

Ellie Nichols held her cello effortlessly as she rose for the standing ovation that erupted after the final, dazzling coda of Schubert's Great C Major. Amidst the applause and "Bravos!" she knew Grady would be studying her from his spot in the horn section. When she glanced at him, he smiled across the stage, a fleeting, discreet smile, a tenderness that Ellie recognized gratefully. He knew that Schubert's music always opened up a sadness in her: she wished her mother had lived to see her play it on a night like this—in a magnificent concert hall with a legendary conductor and a superb orchestra.

At last the applause subsided and the audience filtered toward the exits. Ellie could swear the music still resonated through Symphony Hall well after the orchestra had finished, as if the hall itself didn't want to let it go. C Major chords still coursed through her mental ear. An optimistic key, but also a restless one, a suitable tonality for the complexities of middle age. And a good key for strings, one that unlocked a series of overtones and partials that set something free in the wood. A key on which her cello thrived. Especially, it seemed, at the start of a new season. Nights like this, when the orchestra was rested after the August break, when the Minnesota weather was still mild and the hall sold out, her cello loved to be played.

From the wings, the personnel manager gestured to her. She hoped that whatever it was wouldn't take long, or they wouldn't beat the line at the parking ramp. Their daughter, May, will have returned home from the movies by now, Ellie thought as she left the stage. And Grady had picked up a nice Malbec for a post-opening-night treat.

"Don't worry. Everything's OK," the manager told her when she came offstage, causing Ellie to brace for the worst. There had been a minor accident. May had gone to the emergency room. "They said it's routine. She's fine," he stressed. "She's fine."