

Chapter 1

Way Down We Go (Stripped) – KALEO

Kace

“Hey! You missed a spot.”

The mocking words stung the back of my neck. Exactly where my nerves were, already overstrained from the day and about to snap. But as much as I would have liked to unleash my frustration, the pitiful remains of my self-control held me back. Because I needed this crappy job and because I rarely had the upper hand.

Actually, never.

So, I took a deep breath, gripped the handle of my old cleaning cart more tightly, and just kept going. I ignored the calls and the smug laughter of the students, turning up the music on my white-wired headphones and continuing my night rounds through Trinity College Dublin. The sooner I finished, the sooner I could go home to the people who actually meant something to me. As so often, the thought of my mam and Trix was the only thing that kept me from losing it. From giving up completely. Or, alternatively, from making it clear to the student behind me where he could stick his derogatory comments.

Who the hell makes fun of cleaners these days? It was pathetic.

Shaking my head, I gritted my teeth and looked up from my black Converse as I reached the end of the wide corridor. I wasn't someone who was often in a good mood. For the few people I called my friends, I was pessimism personified, and, in some ways, they were right. I couldn't deny that I was cynical and mistrustful – during most of the hours of my day, reality was too grey for optimism. Life had simply pissed me off too much to be any other way.

But as I stood in front of the wide door, behind which was the music department's rehearsal room number M3, I felt my mood improve noticeably for the first time in hours. Not because I was eager to mop another four hundred square meters. But because of the...music.

Music. It had cost my family so much and yet I couldn't hate it. I needed it to survive.

Music was a scar that burned and at the same time held all the ugly cracks together.

Paradoxical, like my whole life, and yet just contradictory enough to still work. Or maybe I was just incredibly masochistic.

I couldn't explain it any other way – why, every Thursday, I voluntarily exposed myself not only to the music room and all its bad memories, but also to the most talentless music student Trinity had ever seen. Much to the dismay of my ears.

Even through my headphones and the thick door to M3, I could already hear the cacophony. I wondered why I had ever agreed to this twisted bullshit. But a deal was a deal, and if I was honest with myself, Gavin wasn't so bad. Apart from his complete lack of musicality.

With a sigh, I stuffed my headphones into my pocket and finally pushed open the door to the rehearsal room. The off-key sounds stopped immediately, and I didn't bother hiding my relief. In this case, the perfect acoustics of the room were more like a curse than a blessing, especially for someone like me.

"Yo, Kace, what's up? I thought you'd got lost on your route."

I closed the door behind me, set my cleaning cart aside and turned towards the slightly raised stage where Gavin was sprawled on his piano stool. His elbows rested on the keyboard and an opened bottle of Guinness sat on the shiny black lacquer of the piano lid – without a coaster, as though the Bechstein concert grand piano was a run-down piece of pub clutter, not an elite instrument worth almost two hundred thousand Euros.

"Don't worry, I couldn't have missed you if I'd tried."

"You're doing my music an injustice."

"I could say the same thing." I jumped up on to the stage next to him and folded my arms loosely across my chest. "Which victim have you chosen today?"

His crooked grin got noticeably wider. "Did I mess it up so badly that you couldn't recognise the song, even with your wonder ears?"

I gave him a meaningful look and glanced at the sheet music, which was covered with countless pencil scribbles, comments, and highlights. Including a considerable number of very obvious question marks. So, what Gavin had just 'played' was actually Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. *Poor Ludwig.*

"*Mannaggia!*" Gavin let out a suppressed curse and ran a hand through his black hair, which was now sticking up in all directions, ironically making him look a bit like the composer. "You don't have to make that face. It's a damn science that mere mortals can't understand!" More words in Italian followed, which, again, I didn't understand. "What am I doing wrong, Kace? What do these swirls and signs mean and...*merda*, I have no idea how I'm going to get this stupid piece done by next week." Another Italian curse, then he reached for the Guinness. "Why the hell did it have to be music?"

In the weeks since we'd made our deal, I'd learned a few things about Gavin. First, his parents were swimming in money. They allowed their son to live the life of a carefree student, as long as he studied music at Trinity, as was the family tradition. The fact that music wasn't exactly his forte – apart from an admittedly impressive talent for rapping – was beside the point. And it wasn't really up to me to question his family dynamics. Second, Gavin was desperate and, under his annoying macho shell, was under enormous pressure – desperation was something I could understand. And third, his cunning knew no bounds.

When he had caught me at the piano in this hall almost two months ago, when I was supposed to be scrubbing the floor, he didn't hesitate to immediately offer me deal. Or rather, he had blackmailed me, in his charming Italian way. I would help him pass his classical music

course, and in return he wouldn't rat me out, and would let me use half of his rehearsal time in the hall.

If it had been any other day, I would probably have given him the middle finger, but that night I was just...*tired*. From the constant lack of sleep over the last few months, from the many unpaid bills, from quitting my already poorly paid job at the supermarket, which I had barely processed at that point. That one night I was too exhausted to put up a fight, so I just agreed to the deal.

I wouldn't go so far as to say that this arrangement had made Gavin and I friends, because we weren't, but now I saw it less as a deal than as a break. An hour at a perfectly tuned grand piano, where the entire outside world didn't matter. An hour in which I allowed myself to be immersed in the music, while forbidding myself from even thinking about it the rest of the time. Because of Trix. And because of Mam. Because my mother and I were too similar and, through her, I had seen what the rush of music could do to you.

The loud clink of Gavin putting his beer bottle down brought me back to the present. I resolutely pushed aside the heavy thoughts before they could turn into a dark storm. Too often they had taken me to places no one should ever go.

"So, wonder boy, what's up?"

I pushed long, dark blonde strands of hair out of my eyes and pointed at the stool.

"Move over."

"It's all yours." As always, Gavin gave me the piano stool and pulled up a folding chair to sit next to me. "Show me what that chaos of dots and lines is supposed to sound like when it's finished."

"The piece is finished."

"Yes, in a language I don't understand. Yours, not mine, Kace."

I lifted one corner of my mouth in amusement as I scanned the sheets a second time. They were the simplified notes of the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata, and even without looking at every dotted line, I could already *hear* the music. The entire sonata, all the movements with their highs and lows and tones, spread effortlessly in my head.

"Anyone can learn a language," I replied quietly, placing my fingers on the cool ivory,

"Grammar, yes. Speaking is a completely different matter." Gavin leaned back. "And we both know that no amount of practice can ever match your talent."

"That's a matter of opinion."

"Indeed." He looked at me for a moment longer, surprisingly serious, and then his cell phone rang. "Shit, I have to answer this. You warm up your fingers, Van Gogh."

"Van Gogh was a painter," I grumbled, but Gavin had already stood up and was speaking rapid Italian as he headed for the side exit of the room.

So much for that. Frowning, I watched him until the door slammed shut behind him, and then I let out a deep breath. In the sudden silence of the rehearsal room, every little sound

seemed too loud, reminding me that I wasn't supposed to be here, that I had other business to attend to. That it had been pointless to agree to this arrangement in the first place. Gavin needed far more than an hour of jangling the keys each week, and not only did I lose time, but I also risked my job. I wasn't paid to play; I was paid to clean. My place was not at the expensive grand piano, but behind the squeaky cleaning cart.

And yet I couldn't take my fingers off the keyboard. I ran them over the individual keys, the black and the white, until they became a grey blur before my eyes. I clenched my jaw and squinted as my gentle touch inevitably turned into sound. The first note of the sonata. The first, the second, the third...as if independently of me, note after note followed until the individual sounds became the beginning of the third movement of the Moonlight Sonata – my favourite part of the whole piece – and I was no longer able to stop. It had always been like that. It might look as though I was controlling the music, but in fact it held me captive.

I put my other hand to the keys. Mentally, I recalled the melody, tempo, and sequence, focused on the picture the third movement had painted in my mind years ago, and started again. Eyelids lowered to see more, as the notes filled the room around me, filling *me* until nothing else could fit in. As they had done countless times before, my fingers flew over the keys, speeding up, slowing down, hitting the notes harder, dotted, sustained, following the music in my head. I felt my pulse quicken, echoing inside me as the sound of the music did, the two merging. It might sound absurd but in moments like this it was hard to tell where the music ended, and I began.

The grand piano roared as I reached the end, following the final scale and unleashing the four-note chords. Then, the last notes, the last onslaught – the silence that fell over the room once I'd finished was so much louder than the music had been.

Fuck.

Cursing, I pressed the heels of my palms to my closed eyelids, breathing in and out erratically. My pulse was still stuck in Beethoven's madness and my fingers were hot and tingling. It was almost like being drunk. In moments like these, I understood why Mam hadn't listened to her parents when she was young and had thrown all reason to the wind. Why she always followed her passion instead of looking for a reliable job and earning money. Why she put the bills and financial worries, even her illness, on the back burner, because she forgot everything around her as soon as she sat at our battered old piano. Music gave her no other choice. It made every decision for her.

And you're well on your way to following in her footsteps.

But I couldn't let that happen, I couldn't make the same mistakes as Mam. I needed stability, reliability, I couldn't allow myself to choose music like my mother had, putting everything else aside. Because it wasn't about me, it was about Trixie. And Trixie deserved nothing but the best.

I gritted my teeth and, a split second later, jumped as I noticed a figure in the doorway. A man, probably in his late fifties, stood there motionless in a dark brown tweed suit, staring at me as if I had appeared on that piano stool straight from hell.

I jumped up hastily, banging my knee on the expensive grand piano, which made me curse loudly again. Great, that would make it clear to him that I was from the ‘wrong’ part of Dublin. If my old clothes weren’t already enough of a clue.

Without taking his eyes off me, the man crossed the room before stopping a few meters in front of me. Then he finally broke the dreadful silence. “If I remember correctly, you are not paid to play the piano.”

I mean, you can’t really call the pittance I receive payment, but fine.

I started to reply, not knowing exactly how to answer, but he didn’t even give me the chance.

“Kace Holloway, isn’t it?”

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. “Yes, I...” I had many faults but stammering uselessly in tense situations wasn’t usually one of them. “Yes, sir.”

“It’s Professor Grisberg.”

Grisberg? Damn it... Grisberg was one of the head honchos at Trinity College and I was...so screwed.

“You... Listen, I’m sorry.”

The furrows in his brows deepened as he looked me over again. From my worn black Converse, past the faded blue jeans with holes in the knees that had once been *cool*, to my thin sweater that still had a stain from Trixie’s breakfast on it.

Where the hell was Gavin? He would’ve come up with some great explanation because man, that guy could talk.

“You aren’t, Mr Hollway, as we both know. Just as we both know that this is not the first time you’ve played here,” the man replied, with a tight-lipped smile.

Touché. “It...yes, that’s true, but...”

“And if I had anything like your talent, I would have done exactly the same.”

“I...what?” I slumped my shoulders, perplexed. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

Grisberg ran his hand over the dark grey stubble on his chin and joined me on the stage. “Under normal circumstances, it’s not my style to interfere in other people’s lives, Mr Holloway, but to be honest, you’ve made it difficult for me to turn a blind eye this time.”

Was the professor worried I would ruin his fancy instrument with my playing style? Because I wasn’t some privileged music student?

If my future income hadn’t depended on Grisberg, I’d have asked him exactly that. Instead, I just forced fresh air into my tense lungs and said the only thing I thought he wanted to hear. “It won’t happen again, sir. I promise.”

“That would be a shame.” To my surprise, his smile widened considerably. “Over the past few weeks, I have followed your meetings with Gavin Mazzilini with great interest. I am referring, of course, to your outstanding musical abilities.”

This situation was getting weirder and weirder. “I don’t know if...”

“Do me – and, more importantly, yourself – a favour and don’t deny your talent. You’re too intelligent to do something so foolish,” the professor interrupted me a second time. “I have been in the world of music for a long time, I have seen countless great talents, so I know what I’m talking about when I say that you possess a *gift*, Mr Holloway. A gift I believe you are wasting.”

His last sentence hit me in a sensitive spot and finally made me think clearly again.

“With all due respect, Professor, you don’t know anything about me or my life.”

He nodded slowly. “A situation that can, perhaps, be changed. Have you ever spoken to anyone about your gift?”

I grimaced. “Gift?” The more often it was uttered, the more absurd the word sounded.

“Of course I can’t say with absolute certainty, but you show signs of perfect pitch,” he clarified quickly, unmoved by my grim expression. “I have observed you often over the past few weeks, playing without a score in front of you, creating music – often complex pieces, like the one you have just performed – from memory. To put it simply, your playing is precise and perfect because you don’t just play, you *understand* the music, and judging by your expression, you know what I’m referring to. That is more than mere talent.”

I knew not everyone found it as easy as I did to learn an instrument or play difficult pieces, but I would never have called it anything like a *gift*. Probably because it had always been like that between music and me. It was a given, nothing to dwell on. I had learned music just as other children learned to speak. I had internalised every single note I’d ever heard, with its individual sound, its *colour*, the melodies and songs that arose from it. It was only much later that I learned you could make music visible by marking down the tones as notes between five lines on a sheet of paper.

Mam had once said that it had to be like that. Music was like an emotion. Only when you had experienced and felt it, really understood what it consisted of, could you describe it with a name. I had never been interested in the rules of music. I had not needed notes on a page to lose myself. Just music. The sound, the melody, found its way into me as if it had a mind of its own, and it stayed there. Stuck with me like an emotion you can’t get rid of.

Music is feeling.

A feeling you can lose yourself in.

I folded my arms over my chest – suddenly, this felt too close for comfort. I put some distance between myself and the piano. As if that would change anything. “What are you getting at?”

“That I took the liberty of telling a very good friend about your gift.”

As he said this, I instinctively dug my fingers deeper into the fabric of my sweater and the skin beneath. “Excuse me?”

“I stand by my initial statement, Mr Holloway. Someone like you should not waste your abilities. You should work on them rather than restraining them.” The professor removed his tiny, round glasses from his nose and looked me straight in the eye. “Have you ever thought about studying music at an institution like Trinity College?”

Of course I had. Countless times.

Countless times I had imagined it, and every time, everything I was up against knocked me to the ground. Over and over. Until I stopped allowing myself to have the thoughts at all. Because they were selfish and unrealistic for someone like me. But I certainly wasn’t going to lay out my whole messed up life for Grisberg. So, I did what I always did. I stuffed the emotions that music always brought out of me into the nearest box and shipped them off somewhere to the depths of my brain. Where they wouldn’t get in my way.

“Listen, Professor Grisberg, thank you for the compliments but playing the piano is just a hobby, a nice way to earn a bit of extra money by playing in the pub. Nothing more.” *Liar.*

He placed his glasses back on his nose and nodded thoughtfully. “That isn’t an answer to my question, Mr Holloway, but you’ve said enough.” He took an envelope from his jacket and held it out to me. A diamond-shaped emblem with the letters *LSC* was embossed into the heavy, ivory-white paper of the envelope.

After a moment’s hesitation, I took the letter and looked at it suspiciously, first at the sender and then back at the professor standing in front of me. *Lakestone Campus of Seattle.* “What is that?”

“It’s an opportunity I’d like to offer you. My friend in Seattle runs a highly respected institution for gifted young people and is willing to give you this chance. Of course, provided that the conditions are right for everyone and that you agree to a personal meeting and an assessment of your abilities.”

“Seattle?” I repeated, tonelessly, and shook my head. “What makes you think I...Professor Grisberg, that’s a generous offer, but my life is here. I’m not leaving Dublin.” The words came out harsher than I expected, leaving an almost bitter aftertaste, even though they were the truth. My whole life was here, on the Emerald Isle. My mother and Trixie lived here, both of whom relied on me, both of whom needed me in their own way, and anyway, Dublin wasn’t bad. We weren’t swimming in money, and we had more worries than I could count, but we had each other and that was enough. We got by.

What if living means more than just getting by?

I swallowed and handed him back the letter.

“Keep it, Mr Holloway.”

“I don’t think I’ll change my mind.”

The same opaque, thin smile appeared on his lips again, as if he knew something that was hidden from me. “And that is one of the gravest errors of humanity,” Grisberg replied cryptically, pushing my hand, and the letter, to one side before briefly squeezing my shoulder. “There are more paths in life than the one we think we have to take, Kace Holloway, far more than just one. Anyway, you know where to find me. Take care of yourself.” With these words, the professor turned away and left me standing alone on the stage of room M3.

With a now crumpled envelope in my hand and a rip the size of the Marianna Trench in my chest.

A gulf between what I wanted to do but could never have, what I needed to do but could never love.

An old wound that, thanks to Grisberg, was wider than ever and that no amount of fancy writing from Seattle could heal.

So, I stayed exactly where I was.

On the only path I knew.