

Prelude

The love song began its life, not with a fanfare or a crash of cymbals, but instead with a knock at a door.

The door belonged to a room in the basement of the Conservatorium of Music, a graceful old building whose wide corridors and stairwells had been almost entirely emptied out by the January holidays and the heat. But even if this had been a busy day in the middle of semester, the sign on the door in question would still have been misleading. DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY, it read, even though the room beyond it had only a single occupant. His name was Arie Johnson, he was twenty-six years old, and at just before midday he was sitting at his computer without a clue in the world that he was never going to eat the slightly squashed ham and cheese sandwich he'd made for himself that morning. Or that his life was about to change forever.

When Arie heard the knock, he looked up to see Diana Clare standing in his doorway, but this alone was not enough to reveal to him the magnitude of what was about to happen. He observed that her long hair was piled up on top of her head like a bundle of fairy floss, and that the colour in her cheeks was high. This wasn't unreasonable, though, since the day's forecast was for a top of 34°C.

Until the previous day, Arie had known Diana only from a distance. Like most people, he'd seen her on posters and in write-ups in the arts section of newspapers. With the exception of one or two historical figures who had concert halls named after them, or whose statues struck dramatic bronze poses in the Conservatorium grounds, Diana Clare, piano prodigy, was almost certainly the institution's most famous graduate. It was her trademark to perform in a red sleeveless dress and an incongruous pair of Converse high-tops, her lips painted the colour of her gown. In the Conservatorium's main foyer there was a photograph of her playing – shoulders bare, expressive arms outstretched to the keys, head tipped back so that her ginger-blonde hair poured down towards the floor.

At twenty-five, Diana had already performed in some of the world's most famous concert halls, and now she was back at the Con for the summer to teach a series of masterclasses. The task of setting up her computer had fallen to Arie, and yesterday as he'd jogged up the stairs to the office she'd been allocated, he'd had such a clear mental picture of her that he was momentarily surprised not to find her in a red dress. Instead, she was wearing a denim pinafore and a shirt covered in tiny shamrocks, her hair pulled back into braids.

In photographs, Diana Clare was glamorous. Stunning. But Arie immediately liked the way she looked in person – her face densely freckled, her hands surprisingly small, her fingernails cut almost to the quick, her eyelashes so pale they were nearly invisible.

Still, Arie was nothing if not a realist. In school and through university, he'd been the guy all the girls described as 'totally adorable', meaning of course that they wanted him only as a confidant, a shoulder to cry on, and a handy target for their flirting practice. For the whole time he worked on the cranky old iMac in Diana's office, she'd been sweet and attentive to him, but Arie was wise to this behaviour. In his experience, women often behaved this way while they were getting their tech problems fixed. It meant they were grateful; it did not mean they were romantically interested in him.

So, if Diana Clare was here in his office doorway on the day after he'd sorted out her password issues, network access and printing connection, the reason could only be professional. He gave her an apologetic frown.

'I'm guessing something's not working,' he said.

'Oh, no,' she said quickly. 'Everything's fine.'

Arie blinked. 'Okay, so . . . ?'

'The reason I stopped by . . .' she said, then paused. She took a breath and spoke again, all in a rush, 'Was to see if maybe you wanted to have lunch with me.'

Arie stared.

This was Diana Clare. *The* Diana Clare. This was the woman who played the piano with her whole body, as if nobody was watching, as if someone was pouring music in through the top of her head so that it sluiced through her, eddying in her shoulders and torso before being funnelled out through her fingers and onto the keys. And she had just suggested he go out to lunch with her.

Was she asking him out on a date? Was that the correct interpretation of the situation? His impulse was to Google it, but she was waiting for an answer, which meant that he was going to have to coordinate some kind of functional connection between his brain and his mouth.

'If you're not too busy, of course,' she prompted, but Arie's tongue seemed to have lost the ability to verb or noun. In fact, it seemed suddenly incapable of any kind of movement that pertained to speech.

If Diana hadn't looked so sincerely nervous, Arie might have thought he was being pranked. But if this wasn't a prank, there was only one other explanation: he was experiencing a real, live, actual miracle. Shouldn't there have been a beam of revelatory light streaming through a window? Arie guessed that wasn't really possible in a basement office.

'I'm sorry,' Diana said, taking a half-step backwards, 'if the invitation was unwelcome, or—'

Arie commanded his tongue to get its shit together.

'Lutch would be gates,' he managed.

Her features shifted into an expression of amusement. 'Did you just say something about Bill Gates?'

'Lunch,' Arie clarified. 'Lunch. Would be great.'

From there, things proceeded swiftly – *allegro* at the very least, and possibly even *presto*. Tuesday lunch at a café not far from the Conservatorium was followed by a Wednesday night pizza date, which concluded chastely (with a kiss in the back of a taxi), and in turn by a Friday night curry date, which did not.

Diana's place was a small flat on the ground floor of a once-stately home that had been chopped roughly into six separate dwellings. The tiny kitchen was a fire hazard, and the even tinier bathroom was a health risk, but as Diana led Arie through the front door, she explained that she was away so often it hardly seemed worth forking out for a nicer place. Plus, she told him, the flat's third room – the one that trebled as bedroom, dining room and living room – had a bay window.

'That's something you're going to need to know about me,' Diana said.

She was talking to him, Arie registered with astonishment, about the future, and as if that future might include him.

'What is?' he asked.

'That I'll always need a bay window.'

'Because?'

'The Steinway deserves nothing less,' she said, gesturing to her baby grand piano, which did look pleasing when framed by the angles of the window, even if the panes were curtained in shabby damask and the seat beneath the sill was covered with what looked to be a week's worth of Diana's unfolded laundry, breakfast dishes and coffee cups.

The Steinway seemed larger, Arie noticed, than Diana's bed, a single, which was pushed up against a wall and topped with a meringue of clothes and mismatched sheets. The bed may have been small, but Arie didn't mind, because it was there he learned Diana made love as wholeheartedly as she played the piano.

In those early months of his relationship with Diana, Arie wasn't the only one who regarded his good fortune as inexplicable. The Conservatorium's thrice-married music theory lecturer cornered Arie at the pub one Friday after work, raised a leery eyebrow and said, 'You clearly have hidden talents, Arie, my boy.' Meanwhile, Arie's best friend and flatmate, Richard, began making fairly regular jibes about catching sight of Arie in a Victoria Bitter commercial, walking under the banner for MEN WHO PUNCH ABOVE THEIR WEIGHT.

If Arie could brush off the obviously green-tinged comments of colleagues and friends, it was a little harder to dismiss the reaction of Diana's mother. The first time he met Belinda Clare, he felt as if he were being looked over by an off-duty parade sergeant who desperately wanted to tell him to pull his shoulders back. Or get a haircut. Perhaps it was because there was no father to meet that Diana's mother felt the need to be formidable.

'So, where *is* your father?' Arie asked Diana in those early days of telling each other about their lives.

'Absent,' Diana said, and that seemed to be all the answer she felt inclined to supply.

Belinda, in her mid-forties, had short fair hair that was just beginning to silver at the temples and the weary air of someone who'd never had the luxury of being careless. She lived an hour and a half's drive out of the city, in a weatherboard farmhouse with a long backyard, unmown grass, unpruned apricot trees and a view over densely forested hills.

Following a strained afternoon tea in a room whose walls were hung with portraits of Diana, and whose shelves displayed a small army of certificates earned by Diana and trophies won by Diana, Belinda took Arie out to the back shed to have him lift a box of empty jars down from a high shelf; the apricots, apparently, were ready for jam.

Belinda watched him with an intent and critical air while he unfolded the stepladder and edged out of storage the cardboard carton to which she'd pointed.

'So, what is it about *you* that makes her so happy?'

Arie, climbing back down the ladder with the box in his arms, hadn't the first clue how to answer this, but fortunately Belinda wasn't actually expecting a reply.

'You adore her?' she asked.

'Of course,' he said.

'I raised her to be adored,' she said.

'Well, that makes sense,' Arie said, and Belinda took the carton of jars out of his arms in a way that strongly suggested he couldn't be trusted to hold it any longer.

'Then I suppose you'll do,' she said. 'For now.'

Four weeks later Arie moved into Diana's flat, bringing his double bed with him. He and she marked the first night of living-togetherness by drinking raspberry gin and going to bed so early that they were both awake again before midnight and sitting naked at the piano, Diana between Arie's legs, her back against his chest, his arms folded around her swaying body as she played.

He hadn't the least idea if she was playing Mozart or Mendelssohn. He only knew that he was in love with this woman, who liked pizzas and curries even hotter than he did, who clutched at his hands during scary movies, and who found it more draining to spend an hour engaged in small talk at a cocktail party than she did to play a Rachmaninov concerto. She practised the piano for upwards of five hours a day, and although she usually came away from the keyboard listless and irritable, her moods were a bit like sun-showers – soon over with and forgotten.

No matter how deeply Arie pondered the question, he still had no idea why Diana seemed to be equally in love with him, and although he would have liked to be able to say that this was a mystery he was prepared to leave unsolved, just so long as it never ended, in truth it kept him up at night.

When Diana brought the music to a close, resolving the melody in a beautiful finishing chord, Arie felt her lean back into him with a sigh of pleasure. He rested his chin on her bare shoulder, his cheek against the briar-tangle of her hair.

'Why?' he asked.

'Why what?'

'Why me?'

This time her sigh sounded like exasperation.

'I'm not just fishing for compliments,' Arie hastened to add. 'I just really . . . I need to understand.'

'I don't get why you think it needs explanation.'

'Well, you're *you*, and I'm . . . so completely average. Look at me. Even my birthmark' – it was on his hip – 'is beige.'

Diana smiled while her hands moved over the keyboard, making the kinds of sounds that Arie had come to think of as the musical equivalent of doodling.

‘Diana?’

‘I don’t know what you want me to say.’

‘I don’t understand why you’re not moving in with . . . I don’t know, the world’s most gorgeous cello player.’

‘Another *musician*?’ Diana said, with a shudder of horror. ‘Ugh. No thanks.’

‘But why me?’

If Diana had been better with words, she might have been able to tell him all the many reasons why. She might have been able to say that in the moment she’d first met him, she’d liked the way his dark blond hair fell into his eyes, which were a rich shade of brown and full of something that she’d promised herself she would never again go without: kindness.

Perhaps she’d have told him that even if he did give off an air of geekiness in the rumpled blue shirt, cheap office pants and loose-laced Vans that he wore every day to work, this was more than compensated for by his complete lack of ego. She might have said that she loved the supple, olive-toned skin on his forearms and couldn’t get enough of his hands, which were long and elegant, and – slightly irritatingly – looked more like a piano player’s than her own. That she loved his voice, which reminded her of the viola: not extremely deep, but just nicely deeper than you might expect. That she trusted him not to cheat on her, and that she knew he’d never hold her back.

If Diana had been better with words, she might have been able to summarise all of this by saying that to her Arie was the most rare and beautiful of things: a duckling that had absolutely no idea it had already grown into a swan.

But words were not Diana’s thing. Music was. So, as she thought of all her reasons for falling in love with Arie, her fingers made their way around the keyboard of the Steinway, trying out different combinations of notes.

‘Okay,’ she said at last. ‘How about this?’

She took Arie’s right hand in hers and placed his thumb on one of the ivory keys so that a single note rang out into the room. ‘This is you. A for Arie,’ and then she placed his ring finger on another key, ‘and this is me. D for Diana. Play them together.’

He did, and together they made a solemn kind of sound. Serious and beautiful.

‘Okay, now listen,’ she said, and played three notes together in a chord. ‘See the bottom note is D. Now listen.’

She shifted her hand to a different chord. ‘Now the bottom note is A.’

Then she played the two chords again.

'Hear it? Hear how those two chords go together? The Diana chord, and then the Arie chord. When you put together chords like those two, one then the other, in this case the D then the A, it's called a plagal cadence.'

'Sorry. A what?'

'Plagal cadence,' she repeated. 'The interval between the bottom notes of the two chords is a fourth. Now, if the interval between the bottom notes was a *fifth*, then that would be a perfect cadence. That would be where E goes to A. Listen. The D chord goes to the A chord, now the E chord goes to the A chord. Can you hear the difference?' But she didn't wait for him to answer. 'Perfect cadence, plagal cadence. Perfect cadence, plagal cadence. I like the plagal, personally. Can you think what it reminds you of?'

She played the two chords again and again, but Arie wasn't sure.

Diana went on, 'It's what you hear at church, when they sing the *Amen* at the end of a hymn. Listen.'

At first, he couldn't hear it, but then – as she sang along to the chords, 'A-men' – the music came into focus.

'You see? You see?' she asked.

'I think I do, actually.'

Diana let her fingers run all over the keyboard, unloosing a waterfall of music that ended up with the sound he now recognised as the plagal cadence.

'Do you know what I mean?' she asked.

'I am your *Amen*?' Arie asked.

'Yes, you are,' Diana said. 'And I am yours.'

And for seven years, this was absolutely true.