

PART ONE

Intoxication must first enhance the excitability of the whole machine, else there is no art. ...Above all, the frenzy of sexual excitement, the most ancient and original form of intoxication.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

CHAPTER ONE

Fürstentum of Salzburg
January, 1804

Arie De Voss flexed his hands and rolled his shoulders against the tension pooling between his shoulder blades. Wind whipped through the canyons between tall, narrow town homes, down from the steep slopes of Mönchsberg where it loomed above the city. He caught his hat against the gust. Around him, laughter and conversations flourished with the intensity of a circus. If the curious guests noticed the stubborn glut of traffic along Kaigasse, they paid the irritation little mind. The lure of Lord and Lady Venners' ball, the first of *Fasching*, the Carnival season, claimed the city's attention.

Preparing himself as if for combat, Arie pulled his spine straight and yanked the lapels of his coat into place. When the heads of powerful families regarded him as they would the lowest musician, he would smile. When ignorant asses offered praise, attempting to demonstrate their modern taste in music, he would nod. And when his tolerance failed him, as it always did, he would have a sherry, grin, and lie his way through the evening.

After all, Arie accepted the necessity of lies. Lies eased his way onto every stage. And one indefensible falsehood—that he had composed *Love and Freedom*—formed the bedrock of his career.

He caught his breath as a hot wave of paranoia swept

up the muscles of his chest. Someone would discover the truth. One day. But until then, he would do whatever society required of him to keep performing, writing, playing.

“Pardon me, Herr De Voss.” At the entrance to the Venners’ town home, a wigged footman offered a precise bow. “My name is Oliver, sir. Lord Venner requested that I attend to your requirements. May I take your hat and cloak?”

A hush settled among the guests who lingered in the grand entryway. Their fixed stares clung to Arie like ruthless vines, raising his ire beyond its elevated pitch. He quickly, carelessly shed his winter outerwear. A pageant of eyes followed every move.

“Sir, Lord Venner wishes to meet you before you join the other guests.”

“Of course,” Arie said.

Oliver’s livery, wig and manners exactly matched the other footmen. Arie kept his gaze fastened to the back of the man’s powdered head through a maze of hallways and up two flights, lest he mistake his escort for another or lose him in the crowds.

Just inside the floral damasked walls of a private smoking room, the footman stepped smartly aside. “Lord Venner, esteemed gentlemen, I present Herr De Voss.”

Arie bowed to his host. “I am honored, my lord.”

Christoph, Vizgraf Venner, returned the courtesy. With a poised if somewhat lanky physique, he towered over Arie. Faultless manners revealed neither enthusiasm nor disdain. “Good to make your acquaintance, Maestro. You do us credit with your attendance.”

“You flatter me with the invitation and your patronage, both.” Dutch origins tinted his German with an accent he

could not shed, despite years of practice. He heard it grow stronger with his nerves.

Introductions to a dozen bureaucrats, burghers and minor nobles spun Arie with unfamiliar names. He received a glass of sherry from Oliver and took a quick gulp.

Venner indicated a set of double doors leading to an adjoining ballroom. "We were readying to join the gala. The ladies will not allow us to linger in seclusion forever."

"Certainly," said Arie, nodding.

"We recently purchased a pianoforte from Broadwood & Sons that should meet your approval. The *Kapellmeister*, your friend Michael Haydn, called it the finest instrument in Salzburg."

"Thank you for the opportunity, my lord. You must have a keen appreciation for music to import so fine an instrument."

"Not at all," Venner said. "I have neither the patience nor any particular fondness for the arts. My wife reserves that domain."

His blunt honesty inspired Arie with the first enthusiasm he had experienced all evening. He felt an unexpected desire to please his new patron, if only to reward the man's candor.

Quickly, he stifled the sentiment. Lord Venner had likely learned the technique during his political career. Arie did not begrudge the man his chosen means of manipulating people, but neither did he feel like being manipulated.

He bowed again. "I await your direction."

As the gentlemen adjourned, Arie confronted his dread of the awaiting throngs. But also awaiting him was the

unexpected chance to play a Broadwood, a temptation he chose not to resist. Curiosity and excitement outweighed his anxiety.

Damned two-faced sycophants, all of us.

Suddenly unsure of his ability to remain civil, caught in the grip of a suffocating panic, he took another drink.

Mathilda Heidel perused the splendid gathering of Salzburg's most influential citizens. She leaned closer to Lady Venner, their words shared privately. "Have we produced a success?"

"No calamity has yet befallen us," Ingrid said. "We may escape tonight in good standing—a testament to your planning, I must say. I owe you our thanks, dearest."

Surveying her companion for signs of tension, Mathilda could not help but admire Ingrid's grace and resolve. Despite a bout of nerves that had upset her unflappable good nature only hours before, she appeared every inch the practiced hostess. Her obedient chestnut hair, which did not mind being mercilessly curled and coiffed, shone with a deep, radiant luster.

Mathilda offered a genial smile. "Your constant demands kept me distracted. I only wonder what I'll do come morning, once our project is concluded."

"Begin preparations for a May Day celebration?"

"Is this an attempt to demonstrate my continued usefulness to Venner?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I've lived here since just after your wedding," Mathilda said, watching guests step to the rhythm of a jaunty *contredanse*. The air hummed with sweet flirtation. "Surely he must have made some mention of my eventual departure."

“He’s said no such thing.” Ingrid’s smile wobbled enough to reveal the truth. “He knows how much I care about you. Until you are remarried, you will not leave.”

Mathilda glanced down at the mourning gown that enshrouded her body. The glaring contrast of pale trim against black bombazine shouted without words: my husband died unjustly. She shrank from the attention fostered by those garish adornments, the curious looks and pity intent on stealing her peace.

“Do not tease, Ingrid. You know I cannot remarry, most likely not for months.”

“But you’ve helped us beyond measure. I can at least find you a dance partner.”

“No dancing either,” Mathilda said.

“Still? Father Holtz is being unreasonable. A year of mourning is all he requires of the war widows, and even those restrictions are ignored if they have enough money.”

Her fingers wrapped in black kid leather, Mathilda toyed with her *Fraiskette*. She recognized the anxious habit and tucked the protective amber amulet into her bodice. “He’s only ensuring that I respect Jürgen’s memory.”

“You do already,” Ingrid said. “But what if Christoph had refused our entreaty when you wanted to move house? Where would you have gone?”

“I could’ve moved with your father to the country, or joined the nuns at Nonnberg.”

“The convent.” Ingrid wrinkled her tiny nose. “Well, at least you would’ve taken up the violin again, out of boredom if nothing else.”

Grimacing, Mathilda escalated her defenses in opposition to her friend’s other favorite debate: why she no longer played the violin. “I have my reasons.”

“*Ja*, I know.” Ingrid threw up her hands. “Very practical reasons, like when you married Jürgen. I disagreed with those, too, if you recall.”

“I recall.”

“Your hiatus has continued long enough.”

Blood throbbed beneath the skin at Mathilda’s temples. “Do you intend to force me? Make me play music against my will?”

“Not exactly.” Ingrid dropped her gaze and cupped an elbow in each hand.

“What are you hiding?”

“Congratulations, *meine Liebe*,” came a deep male voice.

Engrossed in their quiet dispute, both women jumped at Lord Venner’s greeting. Mathilda glared at Ingrid, wanting only to drag her aside and demand a reply. But she stayed still and silent as the younger woman fled to the safety of her husband’s tall presence.

“Any success we achieve tonight will be because of Frau Heidel,” said Ingrid. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

Venner wore the stresses of his responsibilities at the corners of his eyes and in the slight hunch of his shoulders, but his expression remained thoughtful and open. A striking black suit and a gold-checked waistcoat accentuated the barest hint of red in his closely cut hair.

He bowed slightly to Mathilda. “What she really wants me to insist is that you may stay as long as you wish. And you may.”

Pushing aside Ingrid’s arguments and schemes, Mathilda smiled at his uncomplicated acceptance. “Thank you, Venner. But you both applaud our success prematurely. The more conservative matrons will find some fault in our choice of music. They always do.”

Ingrid scowled. “Old biddies.”

Venner chuckled quietly, in the private way he reserved for his inner circle. “I agree, Frau Heidel. They’ll be especially displeased when Herr De Voss performs.”

The hairs on Mathilda’s forearms prickled within the confines of her gloves. Her heart bumped in a lopsided rhythm. “Who?”

“The maestro.” Above the heads of his female companions, Venner discreetly searched the room. “He arrived some thirty minutes ago.”

“Herr De Voss? Arie De Voss, the composer from Delft?”

“Frau Heidel, artists and their eccentricities baffle me. You know that.” He glanced at his wife. “Press Ingrid for details. After all, she invited him.”

Open-jawed, Mathilda turned to her friend. “What have you done?”

“His recital will surely add to our event,” said Ingrid with an airy smile.

Mathilda closed her eyes as melody and memory danced in her brain. Arie De Voss. Music devotees across the continent heralded him as a prodigy—a pianist, composer and conductor to rival the best in Europe. His name intertwined with music itself, echoing in a foolish place in her heart. An incantation. A fixture in her life despite years spent actively denying that part of her.

“Frau Heidel, are you well?”

Venner’s concern dragged her away from musical enchantment. She pointed an impatient glare at Ingrid. “And you did not think to tell me?”

“You should become indignant more often, Tilda. You look positively fetching.”

“I don’t want to look fetching. I want to know why

Arie De Voss is here, attending your ball, without my having been informed.”

“He’s a known recluse,” Ingrid said, unlinking her arm from Venner’s. “Although he replied in the affirmative, I could not be sure of his attendance. I didn’t want to mention it until I knew for certain. And, well, I wanted to surprise you.”

“You succeeded.”

Ingrid’s pale brows dipped together. “I know what an admirer you are of the maestro’s work. I thought you would be pleased.”

Venner watched her intently as well. The curious surprise she read on their expressions checked her temper. They would never understand what De Voss and his music meant to her. Even she could not make sense of her feelings, a fascination taunting her like a guilty secret. The arrival of an illicit lover to the ball would have embarrassed her less, had she kept such a man. At least the process of taking a lover involved actual contact, not meager daydreams.

An ordinary woman would not obsess about a man she had never met, nor scorn everyday happiness in favor of fantasy. No, an ordinary woman would simply be pleased.

“I apologize, dearest. Thank you for thinking of me.” She carefully cleared her throat. “I am quite...pleased.”

“Good,” Venner said. “I shall find De Voss and make introductions.” Having apparently exhausted his interest in the subject, he departed in search of the musician.

A silent conversation passed between Mathilda and her dearest friend, until Ingrid relented. She banished her quizzical expression and offered an ardent hug. “You get to listen to him play again!”

“I cannot believe he’s here. How did you convince

Venner to invite him? I would've thought his political connections too delicate to withstand a performance from De Voss."

Ingrid raised her eyebrows in lieu of a smile. "Oliver is acting as his special attendant."

"Ah."

Sleek, educated Oliver Doerger was Venner's most loyal employee, some combination of manservant and bodyguard brought from their homeland in Anhalt. Ingrid's new husband left very little to chance, especially the potential ill behavior of guests with questionable reputations.

Admiration flicked a quick smile to Mathilda's lips. Ingrid understood domestic tact as capably as Venner knew city politics.

"Well played, Ingrid."

"A masterstroke, actually. Come now, cheerful face."

Mathilda smiled softly, but every piece of her rational personality—the details of which she had hammered and forged into a quiet existence—argued against giving De Voss a moment of her consideration. Why must the idea of being in the same, albeit *giant*, room with him steal her breath?

A musical chord burst into her brain. Then another. Another.

His symphony.

Love and Freedom.

Desire and curiosity rendered her well-reasoned intentions a cramped, lightless prison. What harm could come of seeing him? Or hearing his performance? After all, she was not about to pick up the violin again. Music had been her mother's downfall, her temptation and weakness. And Mathilda did not intend to follow her

maternal shadow to an early demise.

Rationalizations in place, she curbed her restlessness and awaited Venner's return, searching the scene with practiced skill. Full of warmth and humanity, the cavernous ballroom snubbed winter's chill and the uncertainties of stalled warfare, holding those worries at bay for an evening. Candles cast golden beams across the dance floor from six massive chandeliers, swathing the assembly in gauzy softness. Innumerable jewels refracted and decorated the gossamer light with color.

Ingrid gripped her hand and nodded toward the grand staircase. "There, Christoph found him."

The party fell away in a nauseating rush.

While Venner talked to him, Arie De Voss bowed his head as if deep in thought. Blatant and unreserved, Mathilda devoured every detail. He kept his sandy-colored hair short and a little too wild. Clad in austere black formalwear, he radiated lean arrogance, even as his pensive pose whispered of a vulnerable inner world. He had matured—handsomely so.

Admiration crowded the air from Mathilda's lungs. She may as well have been sixteen again, an innocent with no experience and no past. How could six years vanish so easily?

She willed him to look up, to look her way. To see her.

At last, the maestro lifted his eyes. Mathilda's heart pin-wheeled in her chest, breaking and whirling and beating yet again.