

And, for the first time, she allowed herself to fill in the fantasy image with a tall, dark, exquisitely lithe and beautiful form. It was only a fantasy afterall.

She was having trouble with the pizzicato on the downswing. Her fingers just were not responding correctly. And because she was having such difficulty she became convinced she would choke when the time came to play it in front of her colleagues. She didn't want to embarrass herself but, most of all, she didn't want to disappoint Diana. Sighing, she took a quarter out of her pocket, running it across the backs of her fingers, one to the other, like the old magician's trick. Sleight of...hand. Damn.

She kept dropping it. It rolled across the floor of the rehearsal room and out into the hall.

"It's mine now," Ralph said, flipping it up in the air with his thumb like a gangster in an old movie, as he entered the room. "Heads or tails?"

"No, I wasn't tossing a coin. Really. It just got away from me. I was only...exercising my fingers. I'm worried about playing this piece."

"Play it...as it lays. Have your, uh, fingers been getting much exercise lately?" He took and pretended to inspect her right hand.

"Is everything double entendre with you?"

"Everything. Darling, I'm a gay man. It's in the rule book. And you nicely side-stepped the question. As usual."

"Yes, I am. No, I'm not. End of discussion."

"I know a sweet young actress I could introduce you to. Of course, she's quite mad, they all are, but no moreso than musicians."

"It's alright. I'm better off when I'm unattached. I'm afraid I went a bit wild when I lived in San Francisco. I've been living like a nun since I got here."

"Mm. We should throw you a coming out party."

"Any excuse for a party, huh?"

"Of course."

She patted his knee. "I'm okay. Don't fuss."

"Sorry. But you do need a surrogate mother. You'll just have to put up with it."

"Where's David?" she asked, rolling her eyes.

"He won't protect you. We've discussed this already and he's firmly, ahem, in my camp."

She smiled. "How long have you two been together?"

"Since Julliard." His face softened in memory. "We were 'tender and callow fellows.'" He sighed.

"You're still very sweet." She playfully bumped his shoulder with hers as he relaxed into the seat beside her. "I'm fond of you too. Just as long as you don't turn me into a pet project. I'm not a stray."

"And don't be led astray. You know who I mean."

"Uh...she invited me out to brunch yesterday."

"Ooooh. 'Tell mama all.' Inquiring minds want to know. Did she try to lure you to her lair?"

"I'm not a child, Ralph. I can take care of myself. And yeah, I