

# 1

## *1965 – Vienna, Austria*

Laura Hartley stood in the wings of the Musikverein concert hall, her grandmother's violin in one hand, a lifelong dream in the other.

From her hidden vantage point, she studied the who's who of European society, their jewellery twinkling beneath the tiered crystal chandeliers. The Golden Hall basked in an ethereal glow, reflecting two centuries of gilded history in which legends such as Chopin and Liszt had moved audiences to tears. And here she was – a girl from the wrong side of London – about to take the stage.

She cradled the violin against her chest, its familiar weight a great comfort. Surrounded by fellow musicians and perfect acoustics, Laura stood at the summit of her dreams, the place she'd longed for her entire life.

After years of touring, theatres were Laura's real home, each stage a different hearth warming her musician's soul. Nothing could ever make her trade this life, not after the countless hours of bleeding fingers, exhaustive practice and clinging to every sliver of opportunity that had brought her to one of Europe's crown jewels, where the air vibrated with possibility.

Movement caught her eye, and Laura turned to see Jeremy Thebarton striding towards her. After five years, she still felt a quiet pride in their partnership – personal and professional. Audiences were drawn in by compositions that bore their joint signature, though only Laura knew just how much of herself lived in those notes.

Jeremy slipped an arm around her waist and she leant into his touch – familiar, inspiring, loving.

‘Do you have an envelope for me?’ she asked, hopeful.

Jeremy shook his head. ‘International post can be unpredictable.’

‘But she’s never missed one.’ Laura couldn’t hide her disappointment.

She traced the worn edge of the violin case, her fingers lingering over the small leather pocket sewn into its lining. *Empty*. A new letter from Grandmother Elizabeth should have been there, tucked safely away to be read and re-read after the concert euphoria subsided. Like most musicians, she clung to her superstitions, and receiving her grandmother’s letters before every significant performance had become her most sacred ritual, as they bridged the chasm between worlds – the polished marble of Europe’s concert halls and the sun-bleached timber of her grandmother’s outback verandah. The carefully penned pages were a substitute for Elizabeth’s presence whenever she couldn’t attend, a tangible reminder that someone was thinking of Laura from half a world away. Tonight, with the letter’s absence, that gap felt wider than ever.

Jeremy leant past Laura to study the buzzing crowd. ‘Big audience tonight.’

‘Is this you helping my nerves?’

‘They already love you.’ Jeremy put his finger under her chin, his eyes meeting hers. ‘You’ve earned this.’

‘I know, but . . .’

‘But nothing.’

Jeremy was right. A lifetime of work had led to this moment; she should savour every second.

Laura gave him her biggest smile. ‘Thank you.’

## A WOMAN'S VOICE

'For?'

'For being my rock.'

'Thank you for being mine.' His smile faded and his expression turned serious. 'The next three weeks are going to drag. Are you sure you can't come with me?'

She shook her head. 'You'll be busy, and I don't want to be a distraction.'

'But you love Munich . . .' He fiddled with his watch strap. 'Though, you love sticking to your plans more.' The corner of his mouth twisted into a lopsided smile. 'One day you'll be spontaneous.'

She raised an eyebrow and he quietly laughed.

'Okay, so that will never happen,' he said.

'I haven't finished organising everything for our trip to Australia.' A vision of happiness filled Laura's mind – of her performing the latest composition she and Jeremy had written for Grandmother Elizabeth. After not seeing her grandmother for two very long years, a lightness leapt into her being. She grabbed his hand. 'You're going to love her.'

'If she's anything like you, then I know I will.' Jeremy checked his watch. 'It's time.'

Laura reached up and adjusted his bow tie, the silk delicate beneath her touch. Although their relationship hadn't always been easy with two passionate musicians living under one roof, the times when their creative wills clashed had always dissolved into laughter and ended in a loving reconciliation. Now, finally, they could travel without the pressure of work, and this trip to Australia would be different to anything they'd experienced – three whole months together.

The stage lights beckoned through the wings; and beyond them, a full house waited. But here, in this moment, she had everything she needed – her music and the man who helped her create it.

After giving her a playful wink, Jeremy strode onto the stage, shoulders squared and chin lifted. He executed his signature half-bow – just deep enough to acknowledge the audience's thunderous applause, while rightfully claiming their adoration. *Classic Jeremy*. As he took

to the podium, the room seemed to lean forwards as one, magnetised by his presence. Some might call it arrogance, but Laura knew better – what he possessed was pure, distilled confidence, the invisible force that transformed talented musicians into legends.

Jeremy waved his conductor's baton at the concertgoers, who took their seats obediently, the hall falling silent.

'Ladies and gentlemen, we have a very special surprise guest this evening,' he said.

Attendees exchanged whispers and quizzical looks.

'This artist scarcely needs an introduction, but as her musical confidant, I feel uniquely positioned to share what makes her extraordinary. Born in London, our special guest began her remarkable musical journey at five years old, when she played her first perfect note on her grandmother's violin. This child prodigy became the youngest graduate of The Juilliard School of Music and has trained with various luminaries including Eva Collier and Reinhold Basque.'

Jeremy took a moment to gaze upon the concertgoers, drawing them in with his dramatics. 'At the age of twelve she performed for King George VI and the young princesses Elizabeth and Margaret at the Royal Gala, catapulting her onto the world stage. During these past few years in Vienna our musical partnership has given rise to symphonies that have been performed worldwide, including *Whispers of the Ether*, *Symphony for Violins in G Minor* and *Eclipse of Starlight*, *Symphony for Violins in D Major*. Tonight marks the end of her triumphant ten-month tour filled with sold-out shows and standing ovations, her enthralled audiences a testament to what I've known all along . . .' He paused to let the concertgoers take note. 'That she is truly one of the finest performers of our generation.'

The theatre filled with gasps of delight.

'Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Miss Laura Hartley.'

The audience's rapturous applause and delighted cheers zapped electricity through her. She stepped from the wings and crossed the shiny floorboards, her emerald velvet dress swishing around her legs.

## A WOMAN'S VOICE

As she arrived by Jeremy's side, he whispered, 'I think they might be a little happy.'

'I think you've oversold me.' She laughed.

He lightly touched her arm. 'You'll prove me right.'

Laura took her place in the spotlight then turned to meet the orchestra's expectant gazes with a measured nod that silently confirmed their readiness. Second chair violinist Chelsea Leadbeater, who had also studied with Reinhold Basque, sent a frosty glare in Laura's direction. Accustomed to fierce competition, Laura tried not to let Chelsea's unbridled annoyance unsettle her. Despite Chelsea being five years Laura's senior, with hundreds more performances to her name, in the classical music world complicated hierarchies existed between musicians – a reality that created friction between those who measured worth through years of service and those who believed talent should be recognised regardless of tenure. This tension seemed to weigh heavily on accomplished violinists such as Chelsea, despite her technical mastery.

Jeremy raised his baton. Laura subtly tapped her bow three times against her leg then lifted her violin to her shoulder. Before bow touched string, she could hear the opening notes of *Shadows Across Time*, Concerto for Violin in E Minor hanging in the air like a dare – deceptively simple – as though a master chef had laid out plain ingredients with the ghost of a smile, knowing the feast to come.

After a deep, steadying breath, she began. Her fingers flew into the first variation, a spray of notes ascending and descending the fingerboard with devastating speed. Each note had to be perfect; there was nowhere to hide.

As Laura moved into the second variation, she concentrated on the demanding double stops when her fingers pressed two strings at once while her bow danced across them. Sweat formed on her temples, but she couldn't spare a moment to wipe it away. This piece demanded everything a violinist had, technically and emotionally, without a single measure of rest. And she loved every torturous moment of it.

As she surrendered to the music, a puff of red mist materialised before her eyes, quickly blooming into streaks of yellow and orange. Relief washed through her; the faithful colours had returned, as they always did when she truly connected with her music. The pressure of expectation melted away as the mist swirled in perfect rhythm with her playing, shifting hues with the mood and cadence of the notes.

The audience remained oblivious to Laura's private, kaleidoscopic world that unfurled whenever she played. This mist – a rare form of synaesthesia that transformed sound into colour – guided her through a rich musical landscape. What had once terrified her as a child and made her feel like a musical oddity with an unearnt edge, she now embraced as her secret weapon in the quest for virtuosity.

Her fingers continued to fly across the fingerboard, her bow dancing across two strings at once as if possessed. Every muscle moved in perfect synchronisation, the violin no longer an instrument but an extension of her soul. As the music peaked the mist exploded into a brilliant rainbow – greens, reds, blues, yellows and purples dipped and whirled at the breathtaking tempo of the music. The crescendo built, and it took every ounce of her willpower to not rush towards the end.

For a fraction of a second – so brief it could have been imagined – her bow whispered against the string at the wrong angle, creating a microscopic scratch only another professional would catch. It was minute, but . . . it was enough. In an effort to maintain her composure she didn't dare look at Jeremy, but she felt his energy shift from flowing harmony to acute attention, like a predator sensing weakness.

One imperfect touch in a thousand perfect ones, yet the mistake echoed in her mind like thunder, amplified by Jeremy's laser-focused awareness of her every movement. When she reached the third bridge, Jeremy's baton drew in the string section, then the brass, then the drums, creating a steady pulse beneath her singing line. The audience sat transfixed, lost in the music's spell, completely unaware. But she

## A WOMAN'S VOICE

knew. Her spiralling, coloured mist was now marred with grey-tinged edges the colour of ash she'd never experienced before.

Jeremy guided each section through their closing measures with exact gestures. The drums faded, then the wind instruments, then the strings until finally it was just Laura, playing for the last four bars. As she drew out the final notes, the coloured mist turned entirely grey, then vanished completely. Although this unexpected event sent waves of panic through her, Laura held her final position, violin pressed to her chin, holding her breath, waiting, praying for the recognition she craved.

Suffocating silence filled the concert hall.

A split second later, applause bounced off the walls. Looking down at her violin, she whispered, 'Thank you, Grandmother Elizabeth.'

The applause died down, and she smiled and waved as she embraced the audience's love and crossed the floorboards. As soon as she made it to the wings, she clutched the thick velvet, her breath ragged.

Jeremy half-waved at the audience then caught up to her. 'What happened?'

She shook her head. 'The mist . . . it went grey.'

'You lost focus.' Jeremy's dismissal was sharp. 'Nothing wrong with your mist.'

Laura lifted her chin. 'Just because you can't see it—'

Sensing someone behind them, she turned to find Chelsea, violin case balancing against her hip. Her lips twitched upwards. 'That was a very . . . creative interpretation.'

Laura's fingers tightened around her violin's neck.

'Thank you so much for your critique, Chelsea,' she said, making sure her tone was measured enough to be polite but indicate no further commentary was needed.

Chelsea's gaze lingered on Jeremy, her head slightly tilted, a soft smile playing at her lips. When she looked to Laura again, her smile vanished. She turned on her heels and marched between the

papier-mâché columns from Verdi's *Aida* to the communal orchestra dressing room.

'She's not wrong,' Jeremy said, his bow tie slightly askew.

'I'm already beating myself up about it,' Laura said. 'No one else needs to make it worse than it already is.'

'Miss Hartley?' Flavio, the young theatre assistant, rushed up to her. 'The front desk apologises. It arrived this morning and got lost among other correspondence.'

Breaking into a wide smile, Laura held out her hand to accept the envelope, her heart happy when she read her name written in familiar swirling script.

'Thank you,' she called to Flavio's retreating figure.

'I'll leave you to it,' said Jeremy. 'But don't be too long. I can't miss that train.' He rushed down the stairs to the back of the theatre where a legion of female fans eagerly awaited his autograph.

Weaving through abandoned set pieces and ducking under dangling ropes, Laura made her way to her dressing room. Being a sought-after soloist had its perks – such as requesting this tiny sanctuary far from the chaos. Solitude had always been a post-performance ritual, her way of processing the evening and letting it take up residence in her memory. If Chelsea and the others saw it as diva behaviour, well . . . Laura tried not to care, but it was difficult not to.

She entered the room and was greeted by a huge bunch of yellow roses wrapped in matching cloth. The sweet scent filled her nostrils as she studied the varying golden hues. Jeremy always insisted on yellow roses, claiming they suited her far better than her grandmother's traditional gift of pink ones. Elizabeth had once mentioned that in Victorian flower language, yellow blooms signified jealousy beneath their cheerful appearance – something Jeremy dismissed as nonsense, because he preferred the modern day meaning of joy and happiness. Pushing aside concerns about her grandmother and Jeremy possibly not getting along, she opened the card nestled among the flowers:

## A WOMAN'S VOICE

*May the music in your life continue to delight and fill your heart with the same intense love I have for you.*

*Forever and always,*

*J xx*

If Jeremy hadn't found success wielding a baton, his skill with words could easily carve him a place among the great poets or novelists. Right now, though, she ached for her grandmother's words. Laura rested her violin in its velvet-lined case, sank into the armchair's worn embrace and picked up the envelope.

*My dearest Laura,*

*After all our rendezvous in Prague, Paris, Sydney and points in between, I'm filled with happiness that you're finally visiting me in Gunderring – and bringing your Jeremy with you. I can't wait to show you my most favourite place in the world so you can see why I love it so much.*

*While our little town can't compete with the grand concert halls you've graced, there's something quietly remarkable here, a magic that can only be found in the Australian outback. From endless blue skies and red dusty land to the kindness of (most!) of the townsfolk, especially the delightful Gisela, I'm sure you and Jeremy will have a wonderful time here.*

*I've also been cultivating those pink roses I know you're so fond of. They're just about to bloom.*

*Now, I know how much you love my little words of wisdom . . .*

Laura rolled her eyes.

*Don't roll your eyes, missy!*

Laura burst out laughing. She loved that her grandmother knew her so well.

*So here they are:*

*Believe in yourself as I believe in you, because doubt kills more dreams than failure ever will.*

*All my love (and I can't wait to hug you in person!),*

*Grandmother Elizabeth*

Laura's vision blurred as she wiped away a tear. After years of brief visits with her grandmother in Sydney or European capitals – all Laura's relentless touring schedule had allowed – she would finally see Elizabeth's cherished Gungahring. The outback town where Laura's mother, Joan, had been born had always seemed a world away. After moving to London, her mother had never returned to the remote landscape that existed only in her grandmother's vivid stories and Laura's imagination. Soon, thankfully, for Laura those dusty streets would transform from myth to memory.

A knock on the door brought her back into the moment. She folded the letter and shoved it in the violin case, shutting the lid quickly. 'Come in.'

Flavio opened the door. 'I'm sorry to interrupt, Miss Hartley, but Mr Thebarton would like to remind you he has a train to catch.'

'Thank you, Flavio. Tell him I'll be there in a minute.'

Laura slipped off her performance dress, tossed it onto the chair and quickly donned a midnight-blue casual pants suit. She freed her hair from its pins, letting it fall across her shoulders, then grabbed the roses and violin case before racing towards the theatre's side entrance.

She opened the stage door and stumbled into the semi-darkness where Jeremy waited, arms crossed.

'Sorry for being late,' she said.

'We need to hurry.' Jeremy grabbed her hand and they dashed through the streets towards the station.

'But . . .' Laura glanced at her watch. 'Your train doesn't leave for a while longer.'

## A WOMAN'S VOICE

'We have to get there early!' His hold was rough as he dragged her alongside him.

Laura struggled to keep up with Jeremy's long strides, baffled by his desperate haste. Normally she was the one rushing ahead while he dawdled, her internal metronome driving them forwards as she nudged him through doorways with controlled impatience.

'Can we slow a little?' she panted.

'No.'

They passed under the weathered art nouveau archway of the Vienna Stadtbahn station, its once golden and dark-green flowers dulled by decades of city grime. Jeremy dove into the crowd, his fingers digging into her palm. She faltered on the stairs momentarily, but he didn't stop, insisting on pulling her forwards, their footsteps clattering down the worn marble stairs towards platform eight. The train waited below, doors still open.

Once they reached the bottom of the stairs, he guided her away from the throng. His breathing remained rapid, his eyes on the platform clock. Turning to Laura, he traced her cheek with unexpected gentleness that contradicted his earlier roughness.

'What's going on with you?' The station's loudspeaker crackled with announcements, nearly drowning out her question. His strange behaviour left her completely baffled.

Jeremy's expression softened, a nervous smile replacing his previous intensity. 'I'm going to miss this beautiful face.'

'And I'll miss yours.' Laura sighed. 'I wish you didn't have to go to Munich.'

'This is our life – working and travelling and stealing time together whenever we can.'

'I know,' she said. 'It doesn't make it any easier, though.'

Jeremy took a deep breath as his gaze travelled past her shoulder, resting on something behind her. She turned and found the platform filling with even more travellers.

'I wanted to get here early because I didn't want this to be rushed.'

His serious tone sent a shiver along her spine.

‘First, you need to remember I love you with all my heart,’ he said.

‘And I love you.’ Why was he acting so strange? Their goodbyes had never been this awkward.

‘There’s no easy way to say this . . .’ His eyes locked with hers, their earnestness unnerving. ‘Will you marry me?’

‘What?’

He dropped to one knee. ‘Marry me.’

Fishing in his pocket, he pulled out the most glorious gold ring, with a square sapphire surrounded by tiny diamonds. The blue stone caught the station lights, throwing tiny prisms across the platform floor at their feet.

‘Maybe this will help you make up your mind.’ His voice wavered slightly – something she’d never heard before.

‘I don’t need convincing!’ Tears pricked her eyes as she hastily placed the violin case and flowers next to her on the platform. She held out her trembling hand, savouring how the cool metal grazed her skin as he slid the ring onto her finger. It fit perfectly. She jumped into his arms and Jeremy spun her around. The world turned deliriously dizzy as she threw her head back and laughed.

Eventually Jeremy returned her to earth, and she noticed a sea of strangers had gathered around them. Although used to people watching her every move on stage, she much preferred to remain incognito in her personal life. However, she could forgive this on such a special occasion.

‘So, your official answer is yes?’ His eyes searched hers.

‘Yes! Yes, of course!’

Jeremy put his arm around her shoulders and shouted to the crowd, ‘We’re getting married!’

The applause wrapped around them and the moment sparkled just like her ring. This proposal had been totally unexpected but very, very welcome. Wait until she told Grandmother Elizabeth . . .

‘Let’s do it in Australia,’ Jeremy said.

## A WOMAN'S VOICE

'Get married? But there's so much to prepare. The dress. The music. The—'

'Your grandmother could be your maid of honour.'

'Yes! That's perfect!' And to think, this morning she'd woken up in Jeremy's arms believing her performance at the Musikverein would be the most life-changing event of the day . . .

'Laura.'

'Hmm?' She looked up into her boyfriend's – *fiancé's* – beautiful eyes.

'I can't marry you soon enough.'

'Miss Hartley!' Flavio rushed across the platform waving an envelope above his head. 'Telegram! Urgent!'

She held out her hand to accept it. 'Thank you.'

Flavio tipped his hat and vanished into the crowd just as quickly as he'd appeared.

She ran her fingernail under the seal and pulled out the paper to unfold it.

*Dear Laura. It's with great sadness that I must inform you of your grandmother's passing this morning. Sending you all my love.  
Gisela.*

'Oh my god.' She clutched Jeremy's lapel, her ring catching on the fabric. The station noise dimmed. Her grandmother's face – which Laura had been looking forward to seeing so soon – would never be adored in person again.

Jeremy scanned the telegram. 'Oh, Jesus.'

Her knees buckled. He caught her as the paper drifted to the floor.

'She can't be gone.' The words escaped Laura as a whisper, yet they echoed through her hollow chest like a shout in an empty cathedral. Grandmother Elizabeth – Laura's anchor since that first violin had been pressed into her tiny hands. Grandmother Elizabeth – the woman who had gathered eighteen-year-old Laura's shattered pieces

when her mother had died. Grandmother Elizabeth – who had done everything in her power to keep Laura’s life joyful, reminding her at every turn how special she was. Every memory led back to her grandmother’s gentle presence, and now . . . now . . .

Laura couldn’t fathom a world without her grandmother’s beautiful, fierce light in it. She gasped for air as a dark cloud descended upon her.

‘I’m so sorry.’ Jeremy’s arms wrapped around her. ‘I’ll cancel my performances.’

Laura looked up. Her heart wanted him to be with her. *Needed* him to be with her. But he had professional commitments, and she, more than anyone, understood the career-ending consequences of cancelling a sold-out tour.

She shook her head. ‘No. There are too many people relying on you.’

He checked his watch then looked back to her. ‘They can find another conductor.’

‘You’re the drawcard.’ She reached for his hand. ‘Please don’t argue with me.’

The conductor blew his whistle. Jeremy kissed her forehead. ‘If you insist, my brave girl. I’ll call when I get to Munich. We’ll figure this out.’

‘We will.’

Right now, her head and heart were a jumbled mess of broken dreams and unanswered questions. Grandmother Elizabeth had the heart of a thirty-year-old, forged through decades of managing the sheep station after Laura’s grandfather died. Elizabeth had only moved to Gungderring township four years ago, her retirement bringing a new lease of energy rather than slowing her down. Her letters always brimmed with optimism. What had happened?

The conductor blew his whistle once more and enthusiastically waved a white flag. Half the crowd disappeared onto the train while the rest remained on the platform waving goodbyes, some dabbing teary eyes, others offering brave smiles.

## A WOMAN'S VOICE

'I'll be with you as soon as I can.' Jeremy picked up his suitcase.

The conductor's whistle blew again. Never in her life had she hated that sound more than she did right now.

Jeremy kissed her softly on the lips. Then, as the train began its slow roll forwards, he cut through the remaining crowd. He tossed his case through the carriage door and swung himself onto the step, one hand pressed dramatically to his chest as his lips formed a sad smile.

The train disappeared out of view and the well-wishers on the platform dispersed. Laura didn't relish the prospect of returning to an empty apartment, but she could hardly have jumped on the train with Jeremy when she needed to figure out the next steps.

Laura bent down to pick up the flowers and violin case. Her hand connected with air.

She looked down. The yellow roses lay trampled on the dirty platform, petals scattered like confetti after a celebration long ended.

The violin . . . gone.