took off my coat. Then he hurt me. I didn't want to -- It hurt. It hurt."

Her tears and the racking sobs started anew.

"Marcie, it's all right. You're not the one who should feel guilty."

She shook her head. "What am I going to do? I fought against sharing so he took my music. I was selfish."

"Now you have nothing," he said.

She straightened. "My coat...I left it there. Everyone will know what I did. What can I do now? He took my music."

My fingers gripped her shoulders. "Your talent is part of who you are. No one can take another person's talent."

"But he said --" She shook her head. "He was playing when I left. I've never heard him sound so wonderful. He's going to hurt me again."



"Marcie, stop this. That's what he wants you to think. He chose that piece because it's flashy. He's a master manipulator."

"How can I believe that?"

I lifted her chin. "You have to go to the Emergency Room to be examined. I'll call Pete. You can tell him what Roger did."

Her eyes widened. "How can I say...Everyone will know. It's my fault. I let him hurt me."

"You're not sixteen for another week. You're a minor. He's an adult. He's bigger and stronger than you are. He's committed a crime and this isn't the first time."

"I can't."

"You need to talk to someone who knows how to help you. I can listen but you need a professional. Can you talk to someone like that?"

"I guess so."

"I'll call Andrew and ask for a name. Then I'll call your parents."

"No." She grasped my arm. "Not Mom. She'll blame me. I know she will."

"Then I'll speak to your father."

Marcie nodded. I called Andrew and then the counselor whose name he gave me. She agreed to meet Marcie at the Emergency Room immediately. Then I dialed the Simpson's.

When Martin answered, I explained the situation. "She wants you, not Judith. You need to take her to the Emergency Room. Ask for Janice. She'll be waiting."

"Be right there."

After they left, I returned to the church. A prayer filled my thoughts. I needed to be calm when I faced Roger. If he wasn't at the church, I'd go to his apartment. The coals of anger had been fanned. I wouldn't rest until he was on his way to jail.

When I opened the side door, the gray cat bolted through the opening and dashed into the bushes. Once my heart stopped pounding, I frowned. How had the stray gotten into the church?

I headed up to the choir room. Several pieces of music lay on the piano. Roger wasn't in the music library or the room where the choir robes were kept. Since he'd never leave the lights on and the door open, I knew he was somewhere in the building. The sanctuary? But I hadn't heard the organ.

Downstairs, I strode down the hall and opened the door. The lights were on in the choir loft. Deep shadows filled the rest of the room. I turned to leave and remembered Marcie's jacket. What had she said about the attack? He'd taken her downstairs to one of the pews. Her jacket had to be here somewhere.

As I moved down the aisle, I looked for the bright pink coat. Where was Roger? I stopped short and

held in a gasp. I saw the jacket and Roger's body half-sprawled on one of the pews.

Swallowing my scream, I knelt and touched his arm. "Roger." My voice sounded tentative. Then I saw his head and the blood. I looked up at the balcony. Had he fallen or had he been pushed?

There was nothing I could do for him. I turned and ran from the sanctuary and through the garden to the parish house.

Mary looked up. "He's not here."

I'm sure she meant Edward. "I need to call the police."

"An accident with your car?"

Since I'd already dialed the local station, a number I've memorized, I didn't answer. No sense repeating my news. "Pete Duggan, please. Tell him it's Katherine Miller."

A few minutes later, I heard his voice. "Officer Duggan."

"Pete, I need you."

"Another body, Mrs. M."

"How did you guess?"

"You're kidding."

"Not one iota. At St. Stephen's. In the sanctuary."

"What happened?" His voice sounded in one ear and Mary's in the other.

"It looks like he fell from the choir loft."

"Roger?" Once again, the question was stereophonic.

"Yes."

"Sit tight. We're on our way." The phone clicked.

"Katherine, what do you think happened?" Mary asked. "I can't stand the thought of him being dead. He was so wonderful."

"I don't have time to talk. I'm going back to the church and make sure no one disturbs him." And to retrieve Marcie's jacket. When the police received the report from the hospital, she'd head the list of suspects. And if they found her coat, they'd be sure she killed him.

When Pete and the rest of the team arrived, I stood at the side door. The overhang protected me from the misting rain. Pete took my arm. "Lead the way, Mrs. M."

We reached the sanctuary door and he paused. He glanced into the changing room. "Wait here and don't move unless I tell you to."

"I'll be good, Officer."

He rolled his eyes. "Right. You attract murders like a metal pole draws lightning. Like I said, stay put. One body is enough."

From my position in the chair facing the door, my view of the sanctuary was limited. The deep voices of the policemen rumbled but the acoustics that are so wonderful for music blurred their words. What had happened in the hour since I'd taken Marcie home and my return? How could I protect the girl?

A dozen times I checked my watch and saw the hands had barely moved. I used the time to decide what I wouldn't say.

Pete strode into the room. He held an evidence bag. "Do you recognize this?" The bag held a blue scarf."

"It looks like Beth's."

"It is hers. Has her initials."

"Where did you find it?"

"In the choir loft on the floor near the organ. Looks like someone tried to remove the initials. It's torn where they are. Any idea how it got here?"

"No."

"Was she here today?"

"How would I know? I just arrived before I called you. What's wrong with you?"

He sat on the other chair. "You know that she invited me to that party to spite him. Maybe they made up their quarrel."

"And she pushed him over the balcony because she was so happy. I don't think so. When do you think this happened?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. Won't until the results of the autopsy are in."

I leaned forward. "Roger was charming and a master of manipulation. He had a great ability to fool people but once a person saw the real man, they couldn't be fooled again. Beth's not dumb."

"Are you sure."

"I know he called her and had the nerve to ask to borrow her car and for an invitation to dinner. She turned him down because she knew he was using her. There are things --" How could I tell him what I'd learned today without involving Marcie?

He nodded. "Beth told me about his call. I want to believe her, but there's this." He groaned. "She'll have to be questioned by someone else."

"What now?"

"I'll need a statement from you. Begin with why you were here and what time you arrived."

"I came to see Roger, and it must have been around four when I arrived. Not more than ten or fifteen minutes before I called you."

"Why did you want to see him? Thought the Evensong was your last hurrah."

My thoughts scrambled and I sifted through the things I wasn't ready to reveal. "To tell him to back away from the Simpson's. Frankly, I'm worried about them."

He shook his head. "We'll get back to them later. Start with your arrival here, and details, please."

"I parked at the curb and walked to the side door. When I opened it, the stray cat that hangs around the church flew out the door." I paused. "That struck me as odd. I don't know how it got inside. Roger's afraid of cats."

"How afraid?"

"Deathly. Every time he comes to the house, I have to send Robespierre over to Maria's. Not that the cat minds. He has a thing for little Carlos."

"Mrs. M, don't stray from the story." His tone held a warning.

"I went up to the choir room where he has his office. The door was open and the lights were on but he wasn't there. After I checked the music library and the robing room, I headed to the sanctuary. I couldn't see him in the choir loft, but since it was lit, I decided to see if he was working on the organ. Sometimes a stop will stick. I called and walked down the aisle. Then I saw him. I knelt to check his pulse, saw his head and the blood and knew there was nothing I could do. I ran to the parish office and called you."

"And I told you to stay put."

"But someone could have come in or they could have left."

"And you could have been a second corpse. What would Andrew say to that?" He shook his head. "This is my fault for putting you in a detective's role." He made a face. "All I said was prove those kids weren't burglars."

"Didn't you want me to be your partner?"

"I was joking." He made a face. "Promise this is your last case."

"Gladly."

"Would you come into the church and sit at the organ bench? Maybe I can get a handle on how it happened."

"Not happily. He removed the back of the bench. Watching him while he played gave me the chills. He threw himself into the music. I've had visions of him falling."

"Then this could have been an accident."

"Anything's possible, but knowing Roger and the way he stirred things --"

He nodded. "After that party and the things that went on, I agree with you. Except, I figured if anyone was offed, Mrs. Simpson would be the victim." He took my arm. "Let's get this done."

When we entered the sanctuary, I paused and stared at the nave. Memories arose of the day Roger had given me a private concert, and his reaction to the church and the town. Why had things gone so sour? Why hadn't I sensed the flaw in his character?

Pete tugged on my arm. "The body's gone."

"I was just remembering the first time I heard him play the organ here. A private concert. And I was wondering why such a bright moment went wrong."

"So you think he was murdered?"

My breath rushed out. "Maybe, maybe not and I'm not sure it can be proved he was."

A memory flashed into my thoughts. Judith on the walk. Her attempts to catch the stray cat. How she had wanted to bring the animal to choir. Her knowledge of Roger's fear. The look in her eyes.

The cat had been in the church and something told me Judith was responsible. What if I mentioned my theory to Pete? Would he believe me? I followed him up the stairs to the choir loft.

"Would you sit at the organ and pretend to play? Show me how he'd act."

I made my way to the organ bench. My legs felt stiff and I almost bolted. I don't like heights. Pete left the loft.

A moment later, he called, "Show me how he played."

Though I quaked inside, I gave a fair demonstration. I even turned and leaned over the railing as Roger had often done. Except I kept my eyes closed.

Pete returned. "Thanks, My turn." He sat on the bench and repeated my turning movement. Then he leaned straight back and for I moment I feared he would fall.

He straightened. "The man had guts."

"He once told me he liked to take chances and he had no fear of heights. So what's your verdict."

"Could have been an accident. I can't see how someone could have pushed him. No room for them to stand in front of him. He was a big man. All our measurements point to him being about mid-bench when he fell."

"So it was an accident?"

He shrugged. "Maybe someone startled him. Slammed the door. Or appeared at the top of the steps and shouted and he reacted and went back too far."

Or a cat suddenly appearing on the organ console and he reacted the way he always did to the appearance of one, I thought.

"It's a tough call. Unless we discover who was here, we may never know what happened. Maybe Mary of Rev. Potter saw someone coming in. They're being questioned now."

Unfortunately cats can't talk. Was there a way to prove my theory was right?

## Chapter 12 Benedictus

Pete escorted me to the side door. I heard voices from upstairs. "What's going on?"

"They're checking his desk and his calendar to see if he had any appointments," Pete said. "Go home."

"Yes, sir."

He shook his head. "Someday your curiosity is going to put you in the soup."

"Probably. See you."

I stepped outside. The misting rain continued and I was glad the temperature wasn't cold enough to freeze.

My day had been long and filled with an abundance of shocks. Though barely six o'clock, I was ready for bed and not dinner at Sarah's. When I got home, I'd call and apologize, but there were things I had to do before I crashed.

Edward stood on the small porch outside his office. "Katherine, whatever will we do? I can just imagine the publicity this will engender."

I crossed the garden and walked up the steps to the porch. "I'm too tired to solve any problems today. I'm going home."

"What did Pete say?"

"Very little."

"What am I going to tell people? The Vestry will expect an explanation and there have already been phone calls from the media."

By media, I suppose he meant the local radio station. "Refer them to the police."

He heaved a sigh. "I've done that. Surely, this was an accident, a tragic accident. I can't bear to think it was anything but that. Katherine, can you imagine the negative publicity? Churches have had more than their share of that lately."

If the full story of Roger's past and his proclivities reached the media, the publicity would be horrible. Not only the local news would feature the story, but with today's voyeuristic journalism it would hit the national media.

"What should we do?"

The whine in his voice rasped my already abraded nerves. "Handle the matter with dignity. I have to go home. This has been a long and exhausting experience." And he'd only seen the top layer of my day. "It's raining and I'm cold."

"Come inside. A glass of sherry will warm you."

"A glass of sherry will lay me out cold. Then you'd have another body to explain. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Call me early. I'll let you know what the Vestry says." He reached for the door. "Mary's calling them. We have to meet this evening to discuss this situation. Oh, Katherine, they'll be so disappointed. Will they blame me?"

"Why should they do that?"

"Because I acted hastily and offered him the job."

"But they also heard the other candidates and he outshone them. I remember hearing that."

He nodded. "Whatever will we do about Christmas?"

"I don't know."

"Could you return and head the search committee?"

"Not on a bet." I left the porch. "Talk to you later."

"I'm sure this was an accident, a tragic accident."

"Maybe, maybe not." There was no comfort to be had for Edward or me. We both bore some guilt for the situation. Except once Roger had come to St. Stephen's and showed his mastery of the organ, there'd been no other choice.

I walked to my car. Plans formed in my thoughts. I believed I knew what had happened, and in the morning, I'd prove my theory. Catching Roger's killer wasn't my goal. Protecting the innocent was.

Marcie. Once the police learned what Roger had done to her, they would accuse her of at the least startling him and at the worst of his murder. She'd been at the church this afternoon at close to the right time. I wish I could remember if I'd heard the organ before our collision, but all I could remember was her terror and shock.

Beth. Her scarf had been found in the choir loft. Pete knew about the way Roger had used her and how

he'd abused their friendship. She might be labeled as a woman scorned, especially if they thought she'd witnessed the scene between Roger and Marcie.

Since the year moved toward the winter solstice, darkness had fallen by the time I started the car. My thoughts were as dark as the night. An answer had to be found before more lives were ruined.

The drive home was a horror for me and probably a nightmare for the drivers in the string of cars behind mine. The misting rain, the moving windshield wipers and the blinding headlights kept me to a crawl and further depressed my spirits.

After I parked the car, I grabbed my umbrella and walked back to Beth's house. I needed to learn why her scarf had been in the choir loft. I refused to suspect her, but I wanted to know where and when she'd worn it last.

When she opened the door, a thrill of fear jolted my spine. Had I suspected the wrong person? She looked gray and drained.

"Are you all right?" We said the same thing at the same time.

"I need to talk to you about something that happened this afternoon."

"Come in. I'm not sure how much sense I'll make. I'm beat."

"What happened?"

"It was one of those days at the hospital. I didn't get home until four thirty."

Relief buckled my knees and I grabbed the door to steady myself. "Where's Robby?"

"At Maria's. He's having dinner there. When I knew I'd have to work late, I called the Simpson's. No one was home. Then I tried for Blanca and she wasn't home either. Maria met Robby at the bus stop."

"Thank heavens. Is that all?"

She headed to the kitchen. "Pete just called. He's tied up with a case. He sounded cold and formal. Is it the case or me?"

"Make some tea. It's not you."

She stared. "You're doing it too. What have I done?"

"Nothing. I'm chilled to the bone."

As she made the tea, she studied me. Finally, she pulled the cup from the microwave and sat across from me. "Tell me what's going on."

I inhaled the aromatic steam and sighed. "Roger's dead."

"What? When? How?"

"This afternoon. I found the body."



She shook her head. "How awful for you. Where?"

"At the church. In the sanctuary. He fell from the choir loft."

She shuddered. "An accident?"

After weighing how much to tell her, I decided to keep my story brief.

"Maybe, maybe not. I don't think he was pushed. I think someone startled him. You know how deeply he immersed himself when he practiced. Someone from the police will talk to you. Your blue scarf was found in the choir loft."

She frowned. "My scarf. I don't understand."

"When was the last time you wore it?"

Her forehead furrowed. "Sunday. I think I left it at the Simpson's. At least, I haven't seen it since then and I've torn the house apart. I even asked Martin if he'd seen it."

"And you didn't wear it home?"

"Pete was in a hurry to escape the bad vibes. I didn't stop to look for it."

"Did you tell Pete it was missing?"

"Why? It's just a scarf and not an expensive one. Does this make me a suspect?"

"Hardly. You've an alibi unless no one at the hospital saw you."

"They saw me all right. We had a code at change of shift. Who do you suspect?"

"It could have been an accident."

"You don't believe that. I can tell by your voice."

"No, I don't, but I have no proof." I lifted the cup. "Something worries me. Marcie had a problem with him this afternoon. He hurt her. Happened about an hour before I found the body."

"Not Marcie." She shook her head. "What kind of problem? One that could be a cause for murder?"

"The police will think so."

"She wouldn't. She's one of the most stable people I know. She's been dealing with Judith all her life and that takes strength. If Marcie was going to kill someone, I'd vote for her mother."

"I agree." I put the cup in the saucer. "Let me be on my way."

"What are you going to do?"

"Investigate."

"Don't put yourself in danger."

"You sound like Pete." I put on my coat and stopped at the door. "I almost forgot. Will you bring Robby tomorrow evening or Saturday morning?"

"Probably Saturday morning around eight. Since I'm a murder suspect, the weekend could be called off."

"Once your alibi is confirmed, you won't be."

She stood in the doorway. "Did Roger...did he..." She shook her head. "He did and I hate him for that."

"She'll be all right. My son found a therapist and Martin took her to meet the woman."

I opened my umbrella and instead of going home, headed around the corner and down the block to the Simpson's. I wanted to check on Marcie and to further my investigation.

I rang the bell and waited. My foot tapped lightly against the porch floor. The rain had changed from mist to wind-driven droplets and I was glad for the shelter of the porch. When no one answered, I rang again. Finally, the door opened a crack.

"Mrs. Miller." Marcie widened the opening and threw her arms around me. "Thank you for being there and for finding the counselor for me. She was wonderful."

"Then you're all right?"

"Sort of. They're going to charge him. I'll have to testify."

"Don't worry."

"It won't be fun, but it has to be done."

Before I could tell her about Roger, Judith's strident voice drown my words.

"How could you let her tell those lies? You've ruined my life." Her voice grew louder. "Marcie Simpson, where are you? I'm not finished."

"I'm talking to Mrs. Miller."

"Get rid of her. She's the one to blame. How am I going to face people? My daughter entices a man, a gifted musician, a man who loves her mother. Then she cries rape. Jealousy, that's what it is. He wants me."

"Judith, you don't mean a word of this," Martin said.

Judith strode into the hall. She held a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

"Mother, for once, I wish you'd think of someone other than yourself."

"Roger wasn't the man he presented on the surface," I said. "We should have investigated his background more thoroughly."

Judith laughed. "Please, you're being ridiculous. Roger's too good for St. Stephen's. My daughter invented her story and she's going to confess her lies to the police. He must be protected from scandal."

"I didn't lie." Marcie faced her mother.

Judith stabbed the cigarette at Marcie's face. The girl evaded the thrust and dashed to the stairs.

"You'll pay." Judith glared at me. "I warned you not to spy."

"Roger's dead."

Judith screamed. Martin dropped the glass he held.

Marcie gasped. "Dead? How? Mrs. Miller, you didn't --"

I shook my head. "He fell from the choir loft this afternoon."

Judith drained her glass. "It was an accident."

"Of course it was," Martin said.

My next words were for effect. "The police are still investigating. I'm sure they'll talk to you. Judith, did you go to work today?"

"We both did," Martin said. "Judith even worked late. She got in just before Marcie and I returned from the hospital."

"Dead...He can't be dead. He wanted me. I know he did." Judith strode to the bar and grabbed the bottle. Scotch splashed into her glass and onto the bar. "Oh lord, that wonderful man is dead."

Marcie vanished upstairs. Though I wanted to follow her, Judith blocked the way to the stairs.

"Why did you come here?" she asked. "Get out."

I stepped onto the porch and turned to Martin. "Tell Marcie to stop by tomorrow."

He followed me. "Thanks for taking care of Marcie this afternoon. She has a therapy session Saturday after her classes in the city. Do you think she'll be all right?"

For once I heard concern in his voice for someone other than his wife. "She's strong. What are you going to do about Judith?"

His shoulders straightened. "I don't know." He met my gaze. "If Roger wasn't already dead, I'd make sure he was. He has some kind of power over Judith that I don't understand. She's not herself."

I heard steel in his voice and I wondered if my thoughts about Roger's death were wrong.

Judith screamed. The sound of glass breaking made Martin turn away.

"Send Marcie home with me."

"She'll be all right. She's in her room with the door bolted. Judith will have a few more drinks and pass out." He sighed. "She loves me, you know."

I left the porch and walked home. Was alcohol his way of keeping Judith chained to his side? Rain beat against the umbrella. The wind sent gusts to wet my coat and my face.

At home I made the proverbial mint tea and sat to wait for Pete's arrival. I was sure he'd arrive on my doorstep with demands and accusations.

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His arrival took longer than I'd expected. The next morning, I'd just returned from my walk when Robespierre pushed through his entrance. I reached for a can of food. A staccato knock sounded at the door and diverted my attention. I crossed the room and answered the summons.

"You're meddling again," Pete said.  
I emptied the can of food into Robespierre's dish. "Tea's ready and so are cinnamon rolls. Good morning to you. What took you so long?"

He rolled his eyes. "Explain."

After filling two mugs, I pulled the pan of rolls from the oven. "What makes you think I'm meddling?"

"Excuse me. What else can I infer from the way you flitted around the neighborhood spreading the news of Roger's death."

"It was hardly a secret. The local radio had already made the announcement."

"You told Beth about her scarf."

I shrugged. "I needed to know when she wore it last and you know very well she had no part in his death. Her alibi is solid and well-documented."

"And the Simpson's?"

"I went to check on Marcie."

"Another little detail you neglected to mention yesterday." He reached for the cinnamon roll.

"She didn't kill him."

"How do you know that?"

"When I arrived for my first attempt to see him, she ran from the church. I'm almost certain I heard the organ. I brought her here and made arrangements for her to see a counselor. Martin came and took her to meet the woman at the ER."

He leaned his elbows on the table. "Why did you want to see him?"

"I'd discovered some things about his past."

"Such as?"

I told Pete the things I'd learned. "So I was going to force him to resign. But I arrived too late."

Pete drained his cup. "Always knew he was a sicko. So who killed him?"

"I have a theory but no proof."

"Finding proof isn't your job." He finished the cinnamon roll. "The chief wants to list this as an accidental death. It could have been. Either he was startled by someone or something."

"I vote for something."

"Mrs. M! What else haven't you told me? Has someone arrived at your door with a confession?" His voice held a note of exasperation.

But I wasn't ready to expound my theory. "Not yet."

"Tell me what you know."

"Later. Do me a favor. You might set yourself up for a ribbing though."

"No undercover work." He reached for a second roll. "These are great."

"Thanks. Have Beth's scarf tested for catnip."

"Why catnip?"

"Part of my theory. I'm not even sure it's possible."

"Your theory or the testing?"

"Both."

He walked to the window and stared into the backyard. "Don't put yourself in danger. I'm depending on you to watch Robby this weekend."

"Then all is right with you and Beth? When I talked to her last evening, she was worried because you were cold and formal."

He nodded. "Yeah, I was. The shock of finding her scarf hit my insecurities and I reacted." He groaned. "I groveled. I love her. I want to spend the rest of my life with her."

"Have you told her?"

He nodded. "She's afraid it's happening too fast. I took my mother's engagement ring to have it cleaned. Do you think it's too fast?"

"Sometimes love swoops in like a hurricane. Good luck."

"Thanks." he returned to the table. "What was with Brandon?"

"I think he was a sociopath. He thought...he had some twisted notions or maybe this was his idea of fun. I wanted to confront him. I wanted to know if he was sick or just rotten."

"Good thing he died before you found him. You could have been the one to go over the balcony."

I sighed. "I wish I'd investigated his background before he was hired. He seduced me with music and with his charm. Right now, I'm worried about Marcie. Her mother's not cool about this."

"Mrs. Simpson's not cool about anything. She's a real piece of work, and I imagine your prime suspect."

"Could be."

"What about her husband?"

"Another possibility."

"So I have this scarf tested. Then what?"

I glanced at my watch. "There are a couple of things I need to do. Meet me at the church at ten."

He frowned. "I'm sorry the rack was banned. If we had one at the station, I'd make you talk. The church at ten. Be careful."

"Always."

After he left, I made several phone calls. Then I found my props. When I put an open can of cat food in a plastic bag, Robespierre glared as though I'd stolen his prize possession. Then I tied some catnip in a scarf. He meowed and turned his back.

"Sorry. There's a purpose here and you're not involved."

I put on my coat, grabbed my handbag and props and left the house. My familiar trailed to the car and sat on the sidewalk until I backed out of the driveway.

Mine was the only car parked in front of the church. On Fridays, Mary often late late and Edward seldom made an appearance. I strode up the walk and used the key I'd been given when I'd acted as choir director to unlock the door. Then I set about catching the stray Judith had named Shadow.

My wait was short. He crept from the bushes and began to eat. I grabbed him. Five steps took me and my clawing captive to the door. I stepped inside, let the door close. Then I released the cat.

He streaked down the hall toward the sanctuary. I reached the door in time to see his tail vanish around the partially open door. I entered and pushed it shut. Though I didn't see the cat, I knew there was no escape. As I headed down the aisle, I dangled the doctored scarf.

When I reached the choir loft, I put my handbag on one of the chairs and prepared to wait for Pete. The

only illumination came from the round stained glass window above the organ pipes and the smaller windows at the head of each set of steps.

I glanced at my watch. Seven minutes and counting. Where was the cat? Gradually, my eyes adjusted to the dim light. I spotted Shadow under a chair near the front of the soprano section. I slid from chair to chair slowly and cautiously.

## Chapter 13 Agnus Dei

The sanctuary door closed with a bang and I prepared for action. I stooped and dangled the catnip filled end of the scarf near the cat's hiding place and slowly lured him toward the console. I hoped to recreate what I believed had happened yesterday.

"Roger, Roger, where are you?" Judith's shouts bounced off the stone walls. Panic gathered in my gut. My pulse thundered. I couldn't catch my breath.

She was at work. I'd checked before I left the house. I'd called the Simpsons. No one had answered. Then I called the library and the woman at the desk assured me Judith was in her office. Without leaving my name I'd hung up. Had the call alerted her? Did she know I was here?

Foolish thought. How many members of the congregation drive a silver car with red racing stripes? Next time I'd choose a less conspicuous model.

The cat scurried back to its corner. My back ached. Even if Judith spotted me, I had to straighten or risk remaining in a permanently stooped position.

"I know you're here. I have to talk to you about what you did yesterday. That wasn't very nice. Did I tell you I'm leaving Martin so we can be together? Don't you think that will be wonderful?" The sing-song rhythm of her words made my muscles quake.

With caution, I straightened and tried to judge which set of stairs she would use. If I could duck into the other stairwell, I could escape. Her presence here would be better proof of my theory than the demonstration I'd planned.

"You! What are you doing here?"

My heart beat so fast I was afraid my ribs would splinter. She stood at the head of the stairs on the other side of the choir loft.

"Busybody. Always where you shouldn't be. You have no right to be here. He's mine and that's our secret. You have no right to tell the world."

I edged away from the front of the balcony. Could I reach the stairs before she caught me?

"Why are you here?" she asked.

"I came to check the donations for the Food Cupboard and saw the stray cat had somehow gotten inside. You know what Roger thinks of cats."

"Liar." Her voice was shrill. "I saw the can of food outside. I didn't bring it, and you know I'm the only one who feeds Shadow. He's mine. Martin won't let me bring him home. That's why I keep him here." She laughed. "Catnip works."

She started to close the distance between us. I continued to creep toward the stairs. The scarf dangled behind me.

Judith halted. "There you are, my pretty boy. Shadow, come to me." She held out her hands. "Martin thinks I'm crazy. He wants me to see a shrink. Do you think I'm crazy?"

I gained a few more inches in my quest for escape. Where was Pete? Surely it was time for him to arrive.

"I don't like people who won't let me have the things I want. I don't like people who take away the things I want. I don't like people who mind my business."

Her voice died to a whisper. The distance between us narrowed and I knew she would reach me before I gained the stairs.

"He hurt me and he paid. You'll pay."

The veins in my neck felt engorged. My vision blurred. Was I going to faint? Have a stroke? I forced my feet to move. The cat grabbed the end of the scarf and tore it from my grasp. It leaped to the organ console and rolled over and over.

"Shadow, who let you in? It's not time for you to be here." She moved toward the organ. "That's not the right scarf. It's supposed to be hers. She wants him but she can't have him. He's afraid of you and for a silly reason. You wouldn't hurt him, but I did."

I reached the head of the stairs. "Roger isn't coming. He's dead."

She whirled and glared at me. "Dead. Dead. He can't be dead. He wants me in his bed. I'm leaving Martin. You came to gloat. Martin suffocates me. He wants me to quit the choir. He loves me. Can't you see that?"

I crept down the steps and wished there was more light. Her voice sounded closer.

"I was here when Marcie came. I told her she wasn't to see him again but she wouldn't listen. He kissed her. He should have kissed me. Me. Me!" Her voice rose to a scream. "That wasn't right."

"I know that, Judith."

"He hurt her. He hurt me. Why won't you believe me? You never do. He's always right."

My heel caught on the runner. Only my grip on the railing kept me from plunging forward.

"I know you're still here and I'll find you."

I reached the last step and prepared to dash for freedom. Her hand clamped on my arm.



"Mrs. Miller, how nice of you to come."

My heart pounded. The rush of blood in my ears was so loud I could barely hear. I turned to face her. "I know what you did, but I had to be sure."

She laughed, a high piercing sound that raised gooseflesh. I shuddered. Ten o'clock. I told him to be here then.

"I couldn't let him choose her. I couldn't let Tom hurt her."

"But he did."

She jerked me forward until we were inches apart. "He won't hurt me again. He needed his energy for music. No, that's not right." She giggled. "I kissed and caressed him but he wouldn't touch me except once when he was drunk."

I assessed my chances of escape. Her grip on my arm tightened. She pulled me into the sanctuary.

"He's here. I know he is. Shadow's waiting but that's not how it happened. He shouldn't be here until his host arrives."

"Roger isn't coming. He died yesterday when he fell from the choir loft because the cat startled him."

She laughed. "He didn't scream. His mouth opened and closed like a fish's. I used Beth's scarf. She left it at my house. I walked up the stairs. Shadow followed. We practiced every day the week before the Evensong. I tossed the scarf on the organ. Shadow jumped after it." Her laughter echoed in the vast space. "He tried to back away but there was no place to go."

She dragged me toward the stairs. I tried to grab the back of one of the pews but my hands slipped.

"They'll find Beth's scarf and blame her. Don't you think that's fair? She tried to take him from me. He's always been mine. Years ago and now. That policeman knows all about Beth and Roger."

"You're wrong. Beth worked late at the hospital. Besides, the police think it was an accident."

"It was. It was." She giggled. "Daddy, I didn't mean to trip him. He's just clumsy." She tugged on my arm. "You have to come with me. He's waiting."

When I tried to talk, my lower lip trembled. I sucked in a breath. "Who's waiting and why do I have to come?"

"Because you won't believe me. You never do. You slipped on the ice and broke your head. Should have been your back. I stepped on every crack."

"Judith, what are you talking about?"

"Tom fell down and broke his crown. Roger fell and broke his head. You will, too."

Her eyes glittered with madness. My knees buckled and I nearly fell.

"You're not afraid of cats." She laughed. "You should be. Curiosity kills --"

"Mrs. M," Pete called. "Are you in here?"

"I'm --"

Judith clamped her hand over my mouth. I tried to bite her.

"You should have stayed at home," she whispered.

The sanctuary door banged against the wall. Judith jerked. The light flared on.

She began to cry. "He hurt me. He hurt me but you never believe anything I say." Her hand slipped from my arm. "Dead, dead. I'm glad he's dead. He took my dreams and made them his but he didn't get to keep them. He fell down the stairs and he's dead." She sank to the floor and curled into a fetal position. "Why won't you believe me?"

I knelt on the cold stone floor. "I believe you. He won't hurt you again."

She looked up and smiled. "He's dead. He fell down the steps. Then he came back and he was afraid of cats. You're dead, too. You slipped on the ice but I didn't push you." She put her thumb in her mouth and began to hum.

Pete reached me. Edward was on his heels. Pete helped me to my feet.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Katherine, whatever happened?"

I rested my head against Pete's shoulder. "I'll tell you later. Edward, have Mary call the high school for Martin. Let him know Judith's here and she needs him. Have him leave a message for Marcie to come to my house after school. Then call Andrew and tell him Judith's had a breakdown. He'll know the best place for treatment."

After Edward bustled off, I sank on one of the pews. My body shook and I gulped breaths of air.

"Did she push him?" Pete asked.

I pointed to the choir loft. The gray cat sat on the organ console. "That's what pushed him. I told you about his phobia. She lured the cat into the church with catnip."

"Thus Beth's scarf."

"You've got it." I told him the things Judith had said. "She confused him with someone, maybe her brother."

Pete shook his head. "Diabolical and definitely not sane. Will she get better?"

"Recovering might be too painful. She's been sick a long time."

Were the deaths she'd mentioned actual or products of her twisted mind? I believe she'd been sexually

assaulted years ago and I knew she was capable of plotting murder. The whole story might never be known and that could be the best solution.

A short time later, Martin rushed down the aisle. "What happened?" His eyes widened. "Is she dead?"

"She's had a complete breakdown. Andrew's on his way."

"Did she try to kill herself?"

I shook my head and related what had occurred. He groaned and put his hands to his face. Then he smiled.

"She did it for Marcie. I know she did."

"Maybe you're right. She's going to need a lot of help."

"With her drinking."

"For more than that."

He knelt and stroked her arm. "How could one man create such havoc?"

"I don't know. Only Judith knows what happened. It'll be a long time before she can tell us."

He looked at Pete. "Will she be charged?"

"I don't know. In the state she's in, right now, she's not capable of standing trial. And there's the problem of proving she intended to kill him. She might have thought bringing the cat was a joke."

Just then, Andrew strode into the sanctuary. He examined Judith and rose. "Edward's calling an ambulance. I've spoken to the doctor at Kinurst. She'll have the best care there." He grasped my arm. "Did you put yourself in danger again?"

"Not a bit."

Pete laughed. "Your mother's indestructible. Besides, I had my eye on her."

Sure he did. There was no sense in Andrew to knowing about my recent escape. He'd start talking about his latest idea for his mother's safe living -- a retirement apartment complex being planned for the area. I'm not ready for sheltered living.

Once the ambulance arrived, Martin and Andrew left. Martin promised to call from the hospital and talk to Marcie about her mother.

Pete and I left the sanctuary. Edward waved from the side porch. We walked through the garden and joined him.

"This is dreadful, simply dreadful," Edward said. "We're going to have to bless the church and I don't know what I can tell the Vestry. Poor Mrs. Simpson."

I looked at Pete. He raised an eyebrow.

"Judith's been sick a long time," I said.

Edward shook his head. "I don't understand what went wrong. He was the perfect organist -- talented, dedicated and charming." He sighed. "And Judith was the perfect wife, the perfect mother and a perfectly dedicated choir member. Katherine, we're approaching another holiday season and there's no organist. You must lend your aid."

Pete rolled his eyes. I poked him in the ribs.

"Edward, I can't. I've too much with the bazaar, the holidays and I'm taking a trip out west." The instant I made the announcement, I knew my decision was right. I'd accept Lars' invitation to spend New Year's Eve with him.

Pete took my arm. "Reverend Potter, I'll talk to you later. This lady needs to get home."

"He's right. I'm exhausted. Don't worry. Things will work out."

"I certainly hope so."

Pete walked me to my car. "Taking a trip is a good idea. Are you going to be all right?"

"I'll be fine. I need to plan for my weekend guests. Do you have a cot I can borrow for tomorrow night?"

"Since you'll have Marcie, Beth and I can change our plans."

"No need. Robby and Andrea will help Marcie forget about what happened. About the cot?"

"Will an air mattress do?"

"As long as you bring a pump."

"Will do." He kissed my cheek. "Be careful."

"Always."

The sound of his laughter followed me home.

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At a few minutes past three thirty, Marcie arrived. She sat at the kitchen table and lifted Robespierre to her lap.

"I'm glad you went to school today."

She smiled. "The counselor told me hiding was the worst thing I could do. What happened to Mom? Dad left a weird message for me."

"She's in the hospital."

"Here?"

"Across the river. In a private psychiatric hospital."

She rubbed the cat's head. "Her drinking?"

"Partly."

"Will she get better?"

"I don't know. Your dad's with her and he's staying over there tonight. He'll call this evening. He'd like you to spend the weekend here...Now, how are you?" Though I could have told her more about the morning's events, I think Martin should be the one to tell her.

"Numb. Angry. I wish he wasn't dead so I could tell him what I think of him." She sighed. "He was a wonderful musician. Why wasn't he satisfied with doing the best he could? Why did he have those crazy ideas? Why did I fall for them?"

"You weren't the first." I set some cookies on the table. "Milk or tea?"

"Milk."

"Andrea and Robby will be here this weekend, too. Do you think you can handle that?"

"I'll be gone most of tomorrow. There are my classes and the counselor." She ate one of the cookies. "We could rent some videos to entertain them."

"Andrea's bringing a couple from home."

She ate a second cookie. "Do you mind if I run home for some clothes and to practice." She smiled. "He didn't take my music. I can feel it inside."

"I'm glad."

After she finished the snack, she hugged me and left. She'd be fine. Not today or tomorrow, but soon. She still believed in her talent. Nothing Roger or her mother had done would destroy that.

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At a little after six the next morning, the doorbell rang. I put the hairbrush down and left the bathroom. Marcie rolled over. I tiptoed past the couch where Andrea slept. Robespierre arrived first, followed by Pete and Robby.

"Put him in my bed."

"I'm awake," Robby said.

"You were supposed to go back to sleep."

"Can't. I'm hungry." He looked at the pan of cinnamon rolls I'd just taken from the oven. "Want one of those."

Beth arrived and halted in the doorway. "Quiet, Robby. Marcie and Andrea are sleeping." She dropped a duffel and a pillow on the floor.

Robby sat at the kitchen table. "One roll and then you can rest until the girls get up." I poured him a glass of milk and put a roll on a plate.

Beth hugged him and hovered. I took her arm. "He'll be fine. Hanging around won't make it easier to leave. I'll walk you down." I halted on the landing to let Pete dash past. "Now tell me how you are."

She smiled. "Excited and scared."

"You'll have fun."

"I know, but I never expected -- From friend to fiancé in two weeks is fast."

"He loves you and he's never said that before."

"So he told me." She opened the front door. "How's Marcie?"

"Angry. Sad. Martin told her about her mother last evening. She's not ready to talk about her feelings yet. She's seeing a counsellor today and I'll be here to listen."

"And Judith?"

I shrugged. "She's still catatonic. There's a lot she has to face." I hugged Beth. "Tuck this mess in a dark corner and have a fun weekend."

"I will." She grinned. "Pete asked me to marry him and Robby said yes."

Laughter, hers and mine, blended. Pete strode up the walk carrying an air mattress and a pump.

"Secrets?"

"Just heard about your romantic proposal. Smart kid. Congratulations."

"Thanks." He winked. "Bet you never thought I'd take the plunge."

"Don't bet on that." I took the things from him. "Off with you. Enjoy."

The End