

CHAPTER ONE

Chicago, Illinois

Ten years later

Dr. Sophie Bellinger knew something was wrong the minute she walked into the Bowen Performance Center building.

The conservatory, normally deserted on a Sunday afternoon, should have been entirely shuttered and quiet. Here today, though, only one of those conditions held. Shuttered, yes. But quiet? No.

The noise almost deceived her, sounded untraceable at first. Then, she picked up details. The faint press of a piano key. A second, firmer strike. Then two more. Then...

Someone else was here. Someone who shouldn't be.

Listening more closely now, she paused shy of switching on the lights in her office. Maybe it'd be better not to telegraph her presence to this uninvited guest. Someone pounding piano keys, after all, could be perfectly harmless...or not. If they were harmless, campus security would give her no end of grief about it. If they weren't, campus security would never get here in time to prevent whatever harm they had in mind anyway.

There went those piano keys again, and another sound. A curious humming, and a pounding of octaves on a grand piano that—if her instincts were correct—was center stage in the main concert hall.

In a lightning flash, she made her decision. Every once in awhile, one of the students figured out how to unlock one of the nine-foot grands, or had a friend who'd help them get into

one, and couldn't resist. If this person was only plunking away on forbidden fruit, one glare from her would send the guilty party scurrying anyway. She hardly needed one of the security squad's skeleton crew to come in and do what she could do just as well herself.

Octaves. Octaves, up the scale and down, then in thirds. Then, hammering away on A-440 and hitting its echo from the bass notes all the way to the top.

Sophie shook her head. If she'd been in that kid's shoes, risking disciplinary action for taking liberties with an off-limits instrument, she'd have opted to play something more interesting than *octaves*.

Okay, she'd put a stop to this. As soon as she could lay her hands on some sort of weapon. In case the person was bent on more sinister activity than keyboard play. But what?

The only thing available was a foldable music stand. Sophie half-smiled to herself. Not weighty, but hazardous enough. She'd gotten more than a few tiny cuts on her hands from it to prove that. Short of being an actual knife, it'd do the trick. In its compact form, the shape wasn't unlike a miniature javelin—so, if worse came to worst, she could throw it and run, if she had to. At least it'd be a heck of a distraction.

Who knew high school track and field would come in handy when she was past thirty?

Still smiling to herself, Sophie skittered down the hallway toward the central concert area. Sure enough, she'd pegged the location of the sound right. Time to end this nonsense, quick and in a hurry. Pulling open the backstage door, she flicked on the lights.

“Ahh!” came a shout, startling her into nearly dropping the stand. “Don't shoot! I'm only the piano tuner!”

Peering in to get a closer look, Sophie found herself temporarily at a loss for words.

Standing center stage beneath a single spot, next to the Steinway concert grand with its lid off, was a lanky, shaggy-haired guy who looked about thirty, hands raised toward her...brandishing a tuning fork.

“Really. That’s who I am. The tuner,” he went on. “But if you don’t put your weapon down—”

“Weapon?”

He nodded toward her hands. “The shiny metal thing you’re holding. When people come into my workplace holding shiny metal, I get nervous.” He cocked his right arm. “I promise, you try anything, I *will* throw this. And I won’t miss.”

She couldn’t help it. She burst out laughing.

“Let me get this straight,” she said, taking a breath. “You’re going to defend yourself with a *tuning fork*?”

“Go ahead, laugh. But I guarantee, you get hit with one of these suckers at thirty miles an hour, it’ll get your attention.”

She blinked. “You can throw thirty miles an hour?”

“Well, I *was* clocked in a pitching machine at much faster. But I hate to brag.” Now, the guy was grinning as well. “Okay. I’ll hold my fire if you hold yours. What is that you’re carrying, anyway?”

She held it up. “Behold, the deadly ammunition of a folding music stand.”

This time, he laughed outright. “Oh, now, you should know better. Never bring a music stand to a tuning fork fight.”

“Words to live by?”

“Among many.” Striding forward, he slipped the fork into his left hand and extended his right. “Let’s call a truce. Malachi Goodwin. Piano tuner. And you are—?”

“Sophie Bellinger.” She shook his hand, impressed by the strength of his grip. She didn’t want to notice details about him. But she did. Like how the hunter-green long-sleeved shirt he wore played off his coloring. And the way he moved, in well-faded jeans, was with an ease and assurance many guys her age would have envied.

“Bellinger.” He paused. “Wait a minute. The man who hired me was a Bellinger, too. Any relation?”

She rolled her eyes. “If the man who hired you was the dean, then, yes.”

“Wife?” He shook his head. “No, what am I thinking? I heard he had a daughter. That’s who you are. Right?”

“Guilty as charged. I’m the dean’s daughter.” She gave a mocking sigh. “With everything you’ve probably heard about that.”

He had tucked the tuning fork beneath one arm, but still managed to lift both long hands as if in surrender. “Haven’t heard a thing. Scout’s honor.”

“Were you actually ever a scout?”

“Would you believe me if I told you I was?”

She laughed again. “Mr. Goodwin—”

“Please. Malachi. Some of my friends call me Ki.” He half-smiled. “I used to sign it ‘C-h-i,’ until one too many women called me ‘Chee’.”

“You hang out with the wrong women,” she said without thinking. “I mean, if nothing else, that spells out a Greek letter. These girls never heard of sororities—?”

She cut off abruptly, aware of a dash of light from his gaze, and regretted running with the joke. She'd never seen true jade-green eyes on a man before. Especially not with the spark of chemistry, the *zap* of energy, she suddenly felt from this pair.

Half-panicked, she snapped herself back to reality. To thoughts of Lucas. Her boyfriend. *Yeah, right, Sophie. The man you're going to see in an hour. The guy who's almost your fiancé. Remember him?* No look from a stranger should be able to distract her from thoughts of the man she'd loved for three years. Even though the depths of those unusual eyes beckoned like the refuge of a serene, shade-dappled forest...

She wavered, unsure of what to say next. Fortunately, the tuner stepped into the breach.

"Well, dean's daughter, if you promise to keep your music stand to yourself, I promise to do the same with my tuning fork. But your father should have told you I was going to be working in here tonight."

"Good point." She pulled out her cell phone. "You won't mind if I check with him, will you?"

"Of course not."

Even if he did mind, Sophie thought, she'd have gone ahead anyway. Her dad picked up on the first ring.

"Hey, kitten. Nice surprise," he said. "To what do I owe the honor?"

"Dad, I'm over at the Performance Center, and—"

"There's a piano tuner working there," he finished. "Yes. Name's Malachi Goodwin. Rafe recommends him, so don't worry. He's cleared to be there." He paused. "But what are you doing out there on a Sunday? Isn't this your normal evening with Lucas?"

She rolled her eyes. “It sure is. Only it’s going to be a little different, because I thought I’d best pick up the Stravinsky to look over tonight.”

“Well, don’t push too hard,” he said quietly. “You need time to enjoy life, too.”

She sighed silently. Lucas hadn’t been pleased to hear what she planned for the early evening, but *L’Histoire du Soldat* would be a bear to conduct, and she needed to have it under her command before she brought the ensemble together for their first rehearsal.

“Don’t worry, Dad. I will. Gotta go.” As she ended the call, her father’s question to her rang in her head, and it dawned on her that she hadn’t asked about that. Instead, she turned to the tuner once more.

“My dad asked me what I was doing here on a Sunday,” she said dryly. “Good question. Why are *you* here now? We normally have tuners work during the week.”

“And you would have this time, too, only your usual tuner was down with the flu. Nasty bug. Your dad said this instrument had to be in playing shape first thing Monday morning, so Rafe called me to sub for him, and this was the only time I had.”

Sophie nodded. “We’ve got a guest artist coming in for a noontime convocation.” Then, a connection made itself in the back of her mind. “Wait a minute. Speaking of guest artists...did you say your last name is Goodwin?”

“Indeed, it is. And before you ask, yes, I’ve got a bit of a bloodline, too.” A lopsided smile took over the tuner’s angular face. “I’m Jonathan Goodwin’s cousin. His younger, much more talented cousin.”

She chuckled. “Does your family’s hotshot pianist and composer know that’s how you introduce yourself?”

“I don’t introduce myself that way. We only admit we’re related when forced to.” He winked, taking any possible edge off the words. “You won’t tell him what I said, will you?”

“About what?”

“The bit about being more talented. I’m actually pretty darned proud of him, truth be told.” He grinned again. “Although that doesn’t keep us from trash talking each other.”

She raised three fingers. “I won’t tell. Scout’s honor.”

“Don’t suppose you’re going to tell me if you were a scout, either.”

“Turnabout’s fair play.” She sighed. “Well, nice to meet you, Mr.—Ki. Malachi. I’d best let you get back to work.”

“No problem. I’m half done anyway. It was time for a break.”

She retucked the music stand beneath one arm, then paused at the door. “I do have one more question, though.”

He leaned back on his heels, and she caught the gleam of stage lights on deep brown hair. “Ask away.”

Chocolate, she thought incongruously. *That’s his hair color. Hot chocolate.*

Quickly she forced her thoughts back, once again, to normal conversation. It wasn’t easy.

“Do you still actually use a tuning fork? Most of the tuners I’ve met use electronic gadgets.”

“Oh, I’ve got electronic gadgets. I even like a couple of them.” He set down the fork thoughtfully and picked up a computerized tuning aid about the size of a deck of cards. “But the longer I do this, nine times out of ten, I’ve found my own ear is still the best. I wouldn’t be surprised if by now, I’ve got a touch of hyperacusis.”

“Hyperacusis?”

“Super-sensitive hearing. Works well in music, not so well in the rest of real life. For some people, if you eat popcorn or peanuts or chips too close to them, they want to hurt you.”

She frowned. “It’s that bad?”

“Yep. I’ve heard it sounds like thunder in their heads. They even use special earplugs for those cases—you might call them *un*hearing aids. Not for me, fortunately. If I was that sensitive, I’d need them to keep my sanity.” His eyes warmed. “What sanity I still have after being in music all my life, that is.”

“I hear you. No pun intended.” She turned away then, as much to break the contact with that warmth as to move on to the next task on her list. Truth to tell, she didn’t much want to go. This young man exuded a relaxed ambience, as if he had all the time in the world to get done what he needed to do, and she hadn’t experienced that sensation for too long. Maybe she had hyperacusis about life in general. Too much stimulus, too much pressure, too much noise...

“And now, I really do have to let you get back to work.” She flashed him her best professional smile—the one she’d learned growing up under a campus magnifying glass—and paused, one hand over the backstage light switch. “You care if these are on or off?”

“Leave them on,” he said, a touch wryly. “In case anyone else barges in on me.”

With a quick nod, she stepped out the doorway. But not before she’d heard him say one last sentence, under his breath. “I should be done here in an hour, in case you want to barge in again...”

She didn’t wait to hear if there was anything more.