Soon
by apparitionism

Summary

On an unusually warm and humid January day in 1952, in the heart of Washington, D.C., Myka Bering meets the woman who will bring into her life magic, music, madness, mayhem... everything our B&W are about, at a time in history that was not at all congenial to a love like theirs. Desire, betrayal, destruction, salvation: welcome to Soon.
Chapter 1

It is January of 1952, and in Washington, D.C., the temperature has been rising for four days.

Friday had seemed normal: high in the low forties. On Saturday, the remaining snow from earlier in the week melted away as the mercury rose. Sunday, tourists remarked on how pleasantly surprised they were by the still-increasing warmth, and Monday had seen government workers leave their winter coats at home. And now, for one more warm, sticky day, weather from some other place, or some other time, has been imposed upon the nation’s capital.

The office building in which Myka Bering works is impossibly hot in the summer and correspondingly cold in the winter, and these past few days have clearly confused it. All the surfaces, the filing cabinets and telephones and typewriter keys, all have taken on a slickness, the warm damp condensing onto casings that had been too cold for weeks and weeks. Today, Tuesday, she has washed her hands as many times as she dared to leave her desk, but they have never quite dried, never felt clean, never felt cool.

Now, on her walk home, through humid, still air, she feels entirely overheated, and she is certain that the balky radiator in her tiny room of a fourth-floor apartment will choose this day, this day alone, to radiate. So she is looking for an excuse to linger somewhere, looking for some indication that it would be all right to stop, to sit, even though she is alone.

The sign comes as a sound moving through the heaviness: her favorite song. The music is coming from a tiny bar and grill that she passes every day but has never entered.

She goes in and heads straight for the jukebox, where her song is ending. She has a coin ready to play it again; there are only a few other customers, so the groan of “not again” will not be too loud, if it comes at all.

Because of those very few other customers, she feels that she can take a booth for herself. She sits and waits for her song; she is bold and tells the waitress to bring her a martini. “Over ice,” she says, because “on the rocks” sounds like something her father would say.

After almost no time at all—two sips of her cocktail—“How High the Moon” starts for the second time. Myka drinks; she listens. There is a crisp cool to the music, too, in the juniper snip of Les Paul’s guitar, the spooky sweetness in Mary Ford’s voice.

“Somewhere there’s music,” Ford lyrically, and accurately, points out, “how faint the tune.”

Something at a table nearby catches Myka’s eye, some flash, something…

“Somewhere there’s heaven, how high the moon…”

The flash again: it’s light glinting off a heavy coin, a bright silver dollar, flat against the palm of a pale hand.

“The darkest night would shine if you would come to me soon…”

Then the flash is gone, the coin is gone, the pale hand is empty.
“Until you will…”

The coin reappears.

“How still…”

The coin disappears.

“My heart…”

Reappears.

“How high the moon.”

It’s a magic trick.

Myka looks up and meets the eyes of the magician.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

I'm going to keep a lot of my Tumblr intros and tags on this one, so the salient tags here said: who's the magician?, as my mother likes to say, you get three guesses and the first two don't count
Chapter Notes

Who’s the magician? Yeah, right, like that was some big mystery. But I hope it will not confuse the issue too much for me to say that the question of who the magician is will most likely continue to be a mystery for a little while. My excuse is, it’s the 1950s, a time when a lot of things tended to happen below what might seem to be exceptionally “normal” surfaces. (Small housekeeping issue: there was a word missing from the first chapter as originally posted. It’s there now.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The magician’s gaze is dark and cool, cooler even than the iced martini glass in Myka’s hand.

She is alone too, just as Myka is. Alone, and only two tables away, looking at Myka with eyes that might be black diamonds.

Myka speaks without thinking, saying the first words that come into her head: “I’ve never seen a woman do a magic trick before.”

Now a smile curves over the pale face dominated by those dark eyes. “It worked, then?” she asks.

The way she says “worked”… either she is performing an accent as part of her trick, or she is really English.

Myka hopes it is the latter. She does not know why. “It did work,” she says.

The magician nods. “Good. It’s rather different.”

“The trick?”

The smile again. “No, the weight. Of the coin. I’m accustomed to a crown; your dollar is a bit lighter.” She holds the coin in the flat of her left hand, as she had before. This time she passes her right hand very slowly over the dollar, and it disappears again—Myka knows it must be in her right hand now, but she did not see the exchange happen. What Myka does see is that this magician’s hands, these hands accustomed to crowns, are large—not distractingly so, but Myka looks at her own hand, touching the stem of her glass. Myka is tall, lanky, unfamiliar with feeling small in any way, but her hand suddenly seems compact. The magician’s fingers are long and slender.

“I guess the weight would matter,” Myka says.

“It does indeed.” She moves her right hand over her left again, and there again is the coin. “I tried a half-dollar at first, and it was barely there. It flew across the room.”

Her tone suggests that the coin itself is to be blamed for its flight, and Myka laughs. “I guess you’ve got the hang of it now,” she tells the magician, and she intends that to be the end of it. She doesn’t want to be rude, doesn’t want to impose on this woman’s time or patience. She has almost finished her martini, anyway, and there is no reason for her to linger. She is alone, and she should not linger, for even in the few minutes she has been here, more people have come in, and she does not want to be a woman having a drink alone. She reaches for her handbag, undoes the clasp, looks
for a bill to place on the booth’s table.

Myka stands up to leave. She looks back at the magician, to smile at her one last time, and the woman says, “May I ask you—do you know who that was, playing the guitar on the record?”

The platter now turning is Patti Page’s “Detour,” and Myka thinks it features a guitar solo, but… “I’m sorry. This is just a Patti Page record to me.”

“Not this record. The previous.” She shakes her head. Her hair has a bit of a wave to it, and it is pulled back in a loose knot at her neck. It is nearly as black as her eyes seem to be, and though it does not sparkle, it does shine. A wide silver clip, its metal far duller than the hair it grasps, holds the knot in place. Myka can see the clip’s edges as the magician turns her head, first to one side, then the other.

She is all details, this woman. Myka says, “That was Les Paul.”

“You chose that song.”

“I did. It was a big hit last year. It’s my favorite.”

“Interesting,” the woman says. She begins to manipulate the coin again, this time not magically: she turns it over and over across the knuckles of her left hand, such that it flows back and forth. Myka is mesmerized. “I thought the guitar sounded a bit like Django Reinhardt.” Now she looks up at Myka. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Myka tells her. “Thank you for letting me see the magic trick.”

“You are welcome as well,” she says.

Myka wants to say something else, something like “may I join you,” but that is not something to say to a stranger. That is not something to say to a beautiful stranger who does magic tricks. So Myka doesn’t say anything; she smiles, she nods her head, and she heads back out onto what she expects will be the sticky sidewalk.

But the sidewalk is not sticky: the sidewalk is wet, for rain has begun to fall, a chilly rain that will no doubt correct the weather, that will return it to the winter it is supposed to be.

That night, in her bed in her room that the radiator sometimes heats, Myka dreams, or in the morning she imagines she remembers dreaming, about the moon being high, about the flash of a coin, about hands and black hair and magic.

And it is some remnant of her dream, she thinks, when at work the next day she sees a woman, the length of a hallway away, turning a corner in the company of several men, a woman whose hair is twisted in a dark, glossy, loose knot at the nape of her neck. Yes, it is some vestigial fantasy, some wishful thinking… because what would a magician—a lady magician—be doing at the CIA?

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original Tumblr tags: I love the 1950s in several ways, (great music and movies, some smart politicians too), but for every positive there is a chasm of negative, I know I
would have found it quite difficult to live back then, and our intrepid not-yet-sweethearts are likely to face some trouble wrt that as well
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

One thing I find interesting about historical AUs is the way in which, if one is trying for at least a bit of realism, one has to think hard about women’s roles, and where boundaries can be pushed, and where they can’t. And where actual historical women did push them, to great and/or disastrous effect. And what would motivate them to do that in the first place. Incidentally, in the early 1950s, the CIA had a higher percentage of women in its workforce than nearly every other federal agency did: almost 40%. That’s a lot of women. I care most about two of them, though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Myka’s days are, in a word, predictable. She boils an egg or pours a bowl of cold cereal before work. She packs a sandwich in a brown paper bag to carry with her. She walks down the three flights of stairs that take her to street level and pushes open the door that will take her out of the cramped, mailboxed lobby, where it always somehow seems to be dusk.

The walk to work takes a little over ten minutes in good weather, fifteen in bad. When it takes fifteen, Myka tries hard not to curse every step, but by the time she reaches the complex on E Street and trudges up the leafed drive, she is either freezing or soaked or sweltering. She reminds herself, on those days, that if she were still at home in Colorado Springs, she might not have a job at all. She certainly would not have the job she does now.

So on sizzling days she fans herself; on frigid days she breathes on her hands to bring life back to them, then cups them around her ears to help hurry along the stinging return of blood. Then she puts on her headphones, turns on the reel-to-reel tape machine at the exact point she left off the day before, and begins again the laborious work of translating, from Russian to English, everything from radio broadcasts and public speeches to tapped telephone calls and other covertly recorded private conversations.

When Myka’s supervisor, Miss Calder, taps Myka on the shoulder, she is startled. She has been working on a telephone call between two government officials, and they are remarkably chatty, constantly interrupting and talking over each other. She is grateful whenever the interlocutors whose words she strives to understand and transcribe resemble the Russians she knows: taciturn and uncommunicative, with vocabularies that seem concentrated on “da” and “nyet.”

Now Myka pulls one earphone aside, and Miss Calder says, “I’ve had a request for my best translator.” She smiles at Myka, and Myka, who loves Miss Calder as she did her favorite teachers in school, blushes a bit. Miss Calder has been with the CIA since its beginnings during the war, when it was the OSS, and Myka has heard most of the women here, and several of the men, speak of her accomplishments with awe. Myka has always wanted to ask her directly about the many operations she worked on… but she has lost her nerve whenever the opportunity has arisen. Miss Calder is sweet-natured, but she is also, clearly, made of steel.

Today she is more sweet than steel; she says, “Office 353,” and she is still smiling, creping the skin at the corners of her serene blue eyes. She is in her fifties, Myka is fairly certain. She hopes she herself will still look as beautiful at that age. She doubts it is possible.
“What’s it about?” Myka asks. She takes off her headphones and sets them aside. Her garrulous Russian friends will have to wait a while… not that that is likely to compromise the security of any nation; they are discussing, among other fascinating topics, the optimal way to mask the taste of particularly medicinal vodka made by, as best Myka can determine, a man who works in a department related to flooding. Or possibly borders; Myka can’t quite make out the difference, on the recording, between “poyma” and “kayma.”

Miss Calder shrugs. “Not our department’s project.” The organization is a collection of fiefdoms, and though Miss Calder controls most of the translation services, she is not automatically privy to the other areas’ ventures. Myka has heard that sometimes plans will be made without translators, just so certain officials can avoid bringing a woman into the conversation. Sometimes this results in disaster—but such disasters are generally not attributed to their real cause. Again Myka marvels at what Miss Calder faces, how she seems unaffected by the maneuvering. The unconcerned shrug, the pleasant demeanor, and now, a further word: “But I think it could be interesting.”

“More than Stepanov and his friend Yumashev? I can’t believe it. They’re practically Martin and Lewis.”

This makes Miss Calder laugh, as Myka had hoped it would. “Well, this won’t be Martin and Lewis,” she says. “Definitely a change of pace.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Myka says, then worries that that sounded like she doesn’t like her job, doesn’t want her job. “I mean, only because their conversation—”

“Don’t worry, Myka. I have no interest in letting you go.” She gives Myka a pat on the shoulder. “Hurry up now. You know how those characters in Operations think the world revolves around them.”

Miss Calder can get away with saying things like that, but Myka knows that she herself can’t. So she gives Miss Calder a weak smile and tries to school her attitude back down to an appropriate level of deference. Superiors are superiors… although Miss Calder is right, in Operations they believe themselves to be very superior.

Myka knocks on the door that has “353” painted on its window. Prime number, she thinks, without even really thinking about it.

“Come in,” a soft voice tells her. It’s… a woman? Odd. And it sounds familiar, that voice, though she can’t quite place it. She pushes the door open, looks at the figure seated behind the desk. Dark eyes meet hers.

So it was no dream, no fantasy, no wish… or perhaps it had been all those things together, and now they have come true. “Hello, magician,” Myka says. “It’s you.”

“And it’s you. You’re the girl who prefers Les Paul to Django Reinhardt,” the magician says. She stands, walks around the desk. She is wearing a dark gray flannel suit, the pencil skirt of which shows the rest of her body to be as slender as Myka remembers her hands are. Her hair is just as Myka remembers it, too, with its shine and sheen, mostly hiding at her neck.

“I never said that,” Myka protests, though why she feels she must be clear on this point… “I just know Django Reinhardt’s name, not his music.”

“And yet you still might prefer Les Paul,” the magician points out. “In the event.”

Myka smiles. “I’ll have to make an effort to find out.”
“Let me know the verdict, when you do.”

And for a moment, they are simply standing and smiling, and they might be two people anywhere—at a dinner party, or in the park, or on a train platform—and why they should be speaking like this, Myka does not know, but she realizes, after that moment, that they should not be speaking like this, or that she, at least, should not be speaking like this. She tries to recover by saying, “So. It was you.”

She realizes that did not sound quite right when the magician asks, “I thought we established that? My magic trick, your Les Paul.”

“’I’m sorry,” Myka says. “What I meant was, I thought I saw you yesterday as well. Here. But then I thought I had to be mistaken, because…”

“Because?”

“Because of what you do.”

“What I do?” Now she looks puzzled. Her puzzlement makes her twist her neck to the side, just a bit; Myka catches a glimpse of the silver clip in her hair.

“The magic,” Myka says, for want of anything else to call it.

“Oh. Oh I see. No, the magic… the magic is simply a pastime. A useful one, but no, my real work is currently with the Secret Intelligence Service.”

“MI6,” Myka says. “You’re an agent?”

“Not precisely. But I am here to work on an operation, and that is why I need a translator.” She holds out her right hand. “I think it’s time we introduced ourselves. I know you are Myka Bering, Vanessa Calder’s best.”

Myka takes the slender hand in hers. It is almost no flesh at all; Myka imagines that she can feel individually each bone, each tendon. “I don’t know about being Miss Calder’s ‘best,’” she says, “but yes, I’m Myka Bering.”

“I have no reason to doubt your Miss Calder. Nor should you, Myka Bering. I am Helena Wells,” says the magician, or rather, says Miss—or Mrs.?—Wells. Myka knows she should not think of her as “the magician” anymore… but she knows she will. Until she forgets that the hand she is still holding is the one she watched effortlessly conceal a silver dollar. She is still holding that hand, or more accurately, that hand is still holding hers, and Myka is certain she will never forget that.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original Tumblr tags: I would cast Lindsay Wagner in a role like this in a heartbeat, because she can be so sweet, but she does have that steel at her core, and as far as I can tell that combination, might have let her fly under a lot of radars, but still get things done, also a thousand apologies for my craptastic Russian, here and going forward
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Depending on how much you know about certain dark corners of history, you may begin to understand what is happening well before Myka does, but my hope is that regardless of your knowledge level, the story will still have some interest. Note: the MGB was the Soviet foreign intelligence/security agency that preceded the KGB; that’s not a typo. However, if you find any actual typos, please let me know.

Myka’s first task on her new project is not new at all, for Helena Wells hands her a box that itself contains the flat boxes that signify reels of tape and asks her to go through them as quickly as possible, listening for any mention of either of two words: “bluebird” and “artichoke.”

“I’m pretty sure ‘artichoke’ in Russian is just ‘artichoke’ said with a Russian accent,” Myka says. “Depending on the case.”

“I suppose it should be straightforward enough to recognize, then?” Helena Wells says. “And ‘bluebird’… you may hear it in English as well.”

“Is it birds in general? Does the bird have to be blue? What is this about?”

And she is told, “The bird does have to be blue. And as to what this is about… I don’t want to prejudice you by suggesting any context in which you might encounter these words.”

Myka looks at edges of the tape boxes. Most are “SECRET,” but not “TOP SECRET.” Nor are they especially recent; some date back to 1948. “This is a lot of tape,” Myka says. She is not trying to make excuses before the fact, but there are at least thirty reels here. “I can speed it up, but not too much if I’m listening for individual words. When do you… I mean, do you need it finished today?” She cannot possibly finish today, not even if “today” extends all the way to midnight, or through several midnights. But Helena Wells works in Operations in some capacity, and people who work in Operations think they have only to command, and the laws of space and time will contort themselves accordingly.

“Today?” Helena Wells says. “Miss Bering—it is Miss Bering?”

“It is,” Myka says.

“Miss Bering, if you somehow managed to examine all of these tapes today, I would petition some religious authority to declare you a worker of miracles. If you were able to complete the task in a week, I would still advocate for minor sainthood.”

“It won’t take a week,” Myka assures her. “I really can speed them up… Mrs. Wells?”

At that, the magician laughs. “Not that, thank heaven. I would say call me Helena, but that is not how things are done in this building, is it?”

“You’re in Operations,” Myka says, “and you’re not anybody’s secretary. That pretty much makes you my superior—not to mention, if I’m on your project, I sort of… belong to you.”
Helena Wells whispers, “I am not technically in Operations, but I think that is the impression certain people wish others to have with regard to my presence here.” Louder, she says, “So I suppose you should call me Miss Wells. But rest assured, in any chain of command, you belong to Miss Calder. You are not mine.”

Myka thinks she likes that Miss Wells has made this clear. She thinks also she likes that Miss Wells has told her something in confidence. “But you should call me Myka,” she says. “If you want to sound like you’re in Operations.”

This makes Miss Wells smile. “I shall rely on you, Myka, to help me preserve my cover. At least until someone decides it no longer matters; the politics here seem to shift from minute to minute, do they not?”

“They do,” Myka says. And now they are simply smiling at each other again. Myka feels that as she has stood in this office, all of her senses have become more acute: she is seeing the stitching on Miss Wells’s suit, hearing her own breathing, feeling the roughness of the cardboard box in her arms. She shifts the box, now, and it reminds her that she should get started on the tapes. “Do you want a report at the end of the day?” she asks.

“I’ll stop by and see what progress you’ve made, how’s that?” Miss Wells offers. “I may be slightly later than five, if you don’t mind waiting. The meetings will drag on.”

“I don’t mind,” Myka assures her. “Bluebird and artichoke?”

“Bluebird and artichoke,” Miss Wells says.

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Myka makes her way through six tapes by the end of the workday. She is finished with 1948, and there have been three bluebirds but no artichokes. One of the “bluebird” mentions seemed to be about an actual bird, but the other two… Myka’s best guess is that “bluebird” is, or was, a code word of some kind, because it was said twice during a conversation between a politician and someone highly placed in the Second Main Directorate of the MGB. They were discussing double agents gathering information.

In the course of her translations—and she has been doing this job for almost two years now—Myka has heard all manner of things: words that have made her blush, horrifying conversations, declarations, commands, intimacies. And yet she has so far felt somewhat removed from the actual business of the Agency, the real business of spying on enemies and countering those enemies’ spying on the U.S. The exchanges she has listened to today, however, are different from her usual fare: they involve actual members of the Russian spy apparatus, identified as such. No one chats about vodka on these tapes.

Her head is spinning just a bit when she removes her headphones. She did not quite make it to double speed with the tapes, but the words were moving extremely quickly. She is going to have a fiery headache later tonight… it is a balm, however, when she hears Helena Wells’s low voice—that is, Miss Wells’s low voice—say, “And how did you fare today, Miss Bering?”

“Myka,” Myka reminds her.

“Myka,” Miss Wells repeats. She moves Myka’s headphones over and leans back against the edge of Myka’s desk. She crosses her arms and looks down. “Well?”

“Three bluebirds,” Myka says, feeling absurdly like a spy herself as she does.
Miss Wells smiles. “Tomorrow you can tell me the precise context. And perhaps you’ll unearth some artichokes… but this is excellent.”

Myka smiles, too, and casts her eyes down at the praise. She notes, because Miss Wells’s legs are now directly in her line of sight, that her stockings look to be silk, not nylon. Myka looks up again. She says, to say something, “Your suit is lovely, Miss Wells.”

To her surprise, Miss Wells plucks at her own sleeves with disdain. “My suit. I bow to fashion, but I cannot stand these bracelet-length sleeves. Useless for the doing of magic. How I am meant to get a card from the palm of my hand halfway up my arm with no one noticing, I have no idea.” She takes a blank index card from Myka’s desk, rips it in half, palms one of the halves in her right hand—it disappears for that moment—then drops it. “You see? I cannot throw it into my sleeve.”

“Could you get it into the sleeve on the other arm?” Myka asks.

Miss Wells picks up the half-card again and looks seriously at it. “It would change the configuration of some tricks. Passing things back and forth between arms. Much misdirection needed.” But she does it, just does it, just like that, and the card is gone. Then she shakes her left sleeve, and the card falls out. Myka shakes her head in wonder, and Miss Wells says, “That rough edge was uncomfortable.” She leans back against the desk again.

When an irritated voice says, from Myka’s side, “Excuse me,” both Myka and Miss Wells turn to look. It is Miss Calder, and she goes on to say, very tightly, to Miss Wells, “I thought I made it very clear that Operations personnel are not to harass my personnel. And certainly not at their desks, right in front of me.”

Myka tries to keep her eyes from widening. Miss Calder never loses her temper.

To Myka’s surprise, Miss Wells starts laughing. “My dear Vanessa. You haven’t changed in the slightest,” she says.

Miss Calder laughs too, a quiet chuckle. “Neither have you.” She turns to Myka. “I didn’t mean to shock you. I was only joking. As you can guess, Helena and I have known each other for some time.”

Miss Wells adds, “We met during the war. But that was… far too briefly, and far too long ago. I’m very glad to be able to renew our acquaintance. I hope we can chat outside the building sometime in the very near future.”

Myka wants all the details, and she wants them right now. But no one talks about their own war... “national security” is sometimes the reason, but more often it is simply because no one wants to talk about their own war.

Miss Calder says, “Helena, did you bring your violin?”

It sounds to Myka like a question completely out of the blue, but Miss Wells answers, as if she had been asked the time of day, “Of course I did.”

“I have an idea. Abigail!”

Abigail Cho translates Chinese. She had been hired almost a year ago, as part of the tail end of the push for Chinese linguists in response to the onset of the Korean War. Myka is a little jealous of Abigail, because Abigail is not only a translator but also a classical pianist; when she and Miss Calder, who is a cellist, discovered their shared devotion to music, they set up a regular date to practice together. Myka wishes she were musical like that. She wishes that music had been a...
priority in her childhood, but her parents thought that any time Myka and her sister did not spend applying themselves to their studies should be spent outdoors in the healthy Colorado air. So Myka can ski extremely well—but that is a useless skill to bring to the refined atmosphere of the nation’s capital.

“Yes, Miss Calder?” Abigail responds. Myka does truly like Abigail, in spite of the small knot of resentment regarding music. Abigail sits two desks away from Myka, and Myka will sometimes watch her interactions as if they were a show. Many people seem to think that because Abigail’s face is Asian, she will exhibit certain personality traits. Abigail is always happy to disabuse them of these ideas. Abigail is no-nonsense about almost everything, in a way that Myka does not quite manage to be; in particular, Abigail is very good at stopping men in their tracks if they try to say or do anything untoward.

Miss Calder says, “How would you feel about Helena joining us this weekend? I know we’ve been working on the Brahms, but—”

“I wouldn’t want to intrude,” Miss Wells says swiftly. But Myka is looking at her expression. She does want to… not intrude, Myka doesn’t think that’s it, but just to join them. Whether for the chance to play or simply for companionship, Myka has no idea.

Abigail says, “It’s no intrusion. I’d be just as happy to get away from Brahms for a while. No offense, Miss Calder, but that allegretto’s going to be the death of me.”

“Not the death of you,” Miss Calder says sternly but with affection, and Myka’s resentment notches up.

“In that case, I’d love to,” Miss Wells says, and now Myka is resenting everyone.

She knows she must keep her envy from showing, however, so she turns her attention to coiling the cord of her headphones.

Then Miss Calder says, “Myka, why don’t you join us too? We can make it a dinner party at my house, if Abigail doesn’t mind playing that horrible piano I have, and you and Helena can get to know each other a bit. Since you’ll be working together.”

Myka wants to shout “yes!”, but she instead controls herself and says, “Now I’m the one who doesn’t want to intrude.”

Miss Wells says, “I don’t know if Miss Bering likes classical music. She may prefer Les Paul.”

Myka looks up at Miss Wells. Is she teasing? Her expression makes Myka think she is being challenged. Dare. She says, “It’s Myka. And I don’t know if I like classical music. I don’t know much about it.”

“Do you want to know more?” Miss Wells asks.

“Yes,” Myka says immediately.

“Then do come.”

Abigail laughs. “You won’t learn much from my piano playing, anyway, Myka, no matter whose piano it is. It’s mostly me saying ‘sorry’ when I make a mistake and force poor Miss Calder to start again.”

Miss Wells says, “There will be plenty of ‘sorry’ to go around, I’m sure. I’m terribly rusty.”
Miss Calder tells her, “Let’s work on something you know well, then.”

They proceed to have a detailed discussion about what piece they should play, and Myka has no idea what any of it means, apart from the fact that they decide on something by Beethoven, and Myka knows, at most, four notes written by Beethoven. She does not care about those notes at all, though; these women could play anything at all or nothing, and Myka would be just as excited about the prospect of a Saturday evening spent in their company.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original Tumblr tags: the idea of the piano trio just makes me all wiggly with happiness, and I have got out my own violin, on which if you held a gun to my head I could maybe play Happy Birthday, but just to feel it in my hands, hands are very important in this story, as is listening
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Pianos and violins and cellos, oh my! is basically what I have to say here. Those who don’t know the particular pieces of music I’ve used in this part will have to let me know if the story still works… I can’t unhear them, of course, and I particularly can’t unhear them, now, in the context I’ve put them in. That probably sounds nonsensical, doesn’t it?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Myka spends Friday listening, once again, for bluebirds and artichokes. She hears a flurry of bluebirds late in 1949, and she thinks she has begun to decipher the situation: bluebird—no, Bluebird—is either a program of some sort, something having to do with double agents and controlling them; or Bluebird is a double agent. At any rate, in the first occurrences, the word for “bird” is in the nominative case, as if it just a name, as in “Bluebird is becoming more well-known”; later, however, the noun is often in the instrumental case, so that questions about its use can be asked: “What will they build with Bluebird?” No one seems to know the answer—or at least, no one on Myka’s tapes.

She reports all of this to Miss Wells in her office on Friday evening. Miss Wells says, “Interesting, interesting. Late 1949… and the instrumental case…”

Myka feels a small tug of surprise that Miss Wells does not ask about the significance of the instrumental case. Myka supposes, though, that Miss Wells may know of the language, simply from being around the intelligence-gathering apparatus. Myka certainly knows more about Chinese now than she did a year ago, though she understands only those words of it that Abigail uses when she swears.

“Do you want me to start on 1950 tonight?” Myka offers. She is about to add, I don’t have anywhere to go, but then she realizes how pathetic that makes her sound. A Friday night, and nowhere to go except home, and it is not that Myka can’t bring herself to look forward to a meal and a book. It is not that. It is… well, she should be honest with herself: she wants to impress Miss Wells. She wants to impress her now, because she will obviously do no impressing tomorrow night, when she will show herself to be ignorant of every bit of culture that Miss Wells, Miss Calder, and Abigail reference so casually.

At Myka’s suggestion, however, Miss Wells laughs. “I imagine that you must be quite tired of listening to these Russians chatter about their useful bluebirds. I’ll look over the contexts for these 1949 finds tonight, and you can start 1950 fresh on Monday. I’d much rather be able to enjoy tomorrow evening without thinking ‘oh, I should instead be reading Miss Bering’s translations of 1950 bluebird mentions.’ Spare me that fate, I beg you.” She is leaning toward Myka; her eyes are twinkling.

Myka feels that she is being charmed, though she doesn’t know how she is recognizing it: no one has ever tried to charm her before, and she cannot imagine why Miss Wells is doing it now. She doesn’t know how to answer in kind, either—she has never in her twenty-six years on the planet been able to charm anyone, and she is not likely to make a start with the practiced Miss Wells—
and she feels herself starting to blush as she tries to think of something to say, as the pause becomes a silence.

“Where did you learn magic?” Myka blurts, because she has to say something, and because… well, because she has been wondering.

Miss Wells smiles avidly, as if she wanted to be asked this, as if this were the exact question she wished to hear. “From my father, mainly. And other family members. They’re all performers of one sort or another. Magic, music… other things.”

“Are they disappointed that you aren’t on a stage somewhere?”

“A bit, I think. Certainly my father is.” She holds her hands out in front of her and looks at them. “His hands are large. I think he married my mother because her hands are similarly outsize. She’s a pianist, by the way, and when my brother was born, oh the excitement, as I understand it, that the next-generation Wells magician had arrived. I was just insurance, really, but as it turns out, I can palm a card far more easily than Charles can.”

“So why aren’t you? On a stage, I mean.”

“The war.”

And Myka knows that now is not the time to press for more on that topic. She is trying to figure out what to say to make clear that she understands that this is so, but Miss Wells saves her by asking, “And where did you learn Russian?”

Myka smiles. “Close to the same way. From my grandparents. It’s all they speak—well, mainly—and since I wanted to talk to them…” She smiles wider, thinking about her grandmother and grandfather, their home, the peace of them, the warmth behind their severity… when she was very small, simply the sound of Russian being spoken was enough to make her happy. That’s what she has been told, in any case, and she is content to believe it.

“And how do they feel about your current occupation?”

“They think it’s funny, that something I was babbling at age two—something that everyone expected me to forget, that my sister did forget, mostly—is how I make a living. And my grandfather makes fun of my Cyrillic, which I keep telling him, if he’d taught it to me instead of making me wait to learn it so much later, in college, I’d be better. But he didn’t think I’d ever need it.”

“You’ve shown him, though.”

“Sort of. He’s right that my reading and writing aren’t as good as my listening and speaking, and I feel guilty about that. One of the first jobs Miss Calder ever put me on was translating a stack of airplane manuals. It took forever, and I thought she was going to fire me.”

“Is that why you’re so concerned about getting through these tapes in such a timely fashion? You really shouldn’t worry. I think a slightly more desultory approach may prove useful, particularly when we get to written documents.”

“You’ll need someone else for that,” Myka says; she thinks she should be honest, though she does not want it to be true. “I really am slower than I should be.”

“No, don’t worry about that, either. When we do reach that point, I may show you another card I have up my sleeve.”
“Your bracelet-length sleeve?” Myka says. She hopes this is the right tone, a tease of sorts, but not too much of one.

“I will pray that cuffs become all the rage for spring and summer.”

Once again they are just looking and smiling, and Myka likes this better than when Miss Wells is being charming. She feels, as she did in the bar, an unfamiliar push to say something like that evening’s unuttered “may I join you”: something on the order of “do you have dinner plans” or “couldn’t I at least walk you home.” But she can’t say those things any more than she could have said that spontaneous “may I join you.” Instead she says, “I’ll pray too,” and adds, because she wants to reassure herself that it is true, “I’ll see you tomorrow evening.”

“You’ll hear me, too,” Miss Wells says. “As I try to shake the cobwebs out of my violin, and make a fool of myself in the process.”

Myka says, “I doubt that.”

“We’ll see.”

“Hear,” Myka says on impulse.

That wins her a very knowing smile, and Myka wants to hold onto that image. “Good night, Miss Wells,” she says, and slips out of the office.

“Good night, Miss Bering,” she hears. The words seem made of velvet. Myka wants to turn back around.

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This is a week for firsts, Myka thinks. She is sitting in Miss Calder’s music room—that in itself is not a first, for Miss Calder does hold the occasional office party at her house—and she is listening to three women play music together. No, they are doing more than that: they are working on music together. This is most certainly the first time Myka has sat and watched (and listened to, she reminds herself) such a thing. And there are so many things, literal things, that go into making up this larger thing: the piano against the wall, Abigail’s music propped upon it; the metal music stands that Miss Calder had set in front of two chairs; Miss Calder’s huge cello case, which she opened with something that looked to Myka like reverence; the cello itself, and its glow was very nearly music enough for Myka. It was beautiful. So was Miss Calder when she looked at it.

Miss Wells, who had arrived slightly late, looked beautiful too, beautiful and breathless, as if she had run through the streets. She shed her coat, saying, “It’s warmer than I thought it would be, once again. What is the matter with this town?”

“It heard you were coming,” Miss Calder told her, “and decided to see how well you deal with curve balls.”

“You Americans and your baseball,” Miss Wells scoffed. She picked up her violin case, about which she was clearly less reverent than Miss Calder was her cello’s. The case seemed well-traveled, scruffy, very much at odds with Miss Wells herself, who had traded her bracelet-sleeved suit for yet another pencil skirt, this one in a tweed, and a simple white blouse that was close to mannish in its collar and cuffs. She set her case on the chair provided by Miss Calder and unfastened those cuffs. She began to roll up her right sleeve. She saw that Myka was watching her, and she said, “No magic in playing the violin, I’m afraid. But take note!” She shook the long, now-loose left sleeve at Myka. “I do not bow to fashion in private life!”
Myka, who had spent almost two full hours trying to determine how best to clothe herself for this adventure, wished she could just put on a shirt like that, just put on a shirt and not bow to fashion. But she had decided on a dark swing skirt, with a crinoline underneath, and a lighter cardigan. With bracelet-length sleeves. At Miss Wells’s words, however, she wanted to pull them down, cover her wrists and not bow to fashion.

“You don’t bow to anything anywhere,” Miss Calder said. She herself wore tapered pants, about which she’d said to Myka, “I normally wouldn’t be this informal, but it’s just us girls. And it makes playing so much easier.”

Abigail said, from the piano, “Miss Wells, I hardly know you, but I can certainly believe that’s true.”

Miss Wells laughed and opened her violin case. Myka expected to see an instrument as dilapidated as the case itself, but no: the violin was perfect like Miss Calder’s cello, its varnish nearly as rich and dark as a cup of black coffee. Miss Wells took it up in her hands—the Wells family’s hands, Myka could not help but think—and, lifting the bow as well, played one long, clear note.

Then she raised a roguish eyebrow at Myka. She began a quick series of notes, and it took Myka just a moment to put them together… “That’s ‘How High the Moon’!” Myka exclaimed.

“Very good,” Miss Wells said. “I’m no Les Paul, I’m afraid. Nor am I Stéphane Grappelli, whose style in swing matters I am wont to ape. But I can manage some of his ‘How High the Moon.’” She proceeded to play a bit more, and it was, improbably, jaunty and spry—a song that Myka had thought was about loneliness had suddenly become hopeful.

“Watch it,” Abigail said. “You don’t want Miss Calder starting in on popular music. We’ll never hear the end of it.”

“I’d like to start in on some Beethoven, please,” Miss Calder said. She seated herself with her cello. “Are you ladies ready to work? Usually this is with an orchestra,” she told Myka. “This is the middle part of a three-part piece, and we’re the featured instruments.”

“Triple Concerto,” Miss Wells added, as if that should have some meaning to Myka. Then she was muttering at her violin, “I tuned you, you little monster, and now what? Abigail, if you would be so kind.” Abigail played a note, and Miss Wells twisted a tiny metal knob attached to the base of a string. Miss Calder played the same note, and Miss Wells echoed it. “Better,” she said to the instrument.

“Anyway,” Miss Calder went on, to Myka, “the orchestra would start, but as it is, it’s on me.”

Miss Wells said, “Indeed. Vanessa has to do the heavy lifting here, and then Abigail will take over for a bit. I’ll come in later and try not to embarrass myself.”

“Hush, Helena. You’ll embarrass yourself less with your playing than with your talking,” Miss Calder said, and she closed her eyes, and she began to play.

And so now Myka is sitting and listening. She really does not know the first thing about music as music—she simply knows what she likes and what she doesn’t—but she is starting to feel something, as she listens, something about when the notes are right and when they aren’t, when Abigail will yelp “sorry” and they will stop and back up, when Miss Wells will mutter “hell and damnation” and follow that with the vague apology, “I once could play this in my sleep.”

Miss Calder says, on one of these occasions, “You might do better if you were actually asleep. You
weren’t joking about being rusty, were you?”

But when Miss Wells is not swearing at herself, when she plays what seems to be correctly—when they all do—something happens. There is a particular part, a part for which Myka finds herself feeling something very much like love, during which Miss Calder’s cello seems to speak, or even to ask for something, and Miss Wells’s violin answers. It answers with comfort, with sweetness, but also with playfulness, that same charm that Miss Wells brought to bear on Myka. The cello grounds her, though; it keeps the violin from becoming so full of enthusiasm that it runs, or floats, away.

And Myka imagines that she can hear, in the very notes they play, that this is in some way a story of how Miss Calder’s and Miss Wells’s wars coincided.

The piece of music, once they at last play it through, is only about five minutes long. But they have worked for well over an hour to get to this point, and it is very clearly labor. Miss Calder looks exhausted. She has indeed done, as Miss Wells said, the “heavy lifting”; she has barely stopped playing, the entire time, save for a few parts that were Abigail’s alone. “That’s all I can do for tonight,” Miss Calder declares when they agree they have played it reasonably well. She hefts her cello to return it to its case, and Miss Wells twinkles again at Myka. “Abigail,” she says, “do you know any swing? I would like to show off.”

“How Club style? I can do ‘Minor Swing’… it sounds a little strange on the piano, though, instead of guitar.”

“I’ll trust you to make up the difference.”

Miss Calder says, loudly, “I’ll just be in the kitchen while you two bastardize music.”

Abigail grins down at the piano and plays a little flurry of notes; she looks back at Miss Wells and asks, “Right?”

Miss Wells nods, with a grin of her own.

And suddenly, a song detonates in front of Myka. A series of explosions: there is no other way to think of the speed and force with which the notes come, the velocity of the women’s arms and hands and fingers, and Myka glances at Abigail once or twice, but she is mostly transfixed by the sight of Miss Wells—she is standing to play now, not sitting—with her entire body moving, arms and hands of course, but her legs are moving too, her legs and her back, which she bends to and fro to match the furiousness of the beat.

This is different, too, in that they do not stop for errors; there must be some, for at certain times Abigail looks over her shoulder at Miss Wells, who laughs back, or Miss Wells contorts her face as if her violin has offended her again. Then they start trading parts: Abigail will play some complicated combination of notes, and Miss Wells will repeat them, but slightly differently; Abigail will change those; Miss Wells will change again. At some point, however—Myka has no idea how they know the right point has come—they go back to what is presumably the chorus, play it through once more, then end decisively.

“Abigail, you’re marvelous,” Miss Wells gasps. She is almost panting as she wipes the back of her right hand, the hand that holds the bow, across her forehead.

Abigail shakes out her own hands. “You are pretty marvelous yourself. That’s more fun than I’ve had in ages. No offense, Miss Calder!” she calls to the kitchen.
Miss Calder calls back, “I’m sorry, I can’t hear you; I put in earplugs.”

“How can she not like that?” Myka asks.

“She thinks it isn’t hard enough work, playing swing, playing jazz,” Abigail says.

“Not hard enough work? Look at the two of you! You’re breathing like you’ve run a race!” Miss Wells says, “Not hard enough musical work. We might as well be bricklayers.”

“You are bricklayers!” Miss Calder affirms loudly. “With not even a wall to show for all your effort! But I suppose you’d better come get your dinner, anyway…”

Abigail announces, “After all of that, I am starving,” and she leaps from the piano bench.

“I have to put the creature away,” Miss Wells says. “I’ll be there in a moment.” As she is opening her case and settling the violin inside, she says to Myka, Myka who is lingering, “So what did you think?”

“I think you were showing off,” Myka says. She shakes her head. “But…”

“But?” Miss Wells prompts.

Myka is trying to think of something clever to say. She is looking at Miss Wells’s hands as she thinks, and she is shocked to see a tiny trickle of bright red against her left palm. “You’re bleeding,” she says.

Miss Wells looks at her hand. “So I am. Well. That’s what I get for showing off when I haven’t been practicing.” She turns her hand to Myka; the blood has come from the tip of her index finger. “Next time I’ll have my calluses built back up. Then I’ll really show you what I can do.”

Myka cannot even begin to imagine what sort of explosions that would entail.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original tumblr tags: in my opinion, women musicians are exceptionally hot, and poor Myka is only human, so, you know, she's kinda sunk
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

A little spy-biz information here; not much, but eventually you’ll see where those parts of the narrative are going. Interpersonal matters need to progress to a certain point as well… but it’s 1952. It’s 1952, but also, no matter the time period, you don’t know things until you know them, do you? And you certainly don’t believe things until you believe them. Myka’s making some progress, though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When the dates on the tapes reach the middle of 1951, it is as if someone has strangled the bluebird and replaced it with an artichoke.

Myka reports this to Miss Wells, who sighs in response. “I am not surprised,” she says. “Similar contexts, I presume.”

Myka nods. “Instrumental, too.”

Miss Wells says, “I suppose one doesn’t really expect to hear ‘artichoke’ used in the instrumental. ‘Artishokom’?”

Myka tries not to react to this, but she can’t help herself. “You said you couldn’t speak Russian!”

“I did not say that,” Miss Wells says.

But… Myka thinks about it, however, and realizes that that’s true. But then… “So what do you need me for?”

“Well, in the first place, I enjoy having someone so pleasant provide me with such useful information. But in the second place... how much shall I tell you, Miss Bering?”

Myka feels a quiver of nerves, then a stronger thump of worry that this is something larger than she should be concerned with. She knows what the Agency does, what its mission is, but her part in that mission is generally so minor that she can shunt the idea of it to the side; she can concentrate on her agricultural-department Russians who talk—and care!—about vodka and nothing else. If she wanted to, she could say to Miss Wells, “Please just let me translate.” Myka has always wanted to do her job and do it well... she does not know which course of action will allow her to do that. So she says, “Tell me whatever you want to.” She doesn’t think she could stop Miss Wells from doing anything, really, unless she ran from her office. And she knows she doesn’t want to run from her office.

“Do you know the name Kim Philby?”

That is certainly not what Myka expected to hear. But she nods. “He worked at the British Embassy. Supposedly. But he spent so much time over here, with Mr. Angleton, that everyone assumed he was actually with MI6... but then he was gone.”

“He returned to Britain. Do you know why?”
“Because people change jobs in intelligence all the time? Because he was homesick? Because he retired?”

“That is not why.”

“Okay. Why?”

“Because your government became convinced that he was a double agent, feeding exceptionally sensitive information to the Soviets.”

“Was he?”

Miss Wells lifts a pen from her desk, holds it by its ends, between her index fingers, and stares at it. She doesn’t look up. “I’ve no idea. It doesn’t matter. The result, however, is that in this building, anyone at a certain level who sounds like I do is automatically bathed in a glow of suspicion. There are many reasons I wish not to have my actions illuminated by such a glow.” Now she begins to weave the pen through the fingers of her right hand, making it spin and flow, reminding Myka of the smooth roll of the silver dollar across her knuckles. That was hardly more than a week ago, and now Myka is being told about double agents.

Myka says, “But why would—”

“I couldn’t possibly be another Philby, you see, because I need your help. I know so little about the Soviets; I don’t speak even rudimentary Russian.”

“But you do speak Russian.”

“Ssshh. I needed a translator, didn’t I? I can’t understand a word on those tapes.”

But she can, so… “Does that mean you are a double agent? Is that what you’re telling me?”

“You truly do not understand how to keep your voice down, do you?” She is smiling and shaking her head, as if Myka is a particularly disobedient puppy. “Of course I am not a double agent. What I am is exactly what I look like: a woman of limited competence, a woman who was sent here to do a particular job because to send a man would indicate that that job was considered important.”

“You don’t look like a woman of limited competence to me.”

“That is because you are not a man.”

And Myka tries, really tries, to imagine what it would be like, how different her own view of the world would have to be, for her to look at Miss Wells and see limited competence. See someone whose presence signified unimportance. “It would be a good way to hide,” she finally says. “If you were a double agent, I mean.”

“But I’m not one.” Miss Wells stands up, reaches across the desk, and pulls a quarter from Myka’s ear. “A double agent would never do that,” she says.

“Really?” Myka asks.

“Of course not. It would be a ruble.”

Myka can’t help herself: she starts to laugh. Bluebirds, artichokes, rubles. She asks, “Who are you?”

“A woman of limited competence,” Miss Wells repeats. “Never forget, Miss Bering, that this is a
man’s world. And that can be a disadvantage to us”—she plucks the quarter from Myka’s other ear, with her other hand, and this time, as she does it, her fingers linger on Myka’s earlobe; their tips are cold, and Myka is sure that is why she feels a shudder ripple down her spine—“or, perhaps, something else.” She holds the quarter out to Myka in the palm of her left hand. “I’d make it disappear,” she says, now with a hint of apology, “but that’s becoming rather old hat for us, isn’t it?”

Sparkling new last Tuesday; old hat today? Myka shakes her head. “I don’t think so,” she says.

Miss Wells bares her teeth in a smile; the effect is wolfish. Myka looks down at her hand as fast as she can, but her eyes don’t make it in time. The coin might have been a ruble, a crown, a dollar, anything: it’s gone.

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Myka takes off her headphones after pushing through a particularly difficult telephone conversation—the tape quality was terrible—to the sound of Abigail in conversation with Miss Wells. Myka doesn’t look over at Abigail’s desk; instead, she listens.

Miss Wells is saying, “—after Vanessa drags us through Beethoven again?”

Abigail says, “I’ve honestly never heard it done that way before, but… sure. My part’s pretty simple.”

“Given what I heard last time, I’m fairly certain you can find something in it to hold your interest. If I’m not imposing too much on your good nature.”

“I wasn’t lying when I said ‘Minor Swing’ was fun. It’ll be nice to try something else—and one of these days we might even convince Miss Calder to change her mind. I’ve been working on her, trust me, because what I wouldn’t give to hear bebop cello! And maybe with you on my side… you’re still a showoff, though.” Abigail says this with the sort of ease that Myka has always wished for.

Miss Wells responds just as Myka imagined she would: with reciprocal lightness. “I am, and I apologize for it.” Her voice deepens. “But it’s been some time since I had such… freedom.”

Something in Miss Wells’s tone tempts Myka to turn and look at her. She wants to know if Miss Wells is looking at Abigail. But she conquers the impulse and quickly pulls her headphones on.

****

At the end of the workday, Miss Calder calls Myka over. “I see you’re still finding your way through those tapes for Helena. She isn’t making you work too hard, is she?”

“It’s just a lot of tape,” Myka assures her.

“All right. I was worried that she was trying to use this as a carrot to make you work harder, but as it is… would you like to listen to our little trio again on Saturday? She and Abigail have some idea about popular music, and Helena wants you there.”

“But if you and Abigail don’t, then I shouldn’t—”

“It’s not that at all. I just don’t want you to be bored.”

“It isn’t boring! Abigail said it was more fun than she’d had in ages, and it was for me too. Not just
the swing,” Myka adds. “All of it.”

Miss Calder nods. “Then I will see you, in addition to those two musical ruffians, at five on Saturday.”

****

Late Friday evening, Myka is still listening to Russians talk about artichokes. She has not heard a bluebird since the abrupt cessation in mid-1951, and the artichokes are piling up. She wonders about her three 1948 bluebirds, the relative few in 1949. She wonders about the large number of 1951 tapes she has yet to listen to—at least triple the total from 1948.

She decides to ask Miss Wells about this. If she is still in her office, of course. It is late on a Friday; she might be gone. Almost everyone is gone. There are some overnighters, but the Agency is still an office building, and it still becomes a ghost town at night.

A bar of light shines at the bottom of Miss Wells’s closed door, so Myka knocks softly.

“I know it’s late,” she starts, once she’s been invited in, “but I have a question.”

“Then you should ask it,” Miss Wells says. The ashtray beside her on the desk is full, and her hair has begun to escape its clip.

Myka almost asks “are you all right?”, but she does not want to lose her thought, so she asks her real question. “Do I have all the relevant tapes? Are there more out there from 1949 and before mid-1950, sitting in a box somewhere? There’s so much more from mid-1950 on. Do we have more tape as time goes on because more of the chatter is relevant to whatever you’re investigating, or do we have more tape as time goes on just because there’s more tape as time goes on?”

Miss Wells tilts her head, purses her lips. “I don’t know. That question is, I think, one for your intelligence gatherers, but I will ask it.”

Myka plows ahead. “Because the way they talk about it seems to change, but I don’t know if that’s just because I don’t have all the chatter from before. At first they didn’t seem to know what bluebird was. Then they started talking about uses, and with artichoke too—although some of them don’t know what artichoke is, either—but never specifics. They mention it, but that’s all. So did these particular officials not know enough to talk about specifics? Or were they being circumspect because they knew we were listening?”

“Miss Bering, they always assume someone is listening. If not us, then their own MGB.”

“But if they assume we’re listening, then why would they use the words?”

Miss Wells comes to attention. She says, “What do you mean?”

And Myka has been thinking about this. “You said that I might hear them in English, right? Even though I haven’t, you said that I might.”

“I did say that.”

“So that means they’re probably our names for people or programs or whatever they are. Right?”

“Keep talking.”

But that is about as far as Myka had got on her own; she says now, “But why would they want us
to know that they have information about our people or programs or whatever they are? Why wouldn’t they want to keep their secret intel… well… secret?” She stops, reconsiders. “Wait. Okay. They want us to know that they know? But why?”

Miss Wells is looking intently at Myka. “It pays to consider who is likely to have the upper hand in any situation involving information.”

“Who’s likely to have the upper hand?” Myka asks. She’d like to give an intelligent answer, but she can’t think particularly well under that gaze.

“The party that sends the most believable signals.”

Myka is still not thinking clearly, not with those eyes burning at her. “I don’t really understand what that means,” she admits.

“Keep thinking on it. I would like to know what you come up with.” Miss Wells pauses. She drops her gaze; when she raises it again, it is as if she has made an effort to become less captivating. “You know, Miss Bering, I can’t tell you what I did in the war.”

“Myka is still not thinking clearly, not with those eyes burning at her. “I don’t really understand what that means,” she admits.

“Of course not,” Myka hurries to say.

“But I will tell you that the… patterns of thinking you are demonstrating would have been quite useful indeed. We might have worked together then, too.”

The idea is transporting. Myka says, without thinking, “I wish we could have.”

She is relieved when Miss Wells laughs and says, “I suspect you were a bit young.”

“Maybe not for the entire thing. I was sixteen for Pearl Harbor.”

“How old was I then? I don’t mark the war the same way you Americans do…”

“I’m not trying to pry,” Myka says, even though of course she is, and this is a better way to do it than to shamelessly interrogate Miss Wells.

“No,” says Miss Wells, “not at all. That’s late 1941, so I was twenty-two. Probably far less mature than the sixteen-year-old you.”

Myka speaks without thinking again: “You’re younger than I thought.” In response to this, she receives a raised eyebrow, and she groans, “No, oh, no, that was wrong. I meant, because you know everything. About everything.”

“Not everything,” Miss Wells says, and she is back to playful.

“Oh, name one thing,” Myka scoffs.

“Les Paul.”

“That’s my only claim to fame with you.” Myka does not know how to feel about that.

“For now,” Miss Wells says, and Myka sparks to the idea that there will be more, there will be something beyond “now,” there will be other things between them as jests.

The gleam in Miss Wells’s eyes is an answering spark, but she says, “You should go home, Miss Bering.”
“Why?” Myka challenges.

She cannot tell if it is a reason or a dismissal when Miss Wells answers, “I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

Myka thinks it would be better to take it as a dismissal. She says “All right.” She turns to go… but then she turns back. “Miss Calder said you wanted me to be there.”

“I do.”

“Why?”

“You’ll see.”

“Don’t you mean hear?”

“You should go home.” Miss Wells’s voice is almost as deep as it was when she spoke to Abigail of feeling free.

“Why?”

“I’ll see you tomorrow night.” This time, it’s a reason and a dismissal. But it is also, Myka thinks, a promise.

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The trio make their way through a different thicket of Beethoven—“You have no idea, this adagio,” Abigail had said to Myka as they arrived on Miss Calder’s doorstep together—but Myka finds it just as beautiful as the previous week’s, for it seems so sweet and slow; it seems as if it will stay that pleasant, but then something changes… the key? Myka wonders; is that the key?… and it turns dark, such that she does not see how they will claw their way back to sweetness… but they do, and the music is dulcet again; it resolves in a way that Myka wishes every thing would be self-contained enough to do.

Miss Wells has had to work harder in this piece than in last week’s, as has Abigail; Myka can see it in their postures. As Miss Calder is putting away her cello, she says, “You can’t possibly want to play your swing now.”

Miss Wells stands. She brandishes her violin at Miss Calder. “Not swing this week, Vanessa. Your worst nightmare: bebop!”

This sets Miss Calder to scowling and Abigail to cackling. “Have your fun,” Miss Calder says. “But don’t come crying to me when you can’t move tomorrow.” She disappears into the kitchen, as she had last week.

Miss Wells turns to Myka. “This is for you, Miss Bering. You must listen, and tell me what you hear. Abigail, give her the chords.”

Abigail plays several handfuls of chords on the piano, and Myka thinks that she ought, absolutely, to recognize them from somewhere… but before she can, Miss Wells has exclaimed “Go!” and she and Abigail are off, just as they were last week.

So it’s a test of some sort. Myka doesn’t want to take a test; she just wants to sit here and soak this all in, store it for later, at home, when she can take it out and play it back, because it’s extraordinary, that this happened last weekend in the first place, and now that it’s happening again.
Myka has been in Washington for almost two years, and she hasn’t spent time like this before. She hasn’t felt social… not that she’d ever been social, not like other girls, but she had expected that part to change somehow when she left Colorado. A new city would change her, she thought—a real city, not Colorado Springs, not Boulder. Denver had been a thrilling trip that her family took every few years, and Myka would see so many people with jobs and lives, people who were busy and had tasks to accomplish and they would stride along the sidewalks with purpose, moving from important place to important place, she was just sure. The city would see to it. As it turned out, however, what the city saw to was putting Myka in a job she liked, working with people she liked and also respected—well, some of them, anyway—and then leaving her to find her own way through the remainder of her hours.

All the social situations have seemed to be replays of each other. The recent Christmas party: the Agency, or the parts of it that acknowledged themselves, had taken over a hotel ballroom, and everyone looked so formal, so beautiful, so special. Miss Calder was there with her gentleman friend, a gruff professor from one of the universities, and Abigail too: she’d accepted the invitation of a shy young scientist from Research.

“Thank god my parents aren’t here,” she’d said to Myka, “because first, I practically had to do the asking, and second, the idea of me on the arm of someone who isn’t Chinese? Whose ‘eyes look like that’? Be glad your mother’s family isn’t from Shanghai, Myka.” She’d shuddered.

“My mother’s family is from Vladivostok,” Myka said. “It’s not Shanghai, but it’s practically China.”

“And yet if you went to the Christmas party with someone whose eyes look like Joshua’s, I bet your mother wouldn’t fake a heart attack at the sight and threaten to disown you.”

Myka had to concede that Abigail was probably right. Not that she was going to the Christmas party with anyone anyway… although she did go. She went because she didn’t want to have to explain why she hadn’t; she sat at the same large table as Miss Calder and Abigail and another woman translator and her date. She danced two dances, one with a fellow Russian translator whose girlfriend had to stay home sick, and one with Abigail’s Joshua. Then she took a cab home. It was fine. And maybe that’s what the city had intended to show her all along: that she was fine. That this sense of distance between herself and other people was a fine, acceptable part of who she was.

But these evenings at Miss Calder’s house have been different. Myka isn’t part of the music-making group, but what she feels when she watches and listens to them play is something more like attachment than exclusion, as if her listening matters. That may have something to do with her general familiarity around Miss Calder and Abigail, but she thinks it is more to do with Miss Wells, the way Miss Wells will look and smile and draw Myka in. As if it is her responsibility to keep Myka from feeling that distance.

And so if Miss Wells wants this to be a test? All right then; Myka will take that test. She will take it and she will pass it. She listens, and the music is familiar somehow, just touching its fingers to something she knows… but wait. Wait. What would Miss Wells have smiled so widely about?

Abigail plays her series of chords again, and Miss Wells plays the final notes of a melody that is not what Myka expects.

“Abigail’s part!” Myka exclaims. “How did you do that? It’s ‘How High the Moon.’”

“It’s ‘Ornithology,’” Abigail says. “Charlie Parker. But you got it. The chord progression is exactly the same. Miss Wells said you’d hear it.”
“I knew you would,” Miss Wells says. “You understand more than you let on.”

“Common affliction, isn’t it,” Myka can’t help but say to her.

Miss Wells smiles that wolfishly wide smile. “Umnaya devochka,” she says. Clever girl.

Myka stands up; she doesn’t know why. She stands up and looks at this breathless woman with her violin, this woman who has just spoken Russian.

Abigail turns around to look at them. Her surprise is comical. “Has Myka been teaching you Russian?”

“Only a little,” Miss Wells says. “Just enough for me to understand some of what she’s finding in her translations.”

“I wish some of the people I’ve translated for cared that much,” Abigail says. “But no, it’s usually just some version of ‘thank heaven I don’t have to deal with that gobbledygook your people speak.’ You know, my people. The ones born in New York.”

Miss Wells tells Abigail, “That’s a terribly shortsighted attitude. I’ll ask you to teach me some, then. Who knows when it will come in handy?”

“Here’s all the Chinese you really need,” Abigail says. “Bú yào. Means ‘don’t want.’”

“But what if I do want something?”

“Trust me, if it’s my mother you’re talking to, you don’t want it.”

“Well, I want her daughter to teach me more Chinese,” Miss Wells says. She plays two sliding notes on her violin: the first rises, and the second descends.

“You heard the tones in bú yào,” Abigail says. “You are a showoff.”

“I’m sure I couldn’t say them as you do. And you were showing off plenty yourself on ‘Ornithology.’ Well done.”

“Anybody who just played Charlie Parker’s part on a violin is in no position to talk to anybody else about showing off.”

They are sparring with each other, delighted to be sparring with each other, and Myka is just standing and watching; now she does feel estrangement. She tries to tell herself that Miss Wells just charms everyone, that it must simply be something she does.

Miss Wells now says, “I’ve no doubt Charlie Parker himself would tell a different story about my playing.”

“Ladies!” Miss Calder calls. “Come help me take chairs out to the back courtyard! The weather’s still so strangely nice…”

Abigail closes the piano and says, “Thank god. I thought maybe after that she’d refuse to feed us.”

Myka watches her leave the room. Then she watches Miss Wells turn to put her violin and bow into the case, and she wants some connection to the way the music is made, some idea of what it feels like. “Will you show me?” Myka asks. “How to hold the violin?”

Miss Wells turns back. “Of course.” She offers the violin to Myka; it is lying across her hands, as
an infant might, and the bow is dangling from her right hand. “Take its neck, then raise it to your own neck. Your chin in the rest.” The rest is still warm from Miss Wells’s own skin, and the way that feels is… but Myka’s posture is now unnatural, twisted. Miss Wells must see her discomfort, for she says, “You can bring the neck further forward, make your own neck twist less.” She takes Myka’s left hand, the one holding the instrument, and pulls it toward her. She keeps that hand on Myka’s as she offers her the bow. “Between thumb and fingers, like so.”

Myka takes it carefully. It is like holding a very light, strangely balanced sword.

“It doesn’t bite,” Miss Wells says. “And you can’t hurt it.”

“I could…”

“No, really, you can’t.” She wraps the fingers of her left hand around Myka’s right hand as it holds the bow, and now she is holding both of Myka’s hands; it is as if they are partners in a strange formal dance, one that requires a violin between them at all times. “Now draw the bow across the strings,” she instructs.

She helps Myka do it once, then drops her hands. “No, don’t!” Myka says, and then she starts explaining, “because I don’t know what I’m doing, and I’ll do it wrong, I know it—” And just like that, her hands are back, but she is not helping Myka play; it is just her hands, holding Myka’s, holding a violin, holding a bow.

“Come on, time for dinner,” Miss Calder says, from much closer to them than Myka expected to hear anyone. Miss Wells is surprised, too; she drops her hands again, and there is confusion for a moment as Myka tries to hand her the violin, but Myka’s hand is covering the neck, and Miss Wells seems not to want to hold it any other way, and then there is the bow, and finally Miss Calder says, “Myka, would you please go help Abigail with the chairs?” and Myka escapes into the kitchen. Her heart feels constrained by her chest; something beyond her embarrassment at this moment is trying to kick its way out.

She isn’t trying to eavesdrop. She isn’t. But she can’t help hearing Miss Calder say, low and angry, “Helena… don’t.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original tumblr tags: oh HG, you and your charm, always getting into trouble, and then out of trouble, and then mostly likely into even bigger trouble, because as mentioned, it's 1952
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

This story is set when and where it is for many different reasons, one of which is that I am very interested in the fact that anyone who found conformity to be a challenge, then and there, consequently found the cultural waters extremely perilous to navigate. Vanessa’s warning to Helena at the end of the previous chapter was very, very serious. Having said that, this is of course a love story—but it is a difficult one. And difficulty will sometimes get the upper hand.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What is your name?
Myka Bering.

Do you work for the Central Intelligence Agency?
Yes.

What is the nature of your work?
I’m a Russian translator.

Do you speak Russian?
Yes.

When did you learn Russian?
When I was a baby.

Were you born in Russia?
No.

Where were you born?
Colorado Springs.

Are you a communist?
No.

Are you a security risk?
No.

Do you have personal knowledge of any security risks at the CIA?
No.
Myka knows she should lift a chair and take it to the courtyard. But Miss Calder’s “don’t” held real anger, not the tease Myka had heard her give Miss Wells on that first day.

Miss Wells says, “I’m not. Not really.”

“You are,” Miss Calder says. “Even if it isn’t intentional. Is it just some kind of reflex with you?”

“It is not. You are doing Miss Bering a disservice.”

“What if I were talking about Abigail?”

“We both know you’re not.”

Miss Calder sounds like she is about to shake Miss Wells as she says, “You have to be more careful. Myka is a wonderful girl.”

“I know that she is,” Miss Wells says. This is the first thing about their exchange that Myka has truly understood, and it thrills her.

“She has never done anything with the likes of you. And she does impeccable work for me.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“And I want her to keep her job. So if I have to assign someone else to you, I will.”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

Miss Wells begins to ask, and she sounds earnest, beseeching, “But what if I—” She pauses. Myka wonders what kind of look Miss Calder is giving her. “All right. I’m sure.”

That sounds like an end. Myka leaps for a chair, puts her hands on it, and carries it as quickly and quietly as she can toward the back door.

****

What are you currently translating?

A conversation recorded in a Politburo office in July of 1951.

What does the conversation concern?

The use of something called Artichoke.

What is Artichoke?

I don’t know.

Do you work for Helena Wells?

No, I work for Vanessa Calder.

Have you done translation work for Helena Wells?
Yes.

What is Helena Wells’s mission here?

I don’t know.

Do you have a social relationship with Helena Wells?

Yes.

What is the nature of your social relationship with Helena Wells?

I’ve listened to her play the violin with Miss Calder and Abigail Cho. Twice. And then we had dinner.

Did you and Helena Wells dine alone?

We were at Miss Calder’s house.

Please answer the question. Did you and Helena Wells dine alone?

No, we didn’t dine alone.

****

Myka thinks she should try to salvage the violin situation; during dinner, as she eats salad from a plate balanced in her lap, she says, “Thanks for showing me how to hold the violin, Miss Wells. I think that’s the first time I’ve even touched one.” She tries to sound offhand.

“You don’t play anything at all, do you, Myka?” Abigail asks.

Myka sighs, “I wish I could.”

Miss Wells seems to be taking a similarly light and offhand approach. “You’re quite welcome, Miss Bering, though I believe both Abigail and Vanessa will agree that one can be imposed upon in the musical arena. ‘Oh, play something for us!’ is a sentence uttered entirely too frequently.”

Miss Calder says, “That’s worse for you. And for Abigail, especially, since there’s always a piano around somewhere. Not a lot of cellos sitting in people’s living rooms… and it isn’t a very portable instrument anyway.”

“Which made you quite effective,” Miss Wells says. “Back then.”

This makes Miss Calder smile; it makes Myka think she is going to have to reevaluate her take on those stories about Miss Calder’s war that she’d always suspected were exaggerations. Miss Calder says, “It’s true that everyone expects a violin case to serve as a hiding place. But why in the world would anyone ever lug a cello around if they didn’t really need a cello?”

“So tuba players are actually the best for ops?” Myka asks.

She’s gratified that Abigail, snorting with laughter, throws out, “Kettle drums!”

She even more gratified that Miss Wells laughs too, laughs and says, “Or piano, when you get down to it. But finding piano movers in wartime would be tricky. And could you make a case for needing a specific piano?”
Abigail says, quite seriously, “I could make that case.”

Miss Calder nods in agreement. “Abigail could most likely make any case. They’ll be sending her to China for covert ops in not too long, I’m sure. And now I won’t be surprised if she takes a piano full of recording equipment with her.”

“I don’t actually want to go to China,” Abigail says. “The only good thing I will say for that place is that right now, the women seem to be just as revolutionary as the men. I’m no communist, but I certainly do get tired of those high-and-mighty Agency boys.”

“Be careful, Abigail,” Miss Calder says, but it is her usual “be careful,” not the urgent uncompromising words she said to Miss Wells. “Those high-and-mighty Agency boys control your future.”

Abigail groans. “I know. But Miss Calder, if I hear the words ‘China doll’ one more time… grown men should know better, shouldn’t they?”

“It’s because you’re good-looking, Abigail,” Myka says, although she knows that Abigail knows this. “You attract that kind of attention.”

“You attract attention too,” Abigail says.

“No, I don’t.” And she doesn’t. She is on the receiving end of some inappropriate comments, but all the women get those.

Abigail says, “It’s that you don’t understand that it is attention. You just give them that confused look, and usually they give up.”

“What? I don’t see—”

Abigail holds up her hands, as if to physically stop Myka. “Exactly. You don’t see. Take last month, right before the holidays. Remember Mike from TSS was hanging around a lot, wanting all that help with his Russian?”

“I do remember. His Russian needed help.”

“Right,” Abigail says, with a roll of her eyes, “but you might have noticed that there are a lot of Russian speakers in the building. He was hanging around you. He wanted you to go to the Christmas party with him.”

“He did?” Myka is astounded. She’d helped him as much as she could with the language, but he hadn’t gotten much better. He’d seemed frustrated, and she’d thought he must have given up and requested a translator. “Then why didn’t he just ask me?”

Abigail rolls her eyes again. “He wanted you to show some interest first. You know. Say something about how handsome he is. Tell him how good his Russian’s getting. Giggle at his jokes.”

“His jokes were as awful as his Russian,” Myka protests.

“I think you’re missing the point.”

Miss Wells speaks for the first time in some time. She says, quietly, “I think that if Miss Bering does not find the gentleman’s jokes funny, she should not laugh.”
Miss Calder responds to this with a sharp “Helena!” but Abigail waves it off with, “Look, I’d say the same thing, but Miss Calder’s right: they control our future. And I want a future. Don’t you, Myka?”

“Of course I do. But I… I mean, I don’t want to laugh at his jokes if they aren’t funny. I don’t want to say things that aren’t true.” She wants to look at Miss Wells. She wants Miss Wells to look at her too, and to say again that Myka shouldn’t have to laugh, and that Myka shouldn’t have to say things that aren’t true, either.

“Mike’s plenty good-looking! I’d date him myself if he were interested in me.”

“I guess I just don’t see him like that,” Myka shrugs.

“This is my point!” Abigail trumpets. “You don’t see anyone like that!”

Myka is nonplussed. Is this really how Abigail thinks of her? As someone who isn’t… well, who isn’t, or wouldn’t be, interested in anyone? “I thought we were friends!” she says.

“We are friends. That’s why I’m saying this to you. You’ll get a lot further by playing along sometimes.”

Miss Calder comments, very drily, “And then complaining about it later."

“Well, sure,” Abigail says. “When the high-and-mighties aren’t around. Come on, you know I’m right, Myka.”

But Myka doesn’t say anything. She is looking at Miss Wells—or, more accurately, at Miss Wells’s hands. Miss Wells is wounding the fingertips on her left hand with the end of her steak knife, making small cross marks in her calluses. There has been no blood this evening so far, but given the pressure she is applying, Myka expects to see a gush of red at any moment, never mind the thickness she had claimed she would build. Myka chances a look at her face; her expression is composed. But her hands are livid.

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Have you had sexual relations with a man?

What?

Please answer the question. Have you had sexual relations with a man?

Yes.

How many times have you had sexual relations with a man?

Once.

When did this occur?

In 1948.

Were you married to this man?

No.

Have you ever been married?
No.

Do you intend to marry?

What?

Please answer the question. Do you intend to marry?

I don’t know.

Do you intend to remain unmarried?

I don’t know.

Are you a homosexual?

What?

Please answer the question. Are you a homosexual?

No.

****

It lasts three hours. Then the polygraph team members remove the blood pressure cuff from Myka’s arm, the straps around her chest, the electrode on her hand. Her questioner nods. “You’re free to go,” he says. He doesn’t smile; he doesn’t frown.

Myka goes back to her desk. She puts her headphones on and tries to listen, tries to understand… but she finds that the Russian words make no sense. She takes her headphones off, and the English being spoken around her seems incomprehensible as well, for it is all real sentences, not short questions. Short, invasive questions about who she is and what she has done. Whether she has morals. Whether she is normal. She does not know what any of it was really about. Something to do with Miss Wells’s project? About Miss Wells herself? She had heard that sessions in the box could be like that, but she had never expected that kind of questioning to happen to her. There were so many questions that even Myka, who prides herself on her talent for memory, can barely remember them all. She told the truth, yet she is angry at herself for not remembering everything she told the truth about.

All she can think is that she needs to apologize to Miss Wells for getting so little work done today. And she needs some kind of reassurance that everything will be all right, and Miss Wells will surely, surely say something like that. Myka looks to Miss Calder’s desk: she would be comforting too. But Miss Calder is not there.

Miss Calder is not at her desk because Miss Calder is in Miss Wells’s office. Myka can hear her as she nears the door, hand raised to knock. Miss Calder is angry again, and again, Myka tells herself to leave, to stop listening. She tells herself to leave, yet she does not move from her place in front of the door, and she keeps her hand raised. Just in case anyone else walks by.

“I told you not to do it! I told you to be careful,” Miss Calder is saying. “I warned you, and you ignored me!”

“I did not! Listen to me—”

“Oh? Then why was Myka taken to the box? Hours ago, Helena!”
“Oh, god,” Miss Wells says. “Oh, god, I should have guessed that she would be, but… listen to me: I didn’t do anything. Something’s happened.”

There is a pause. Then Miss Calder says, “Well?”

“It’s Alan.”

“What’s he done?”

“You can imagine.” But Myka needs Miss Wells to say more than that, because Myka can’t imagine. Is this person one of the double agents? Was he captured?

“How bad?” Miss Calder asks, quietly.

“Quite bad. Disastrously bad. The frustration is that he wasn’t even caught; he simply admitted it in the course of a burglary investigation. And someone here must have made the connection, that I was… under his patronage, for a time.”

“And that someone raised questions about you… but you can’t be interrogated, not here.” Miss Calder pauses. “But the person who’s been working for you can.”

“Exactly. Although she can’t have told them anything overly damaging, to me or to herself. She doesn’t know anything.”

“Will you swear to me that that’s true?” Miss Calder asks, and she sounds suspicious and angry, as she did on Saturday. She must have received a nod in return, for she continues, “They’ll pay much closer attention to you now, Helena.” But she is not angry at Miss Wells anymore.

“I know. And to anyone with whom I associate. You shouldn’t even be in here with me; you’ll be next in that box.”

Miss Calder laughs, one short bark. “They know that putting me in the box does them no good.”

Miss Wells laughs a little too, but Myka can tell that nothing is funny. “True.”

“But you need to take steps.”

“I know. I had hoped not to, not here… but I’ll change the picture. I’ll show myself as I ought to be seen.”

“Please do. It’s very bad here, Helena. Very bad. I hope you understand that now. You know I want to protect you, don’t you?”

“And Miss Bering.”

Myka can hear the shrug in Miss Calder’s voice: “Her from you, you from yourself.”

Miss Wells says, “You don’t need to protect her from me. I told you.”

Now Myka knocks. She can’t stand here and hear about how she does or doesn’t need to be protected from Helena Wells. She opens the door, and both women look at her: Miss Calder with concern, and Miss Wells with… sadness? Resignation?

“Are you all right?” Miss Calder asks.

Myka does not want to cause Miss Wells any more sadness. And Myka is not going to be anyone’s
idea of a woman of limited competence. “I’m fine,” she says. “I just came to apologize to Miss Wells. I didn’t get very far today.”

“You need not buck up,” Miss Wells says, and Myka had wanted her to be reassuring, but it is worse for her to be tender. “Questions are being raised about me, and you are bearing the brunt.”

Myka repeats, “I’m fine. I was in the box two years ago, before I got my security clearance. I knew how it would go.”

Miss Wells’s expression becomes both harder and softer as she says, “I am not making a joke when I say this: you’re lying.”

“Maybe so,” Myka says. She can’t say anything else; she is about to cry. But she wants to say, don’t change the picture. Please don’t change the picture. I’ve never seen such a picture. I never imagined there could be such a picture. Please, please, please don’t change the picture.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original tumblr tags: the personage mentioned near the end won't be that important to the overall story, but I do mean the historical personage, and it makes a great deal of sense to me that HG would have worked with him in some capacity, during the war, queer supergeniuses the both of them, and don't worry if you don't know who it is, because I'll make it clear in not too long
Chapter Notes

So where were we? Right, Myka was having trouble cluing in to a very important idea concerning herself and somebody else. Does she at last get the wake-up call? Well… let’s say that sometimes when the picture changes, you can see what’s really there. Also: I am trying to keep this extremely historically accurate, but I couldn’t for the life of me find anything that would tell me what the NSO played in March of 1952. I can get two late-January programs, but that doesn’t help, so: I made it up. (But there is a lot of stuff that is not made up in this.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Myka doesn’t translate exclusively for Miss Wells anymore. She finished the tapes from the original box, and now every so often Miss Calder will hand her a few reels and say, “These are for Helena,” which is Myka’s cue to listen for bluebirds and artichokes again. Mainly, though, she is back to her low-level functionaries. The most exciting thing she has heard in ages is a discussion about a new kind of industrial snowplow that seems to have the entire Kremlin in a tizzy of delight. She wishes “snowplow” were code for something. She wishes she could share that thought with Miss Wells… but it is very clear that she needs to keep her distance if she is not to be brought in for more questioning.

She had tried to ask Miss Calder what had happened, who this “Alan” was and why what he did was so important, both to Miss Wells and to those who were raising questions about her. Miss Calder had said that she didn’t want to talk about that, and besides, Myka was better off not knowing about certain types of things. And certain types of people. “What types of people?” Myka had asked.

“The types that could be used against you in the box,” Miss Calder had told her, “or by the Civil Service Commission.” And she would say no more about it.

Miss Wells still occasionally comes to the translators’ room; she will come to talk to Miss Calder, and sometimes she speaks with Abigail. She has continued to play her violin, sometimes, with them. Myka knows because Abigail told her about it, because Abigail asked why Myka didn’t come and listen to them anymore. Myka said, “Miss Calder decided that if I’m going to translate for her, we shouldn’t have a social relationship.”

Abigail had had a session in the box, too, not long after Myka’s: “Honestly, it was silly. All about whether I knew any security risks and if Miss Wells was going to, I don’t know, sell us out to the commies. I said I didn’t think so, and then they wanted to know if she could really play the violin. I said ‘you bet,’ and then I said ‘she can really play the violin,’ and they said that I was being uncooperative, but they were laughing, and it was pretty much over at that point. Is that what yours was like?”

“Not exactly,” Myka said.

“How not exactly?’’

“Mine was… longer.”
“I guess that makes sense,” Abigail said. “I bet they wanted to know about all those translations.”

Myka said yes, that was it. All those translations.

She tries not to look at Miss Wells anymore. She feels that Miss Wells is trying not to look at her, either, because when their eyes do meet, Myka cannot look away. She can’t look away, and all she wants to do is stand up and walk over to her and make her at least explain, at least do that, so that Myka can put a reason to what happened, so she will at least know why she is being punished. And why would Miss Wells want to be confronted like that? So that must be why she is trying not to look at Myka either.

As the weeks pass, Myka lowers her head further and further toward her tape machine. She focuses more and more closely on the tapes, on the translations; she makes them perfect. She is not a security risk: she doesn’t talk about their content with anyone. She notes bluebirds and artichokes when she has to, and she tries not to think about two unseasonably warm and beautiful weeks in January.

“Myka, are you sick?” Abigail asks her one day.

“Why would you think I’m sick?”

“Because you barely talk anymore. You barely do anything anymore except work.”

“There’s a lot of work,” Myka says.

“But that’s always true, and you used to be more fun about it. You joked about the Russians. I haven’t heard you say anything funny since… I don’t know when. I haven’t heard you say boo.”

“I told you. It’s the work.”

“When was the last time you did something fun?”

Myka wants to answer, “When I listened to you and Miss Wells play ‘Ornithology,’” but she suspects that that is not a good thing to say. So she says, “I can’t remember.”

“I have an idea,” Abigail says. “Want to come to the symphony with me? You liked the Beethoven we played for you, I know you did, and you could broaden your classical horizons.”

Myka’s immediate feeling is “why would I care about classical music anymore?” But that answer is as bad as clinging to “Ornithology” as a moment of happiness. “I’m sure I can’t afford it,” is what she settles on.

“Sure. As if I can afford the symphony? No, Miss Calder gave me the tickets. She and her professor can’t make it, and she gets them free anyway.”

“She gets them free?”

“Ask her someday how she knows the conductor. It’s so funny. Miss Wells just about laughed her head off when Miss Calder told her.”

Myka is glad that somebody feels like laughing their head off about something. Fine, then. Fine.

“Okay,” she tells Abigail.

“Okay you’ll ask Miss Calder, or okay you’ll go?”

“Okay, I’ll go. When is it?”
“Tomorrow night. Crazy program. Some Brahms, then I forget what else, and then we end on Schoenberg.”

“I won’t know the difference,” Myka assures her.

Abigail assures back, “Trust me: with Schoenberg, you’ll know the difference.”

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Myka surprises herself by enjoying the symphony. As she does not own an evening gown, she is wearing her best green taffeta party dress; Abigail does not have a gown either, just a black cocktail dress, so they at least match in their lack of formality. Myka is trying to think about the fact that this is new, this is different, this is exactly what she should be doing: new and different things.

She likes the pieces the symphony plays before intermission, particularly the last one. The program says it is the sixth movement from Mahler’s Symphony no. 3. She asks Abigail what she thought of it as they stand to stretch their legs.

“I always wonder if Mahler’s right, if it’s what love tells me,” Myka hears Abigail say, but that doesn’t make any sense. Her face must show it, because Abigail goes on, “Oh, Mahler names his movements. I can’t remember all of them from this, but there’s something about a shepherd or springtime in the second, maybe? The fifth movement I think is ‘What the Angels Tell Me,’ and this last movement is ‘What Love Tells Me.’ And so I wonder, because I don’t think I’ve ever been in love. I mean I love my parents, I guess, most of the time, but I don’t think that’s what Mahler’s talking about.”

Myka wonders what exactly it is Mahler thought love was talking about. Something huge and overwhelming, she thinks, particularly at the end. She tells this to Abigail, and Abigail laughs.

“You kind of sound like yourself again. Aren’t you glad you came?”

And she is. She tells Abigail so, and Abigail says, “And I hope you still feel that way after ‘Variations for Orchestra.’”

They are making their way back to their seats when Abigail pokes Myka in the arm and says, “Isn’t that Miss Wells?”

Myka looks across a bank of seats, in the direction Abigail is pointing, to the opposite aisle. And it is Miss Wells. Myka has not seen her in days. She is wearing a dark, full-skirted evening gown with a halter neck. Her gloves are long, and her shoulders are bare. She is a vision, Myka thinks, and she realizes she has heard that said of women before, but she did not understand it until now. She is a vision.

“Oh, and there’s the fellow she’s seeing,” Abigail says.

Myka staggers.

“Are you okay?” Abigail asks, and at Myka’s dazed nod, she continues, “Yeah, I forget his name… Nate. it’s Nate something. He’s some big deal in the Security office.”

“Is he?” They have reached their seats. Myka sinks into hers and thanks god that she can, because her legs won’t hold her up. She watches as Miss Wells and Nate something make their way to their seats. She watches Miss Wells take his arm to steady herself.

“Yeah. He came to listen to the trio once, because we were working on one of Professor Nielsen’s
favorite pieces and Miss Calder invited him and said we should bring someone too. Joshua’s
geting pretty used to me asking him out, I’ll tell you that. But anyway, I tried to get Miss Wells to
do ‘Ornithology’ again, because I wanted to show off for Joshua, but she never wants to show off
anymore. She said the flattest ‘no’ you ever heard.”

“Did she?” But she did play the violin. So, not even that, not even listening to her play the violin,
not even that is Myka’s anymore. Not even that.

“I think she’s working too hard. When we play, she gets tired. She didn’t those first couple times,
remember?”

Myka’s real answer to that question is “I don’t want to remember.” Her other real answer is “I
remember every detail.” But the answer she gives Abigail is, “I guess not.”

“It’s okay, Myka,” Abigail says with a smile. “You don’t have to play it cool. You can say that you
miss watching us show off. I miss you being there, and I’m pretty sure Miss Wells does too.”

“She has a funny way of showing it,” Myka snaps, and Abigail looks like she would like to ask
what she means, but the audience abruptly quiets as the conductor strides onstage.

Myka finds that Abigail was not misleading her about the Schoenberg; it is to Myka’s ears a
soundtrack of confusion, something that would accompany nonsense verse. It is certainly not
telling Myka anything about love. Instead, her head is pounding, and it has to be the music that is
doing that, and not the fact that she keeps looking for Miss Wells’s bare shoulders, several rows
forward, looking for them and finding them, and looking away, and looking back again.

She leans over to Abigail and whispers, “Do you mind if I go home? I don’t feel well.”

“It’s not too much longer. Are you sure? Do you want me to go with you?”

“Myka says. She could not stand a conversation right now—what words could she say?
She can breathe, but only just; she can force her legs to push her out of her seat, into the aisle, out
into the lobby… but only just. She has to get away.

She takes a taxi to her apartment building. Upstairs, in her bedroom, the radiator isn’t working, and
by the time she sheds her dress and puts on her pajamas, she is shivering as if her blood has
forgotten how to move. She gets into bed, shivers in bed, then reaches an arm out and turns on the
radio, hoping to hear something familiar, something that will take her mind off the cold. All she
can find is Johnnie Ray, singing to her that she should cry… so she does. She cries and cries and
cries until she can’t cry anymore, and she replays, over and over and over, Miss Wells putting her
magical, singular hand on the arm of a tall, handsome man.

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It is Friday night, two days after the symphony. Late Friday night. Myka is working on, wants to be
finished with, a tape that Miss Calder told her was for Miss Wells… it is from 1951. It is two MGB
operatives, and they are talking about Artichoke. Yes, uses, yes yes, nothing new here; Myka
writes it all down. She is bored. She is thinking about how she wants to be finished with Miss
Wells too, Miss Wells and her handsome man… it had been stupid of her to cry about that. As if
Miss Wells would care that she and Myka are no longer… well, friends. Myka supposes, they were
something like friends. And now they aren’t. And now if Miss Wells would just go back to
England so that Myka wouldn’t have to be reminded that she exists, that would be fine.

Myka is startled out of her brooding by a word: “gipnoz.” Then she is further startled to hear the
name “Alan.” The speaker is corrected by his counterpart: it is not gipnoz, hypnosis, they should be talking about, really, but “vnusheniye.” Alan, as far as she can tell, learned gipnoz, but what he is interested in is vnusheniye. Which is closer in meaning to… mind control? Myka thinks this is what it means, but it is not a word, an idea, that she commonly encounters. And is this the same Alan? Does this have to do with the trouble Miss Wells is in, with the trouble that Myka is being kept out of?

She’s not supposed to give anything directly to Miss Wells anymore, but she feels that she can’t hand this translation to Miss Calder, not if this is that Alan, on the tape. Miss Wells deserves to know first, and maybe it will be all right, if she’s still here tonight, for Myka to just hand it to her and say, “I finished this and thought you should see it.” Myka can be brusque, businesslike; she’ll hand over the transcript and leave. If Miss Wells is even in her office this late. She probably doesn’t stay late on Fridays anymore, Myka tries to tell herself. She probably has better things to do.

She talks herself into this idea so thoroughly that she is genuinely surprised to see the bar of light shining from the bottom of Miss Wells’s office door. Myka takes a breath, taps gently. When she receives no response, she says softly, “Miss Wells?”

Nothing. Well, why not: she pushes on the door, and it swings halfway open. And Myka sees why Miss Wells did not answer: she is asleep at her desk. One arm is pillowed under her head. Myka can imagine her saying to herself “I’ll just put my head down for a moment…” and then sliding into sleep. The thought makes Myka ache.

Myka tells herself that she is just making sure Miss Wells is all right. She is just concerned for her well-being, that’s all. That’s why she steps around the desk and places her hand on Miss Wells’s shoulder.

Miss Wells’s suit is tweed, slightly rough, and Myka moves her hand over it, just because it is a texture, because it scratches a bit, prickling against her palm. It’s warm; Miss Wells is warm. She’s asleep, and she’s warm, and Myka knows she should move her hand away right now, right this second, before it is too late, because then it is too late. Miss Wells raises her head and looks up at Myka, and Myka looks at that magic face, and those eyes open, and then they close, and then they’re open again. And now Myka knows what she wants, and she knows she will never, ever have what she wants, and she knows that she will never ever even have this much of an opportunity again, so she leans down and brushes a kiss on the lips of that magic face. Then she stands, as if shocked at herself—because she is shocked at herself—and she is opening her mouth to say “I’m sorry,” but even as she is opening her mouth, she finds that her open mouth is being covered by another open mouth, and she is getting what she wants.

The first time she kissed a boy, her thought had been, now I know what it feels like to kiss someone and I guess that is a good thing to know. But now she knows that she had no idea what it feels like to kiss someone, because this is what it feels like to kiss someone, someone who is kissing her, someone she wants to kiss, but not just kiss, someone whose body she needs to bring closer to hers.

But then the body pulls away, turns away, faces the desk, leans forward. “Myka,” she hears. “We can’t.”

And in response, Myka says, for the first time: “Helena.” The name is beautiful in her mouth, a perfect fit, and at the sound of it, beautiful, perfect Helena sighs. She sighs, and her head falls back just a bit, just enough for Myka to understand that “can’t” means “shouldn’t,” and Myka doesn’t care at all anymore about what she should or shouldn’t do. She looks at the back of Helena’s head,
the opacity of her hair, and then her gaze drops to what holds that hair, the silver clip, yet another barrier, a symbol of all the barriers.

The clip is in her way, so she reaches forward with hands whose sureness surprises her and takes it out, and the cat-black hair falls down, and Myka’s hands are finally pushing through its thick waves, but that isn’t enough; she buries her mouth in the hair, trying to find Helena’s neck, and she slides her hands down and around Helena’s body, and Helena’s back is molding into Myka, not like it belongs there, but because it does belong there, and Myka never imagined anyone’s body against hers, not like this, not this way that says closer, closer, there has to be a way to be closer. Helena is saying “I swore, I swore, never again,” but her arms are reaching too, she is pulling at Myka’s arms, pulling them tighter around her, pulling her hands down, and that is exactly where Myka’s hands need to be, sliding down the length of Helena’s skirt, grasping at it, pulling it up, such that the fingers of one hand now are brushing the silk of a stocking.

“Myka,” Helena sighs, but then, stronger, “Myka, we must stop.”

“Why?” Myka asks. She has never felt like this before; why should she stop, when everything about her own body and Helena’s too is telling her to never stop?

“We’ll be caught. They’ll find out. They may already be watching, listening.” She pulls away, pulls the hem of her skirt down, sits down again. She looks up at Myka. She is clearly trying to get her breathing under control. “Walk away from me,” she says. “Walk away from me right now, this second.”

But that is nonsense. It is such nonsense that Myka laughs: “How?”

And Helena clearly does not have a ready answer for that, because she is standing and sliding into Myka’s arms again, and their lips are joining and parting, over and over, and Myka has never been so happy, never has she been so happy, not once in her entire life.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original tumblr tags: whew that..., Schoenberg really takes it out of you, doesn't it?
This Myka and this HG are miles apart in terms of age and understanding of how the world works. Of course that’s true on the show, but I like how in an AU that distance can be inflected very differently. I also like goal-directed Myka. She did not really have her rather naïve eyes on the prize in previous chapters. How ’bout now? Well, she’s still kinda naïve, so we’ll see how it goes.

Myka is holding Helena Wells in her arms; she is kissing Helena Wells. She is astonished, both that these things are happening and by how certain she is that it is right for these things to be happening. She is astonished also by what is happening to her body as she holds Helena Wells and kisses Helena Wells.

She wants to keep her eyes open, to watch what is happening, but they keep dropping closed when Helena moves her lips against Myka’s, when she opens her mouth. Myka’s own mouth opens and moves as it wants to, and she seems to have no control over what it is doing, or what her hands are doing, for they are buried in Helena’s hair one moment, sliding all the way down Helena’s back to reach and grip her hips the next.

Even when Myka’s eyes are open, she senses a fuzzing, a dimming of her vision, as if the world is being remade to show her Helena and only Helena. New nerves are awakening to allow her to feel everything: the barest brush of a lock of Helena’s loosed hair, a ghosting tickle of her tweed sleeve against Myka’s neck, the soft push of the crinoline under Myka’s skirt against her own legs as Helena’s body moves against her.

She doesn’t understand any of this, and she wants to. Most of all, she wants to understand the painful, desperate thump of what must be her heart, the way with every beat it floods her body with something that is both joy and agony.

Myka is beginning to understand one thing—that Helena’s clothes are as much in her way as her hair clip was—when Helena pushes her away again. She blinks her eyes open and says, “Stop. That’s enough.” Myka can only breathe in response, but she is thinking, as before, How? How could it ever be? And perhaps she should have asked out loud again, because Helena sits down again. She points across the room. “Go over there.” Myka’s confusion must be plain, for Helena goes on, even more sternly, “If you don’t want me to tell you to leave this office entirely, this very minute, you will go over there.”

She wants to ask “why would you want that?” and “don’t you want to keep kissing me?” but she takes up her transcript and she backs up, around the desk, across the room. The office isn’t large; she can still see the flush of Helena’s skin, hear the heaviness of her breath—she can see the snap of anger, too, in Helena’s eyes as she says, “Now. Listen to me. That will not ever happen again.”

Myka is groping for some response other than “what?” or “why?” when Helena continues, “We can never be in a room alone together. Ever. Do you understand me?”

“No!” This is the first thing Myka has managed to say since Helena’s mouth left hers.
"Yes. I cannot afford to be seen as a security risk. And I will not turn you into one."

And Myka is now incredulous. "This is what they mean?"

Helena shrugs. "This is one of the things they mean. Of course it is. Alcoholics, adulterers... this. Anyone who can be blackmailed, who is subject to desires beyond their control... well. Anyone who habitually or temperamentally wants things that could be supplied by a hostile government seeking opportunities for manipulation."

"Habitually or temperamentally?" Myka repeats. "But I never wanted this before."

"Good. And you should never want it again."

Everything about Helena’s face seems to freeze just a degree more with each word she says. Her eyes are turning to ice, her jaw a rigid block, her lips two firmly drawn lines; everything is solid, nothing supple and yielding, but Myka’s own lips are still feeling Helena’s, how they flowed, over and against hers, over and over. She asks, "But how could a hostile government give me you?"

The icy eyes narrow. "That is not the point and you know it. I know you aren’t stupid; stop pretending to be."

"All right," Myka says, trying to match Helena’s aggression. "I won’t be stupid. I’ll ask you this: how will anyone ever know?"

"And yet you are being stupid," Helena sneers, "because: consider where you work! Do you not all day listen to recorded conversations?"

"I’m not listening for this."

Helena demands, "What if I had asked you to listen for this? What if that were your brief? To find people whose conversations indicate that they could be compromised?" She nods when Myka can find no response. "Exactly. Suppose now that there were a tape of us, here, tonight. Suppose that, Myka. If it were the Russians, they would blackmail us. If it were our side? You, fired. Me, on the next airplane home in disgrace. How can you fail to understand what is at stake?"

"But you did this!" Myka explodes. She has been wanting to say this since Helena started talking, possibly since she herself saw, moments ago, where her wanting had taken her, since she looked down into the face of her magician and finally knew that she wanted, yes, to watch her do magic tricks, and yes, to listen to her play the violin, but also, yes, to kiss her. "You did this! The magic! And the violin! You didn’t do this to Abigail. You didn’t want me to stay away. You wanted this."

Now Helena drops her eyes. In guilt? Remorse? "It doesn’t matter what I wanted," she says. "Please remember, I did not in fact do anything untoward. I thought it would be harmless. I was far away from anyone who knew anything and might wish me harm because of it. And I thought I enjoyed some measure of protection, via a friend."

"Who was protecting you? Miss Calder?"

"No... I mean, yes, she is kind enough to want to protect me, even though she thinks I should not be so weak. But I meant, a friend in England. Who unfortunately cannot protect anyone anymore."

Myka thinks she might as well try: "Is that... Alan?"

Helena looks up now, not guilty, but startled. "How do you know about Alan?"
“I heard you and Miss Calder talking, but I didn’t understand. Please tell me. You didn’t tell me anything before.”

“Alan is Alan Turing.” Helena lays her hands, palms down, shoulder-width apart, on the white expanse of desk blotter in front of her. Myka thinks she is trying to keep herself from any nervous magic or manipulation. “He was my friend and mentor, during the war. I can’t tell you what I did, but I can tell you that I worked with him. And then, after, he helped me find work with MI6. So very many of the women went back to their real lives… but I didn’t want to. Couldn’t, really, not after that. He knew. He had… protected me, in the past, and he understood… well. At any rate, he knew of my unique set of skills. And he recommended me to people he knew.” She stops speaking, and Myka knows she is no longer anywhere in the office.

Myka says, “But something’s happened.”

This makes Helena suddenly violent; she slaps her hands against the desk, pulls them toward her to curl her fingers around the nearest edge. “Yes, Myka, something has happened. Something exactly like this, something that no one understands except to know that it is wrong. And now he is to go to trial, and he will be convicted, Myka, he will. He and Oscar Wilde and all their ilk, birds of a sodomite feather, unable or unwilling to stop when they should, then unable or unwilling to lie when and how they should. I wonder if Alan gave a thought to the rest of us, those who would be guilty by association, those he was leaving in the cold. I have no protection, Myka. No protection at all. So no, I cannot touch you again. I cannot be alone with you again.” She laughs, and it is the saddest sound Myka has ever heard. “I cannot look at you at the symphony and wonder how that shade of olive green has darkened your eyes.”

My dress, Myka thinks. My party dress. “You saw me?”

She is still gripping the edge of the desk, and Myka wants to tell her to be careful of her hands, to please not hurt her hands. Helena says, low and angry, as if she hates the words, “I always see you.”

“I saw you too. I saw your shoulders, in your dress. But I also saw you with your—”

More hated words: “Don’t say it. I am doing what must be done.”

“Changing the picture?” Myka tries.

“So you heard that as well… think, Myka. If it is so easy for you to overhear, why not others?”

Myka is listening to Helena, and she understands that there are many, many problems, she truly does, but what she does not understand is how those problems could not fall before what Myka is seeing: Helena’s hair is still down, and her suit collar is hanging open, thanks to the anxious work of Myka’s hands. Anxious, unfinished work. “Okay,” Myka says. “Okay. Not here. But here isn’t the only place. People go places all the time. We went to Miss Calder’s.”

Helena shakes her head. “Not anymore. Myka, someone will see. Someone always sees.”

“How can you say that? You’re a magician! The whole point is that no one sees! No one sees how!”

But Helena shakes her head again, more slowly. “Someone always sees how the magician does the trick. Someone always sees. Eventually, everyone is caught.”

Myka knows the answer to her next question, but still she needs to ask it, needs Helena to answer it directly: “Were you caught?”
“Of course I was.” Helena laughs without humor again. “But Alan was kind enough to persuade several people to look the other way. I swore, to others and to myself, never again.”

But Myka thinks that if Helena could truly have sworn never again, then that was not like this. That could not have felt like this. “Did you always see her?” she asks.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Whoever you were caught… with. You said you always see me. Did you always see her?”

Helena blinks. “I… don’t know. I don’t remember.” But her expression is different now; she is thinking, she is comparing, and if Myka wins, somehow, this contest… in any case, she has made Helena think. And Myka is certain that Helena would not have of her own accord stopped pushing Myka away long enough to start thinking.

“If you did,” Myka says, “I think you’d know. You’d remember. If I never see you again after this minute, do you think I’m going to forget?”

“Don’t,” Helena says, and the moment is over; she is back to warning Myka, to pushing her away. “I could be anyone.”

“You’re not anyone.” This, Myka has known to be true since that first moment, in the bar, her eyes caught by the gleam of a silver dollar.

“You don’t even know me.”

Myka laughs. “You don’t even know me.”

“And we must keep things that way.”

“But I don’t want to,” Myka says.

Helena slaps the desk again. “Why won’t you listen to me? What you want doesn’t matter.”

Those words are the proof that Helena truly doesn’t know Myka well enough yet, not if she imagines that what Myka wants doesn’t matter. Myka hasn’t wanted very many things in her life, it’s true. But she wanted to go to college; she did that. She wanted to come to Washington and work for the government; she is doing that. Myka says, “I think it does matter. You might think so too, one day.”

“No,” Helena says. This is a tone of complete dismissal, a tone that says from now on she intends to not even acknowledge that Myka is alive.

Myka doesn’t believe her. She walks to the desk again, walks around the desk again, and to Helena’s indignant eyes, she says, “Don’t worry; you can order me to leave this office entirely in just a second.” Myka is close enough now that Helena is looking up at her, as she had right as she woke up. Her expression has become adamantine, but she is to Myka’s eyes just as beautiful, even in this hard anger, as she has always been. She leans and touches her lips against Helena’s in one brief kiss, like the very first one. She stands and says, “But I know one thing: I am not going to live without that, without you, now.”

Helena shakes her head. “You don’t know anything. You don’t understand anything.”

“We’ll see,” Myka says. She touches the tumbled silk of Helena’s hair one more time.
Not until she is halfway back to the translation room does she realize that she did not even mention, and has now carried away again with her, the transcript of the latest tape. She imagines turning around, going back into that office, just to, perhaps, catch Helena in the act of putting her hair back in place, just to see the look on her face, just to consternate her by saying “here, you should see this” in very businesslike fashion.

But Myka looks at the transcript in her hand, and suddenly she sees it for what it is: a much larger opportunity. For a much more consequential operation.

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On Monday morning, Myka asks Abigail if they can eat lunch together. If they can eat lunch together outside the building, that is, maybe just down on the Mall, because it’s supposed to be so nice out.

“Really?” Abigail sits back in her chair and crosses her arms, looking for all the world as if she is an impassive questioner in the box. “Why do you want to leave the building?”

“I told you, because it’s nice.”

“The needles are going crazy, Myka.”

“Because I need to ask you something.”

Abigail drops the façade. “What? Ask me now! Because you got so down again after the symphony, and now you aren’t down at all. What happened? Ask me now!”

“I can’t. We have work to do, and I told you, I want to leave the building.”

“Okay, but… on a scale of one to ten, how exciting is it? Oooh, did you get a new job? Are you trying to get a new job? Is that why we have to eat outside?”

“On a scale of one to ten, it’s if you don’t drop it until we leave the building, I will call your mother and tell her you eat a peanut butter sandwich for lunch every day. How’s that?”

Abigail gasps, “You wouldn’t!”

Myka nods. Abigail sighs dramatically and says, “All right, all right,” but she spends the next four hours elbowing Myka every time she passes Myka’s desk and asking “Is it lunchtime?”

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They walk for five minutes, with Abigail saying “tell me now!” at regular intervals; they find room on a bench with a view of both the Washington Monument and the Capitol. The grass, the trees, everything is starting to green. “Cherry blossoms in not too long,” Myka comments.

“Cherry blossoms my eye!” Abigail says, and she refuses to touch her peanut butter sandwich until Myka explains herself.

“It’s actually not that important,” Myka says.

“If you don’t give me the goods right now,” Abigail says, “I will tell Miss Calder that you said jazz could beat classical in a fistfight.”

“You’re just saying that because I said that thing about your mother.” This is greeted with a whinny of frustration from Abigail, so Myka relents. “Okay. Here’s what I want to know: where’s
the best place to go if you want to be alone with someone?"

Abigail’s jaw drops.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original tumblr tags: it is the contrast in how they are seeing the world that I want to worry at, because knowing certain things gives you one view, and not being able to ideate certain things yet gives you a different view, and sometimes even when you think you know things, you may not know them in the right way yet
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I have been thinking a lot about double consciousness lately, so I am just going to quote some W.E.B. Du Bois here, because he is worth quoting and considering in so many contexts: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” Anyway, I am putting up parts of a story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Alone with someone,” Abigail repeats. “I have known you for almost a year, and in all that time you haven’t even wanted to be alone with a housecat. But now you want to be alone with someone. Alone with who?”

“Whom,” Myka says.

“We are not playing some correct-my-grammar version of ‘who’s on first,’ Myka. We are playing ‘spill the beans right now.’”

“Eat your sandwich,” Myka says. “I’m not telling you.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not.”

“Is it a secret?”

“Are you not listening to me?” Myka unwraps her own sandwich, which is also peanut butter. Her mother, unlike Abigail’s, would be unmoved by that fact.

“You really won’t tell me?”

“No.”

“Will you tell me if I guess?”

“No.”

“Is it somebody in Congress? Somebody from the White House?”

“I just said I wouldn’t tell you.”

“I know, but I was hoping you’d jump or something and give it away if I got it right. FBI? State Department? Supreme Court?”

Myka jumps so ostentatiously at each one of these that she almost falls off the bench. So much for comedy.

“Oh, fine. Don’t tell me. You will eventually, though.” Abigail takes a bite of her sandwich;
chews, swallows. “How about now? Will you tell me now?”

Myka sighs.

“Okay.” Abigail takes another bite. “Alone with somebody. Well, there’s the obvious.”

“What’s obvious?” And for just a second, she thinks it will be that easy, that Abigail will have the answer and that Myka can get Helena to come with her to this very obvious place and they will be alone and that will be that.

“Sometimes I think you didn’t go to high school like the rest of us did. The movies, Myka.”

Of course it isn’t going to be that easy; Myka can just imagine Helena’s face if Myka tries to explain that they should go to the movies together. Even though now she is thinking about going to the movies together: that, too, she had thought she understood, what it felt like to go on a date, to the movies or anywhere else, with someone. And yet now… but could they go on a date? Even if they could go somewhere together, how would that work? “You can’t really talk to someone at the movies, though. Also I think it’s too public,” Myka says.

“A movie is too public?” Abigail whistles. “Okay. So it is a secret?”

“It’s just that… it’s better if I’m not really seen with… this person. And vice versa.” Myka is certain that Abigail is going to guess at some point. And Myka is trying to work out what she will do if Abigail decides never to speak to her again.

“Huh. Okay. Well, I guess there’s the next obvious thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I think you really didn’t go to high school. Or see any movies about people going to high school.” At Myka’s uncomprehending head-shake, Abigail groans. “A car, Myka. It’s called parking. I mean, it is pretty high school, but you’re pretty alone in a car.”

That seems even more far-fetched than the movies. “Where am I supposed to get a car?”

“You aren’t. Doesn’t this person have a car?”

“No… well, I don’t think so.” She is thinking of how Helena had arrived at Miss Calder’s that first time: breathless, slightly disheveled, not as someone who had just parked a car would have looked.

“Incidentally,” Abigail says, “your face, when you think about this person, as I am pretty sure you just did—it’s very interesting.”

“Interesting how?”

“Kinda seems like I’ve seen that expression on you before. So listen, you could always—now bear in mind this is the kind of thing my mother would kill me for even bringing up—I mean, you have an apartment. And you don’t have a roommate like I do.”

That is even more tempting. And even more impossible. “I think… this person wouldn’t agree to that. I think there would be a lot of worries about being seen going to my place.”

“Does, um, this person have an apartment?”

Myka wonders if Helena does have an apartment. Or maybe she’s staying in a hotel? Myka realizes she doesn’t know the most basic of things, such as how long Helena is going to be here. She has
just been assuming that she will always be here, because that is how she has made Myka feel: as if there was a time before, but now things are completely different, as if some world-changing invention had instantly become commonplace. The telephone, the radio, the magician. “I think the same worries would apply,” she says.

Abigail grumbles, “You are making this very difficult. Can’t be seen in public, can’t really go anywhere private… I guess you could be really daring and go to one of the parks at night. You shouldn’t go to Lafayette, though. They still do the pervert patrols there, but those guys are smart enough not to use Lafayette anymore for pickups, so the police are getting desperate. They’re arresting anybody they can find now. I heard that they catch mostly teenagers these days. And anyway, a lot of those guys are too scared to be seen in public together anywhere, on account of all the investigations. I heard there’s more private parties than there used to be, for guys and for girls, but even those are getting dangerous.”

“How do you know these things?” All Myka knows about Lafayette Square is that it’s green and well-kept; she’s been there, of course—she wanted to see the statues—but certainly never at night. Certainly never when any policeman would look at her sideways… and she’s never heard of pervert patrols, and she doesn’t know anything about anybody’s private parties.

“Myka, you’ve been here twice as long as I have. In two years, have you never listened to anybody talk about anything, other than your Russians and their… well, I don’t know what your Russians really talk about; those Chinese bigwigs are always Tibet this, Korea that… seriously, how do you not know these things?” Abigail shakes her head at Myka. She looks at her watch, then pulls an apple out of her lunch bag and bites it energetically.

“I didn’t know I needed to know these things! I never wanted to be alone with anybody before!” Abigail crunches her apple. “Well, I certainly didn’t know you’d need me to tell you about them. But listen, calm down. We’ll figure something out. You should definitely get to be alone with whoever you want to be alone with.”

“Whomever,” Myka says automatically.

“I mean I’m not sure this person is actually going to enjoy being alone with you, but that’s their problem, not mine.” Abigail smiles as she says this, though, and she repeats, “We’ll figure something out.”

Myka hopes this is true. And then she hopes that it is not completely wrong of her to have such hope.

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At the end of the day, Abigail beckons Myka to her desk. “I have an idea,” she says as she is tidying her headphones. “It’s not quite what you want, but you could at least, I think, talk to the person in question. It’s sort of public, but nobody’s going to pay you a bit of attention, particularly not if you show up separately.”

“Where?” Sort of public isn’t private, but at this point Myka will take it. Anywhere other than this building, anywhere she can convince Helena to have a conversation with her, Myka will take.

“The Arts and Industries Building. You know, over on Jefferson, across from Natural History? You could try Natural History instead, but A&I’s a lot less busy… all those tall, dark display cases, lots of secluded corners. Pretty good for whispering, anyway, and I’m sort of speaking from experience. Joshua took me there a few weekends ago. I wouldn’t say it was romantic, but it was
definitely quiet, and nobody looked at us twice. Which, you know, they sometimes do.”

“People should look at you twice,” Myka declares, “but only because you are brilliant. Why didn’t I think of that?” She has spent so much time in the museums, so many of her lunch and weekend hours… but not lately. Lately, she hasn’t had the interest or the energy.

“Well, you’re trying to get somebody alone. Isn’t that supposed to addle your brain? That’s what all the songs say, anyway.”

“It turns out the songs are right.” Myka laughs. “Maybe that’s what Mahler was talking about too.”

“Nah, an addled brain sounds more Schoenbergy to me. Miss Calder was impressed that you gave that a try, by the way. I didn’t tell her that it made you sick.”

Myka says without thinking, “That wasn’t what made me sick.”

“Gonna tell me what?”

“No.”

Abigail says, “Okay, Myka. But remember, I’m brilliant. Don’t blame me if one of these days it turns out I can put two and two together.”

“Are you trying to tell me something?” For just a second, Myka imagines that they might be able to talk about it, that she could actually say out loud, in conversation with another person, the name “Helena.”

But Abigail says, quickly, “Not really, no… and honestly, you shouldn’t tell me, either. I think it’s safer for everybody if I don’t actually know anything, don’t you?”

“I think…” What Myka really thinks is that she might cry; she remembers accusing Abigail, “I thought you were my friend.” But Abigail is her friend, and Myka had had no idea what that meant. Now it means something completely different than it had three months ago—then, someone to eat lunch with sometimes, someone to be entertained by, someone to entertain with a joke about Russians. Now it means someone who wants to protect her… or maybe it does mean the same thing, because Myka sees that Abigail had been trying to do that before, too: “play along,” she had said. Warned. Myka wonders how different the situation would be now—if it would be different at all—if she had paid attention to Abigail’s very good advice.

She could have gone to the Christmas party with Mike, before. Now she does not know if she could bring herself to do something like that—even though Helena can, Helena can and has. But Myka doesn’t know how many lies she will be able to tell. Tell or live.

But now she says, “I think… I think that if you need me to sit your mother down and explain how sweet Joshua is, I will do that from now until the end of time.”

At this, Abigail sighs. “I think that it really would take from now until the end of time. And, you know, I like Joshua, but it isn’t that serious yet. I appreciate the offer, though.” She sets her headphones against her tape machine. “Listen, I was thinking about this all afternoon, where you could go, and I’m going to keep thinking about it. But there’s one other thing I thought, and I think it’s important. I know you aren’t likely to talk to a lot of other people about… this, because let’s face it, you just don’t talk to a lot of people. But I do talk to people. I talk to all kinds of people, okay? And I think some of them would say that when you’re talking to people… don’t say ‘this person,’ Myka. Say ‘he.’ Okay?”
Myka nods.

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The following day, Myka’s brain runs on two parallel tracks: the first is dealing with her actual work, which she can do without much conscious thought; but the second is focusing on her plan for Helena. Every time it is feasible for her to take a break, she does, and she spends each break loitering by the entrance to the ladies’ room that is nearest Helena’s office. If anyone comes by, Myka pretends to be on her way in or on her way out. She is armed with a note and her nerve.

In the late afternoon, she is rewarded with the sight of a completely preoccupied Helena walking down the hall, toward her office. She is reading from a folder that is open on top of a stack she is holding, and she does not seem to realize Myka is there until they are only a few yards away from each other; Myka is now striding toward Helena, whose eyes open wide, and wider still when she realizes that Myka is going to walk directly into her path.

“What is—” Helena begins to say, but it is too late; Myka has ensured a head-on collision. Papers fly everywhere, and they both come very close to tumbling to the floor. “What are you doing?” Helena demands, once she has her footing back.

“You said we couldn’t be alone in a room together,” Myka reminds her. She is holding onto Helena’s arms, in the guise of maintaining her balance, but really just holding. “This isn’t a room. It’s a hallway.”

Helena pulls away and gathers her papers back into their folders. “I see that you think this some kind of joke. It is not funny.” She moves to push past Myka to get to her office.

Myka grabs her sleeve. “You dropped this,” she says, holding out her note.

Helena glances down, says “no I didn’t,” and pulls her arm free.

“Will you just take it, please?” Myka says. “Honestly, I should have tried to slip it into your pocket.”

“You cannot be slipping me notes,” Helena says.

Myka huffs. “Well, no, not if you’re going to make this much noise about it. Just… do what it says, okay?”

“Alan mentioned on tape,” Helena reads aloud, but quietly. “Come to Industrial Models exhibit, Arts and Industries Building, Saturday, 4pm.” And you’ve signed it ‘Les Paul’? Myka…” She shakes her head, gives a laugh that Myka would like to read as amused but is, she can tell, actually frustrated. “I told you, this is not a joking matter. So no, I will not go anywhere at your behest on Saturday at 4pm. I have an engagement that evening in any case.”

“Then come at three,” Myka begs. “Look, I think it really is about your friend. And I think it’s important.”

“If it is so important, tell me now. Better yet, just give me the transcript,” Helena says. Weeks ago, Myka would have wilted under this tone of terse command, but now she finds it thrilling.

The fact that she can’t act on that thrill makes her even more determined. “No. Meet me.”

“You are being stupid again, stupid and childish. Must I bring Vanessa into this?”
Myka shrugs. “I don’t know, Miss Wells. That’s pretty much up to you.” Myka knows she would give up if Helena were to go to Miss Calder; she would simply hand the transcript over and that would be the end of it. She has never tried to play anything this cool before.

Helena looks like she is teetering between fury and something like astonishment. Myka wants very much to astonish her more, to kiss her, right here in the hallway, because that one steadying grasp of her arms had been heavenly, heavenly but far too brief. No one else is in the hall; she might be able to get away with it… but even as she is having the thought, she is acknowledging the risk of it, retreating from it, censoring it. So instead she waits.

Finally, Helena says, “All right. Your blackmail worked. I’ll be there at two.” She stalks away, rearranging the papers in her arms as she does. She looks over her shoulder, once, at Myka, and Myka smiles. Helena doesn’t smile back.

Myka supposes she should probably feel in some way guilty about this so-called blackmail, but the only thing that drags on her conscience, as the days march toward Saturday, is the fact that she has to be evasive with Miss Calder about the tape. “You aren’t finished with it yet? I gave that to you last week!” Miss Calder says on Thursday.

Myka has her story ready to go. “But I had that backlog of embassy tapes, and then you told me TSS wanted their cables finished by the weekend. Has Miss Wells said anything to you about it?”

“Well, no,” Miss Calder admits. “But if she does, I’d like to be able to tell her that you’re at least in progress.”

“I was working on it, but then I got distracted. So yes. In progress.”

“Thank you.” Now Miss Calder looks closely at Myka. “Are you all right?” she asks.

This, Myka has not anticipated. “I feel okay.”

Miss Calder gives her an even more appraising eye. “You seem jumpy. Has something happened?”

She is going to have to get better at this, she knows. “Something’s always happening around here, isn’t it? Spring fever, maybe.”

“If you say so,” Miss Calder replies.

So Myka feels bad about that. And she does keep trying to convince herself to feel bad about manipulating Helena, but ultimately that is Helena’s own fault, for issuing that impossible edict, for giving Myka no choice.

Myka has been watching her, all week long, and she knows now that Helena does always see her, that Helena’s eyes flick to her, even now, the minute Helena walks into the translation room, and many, many times after that; Myka has taken care to share a hallway with her more than once—so that the note-passing collision would not seem at all out of the ordinary, if anyone had happened to observe them—and those times, too, Myka will feel, and find, Helena’s gaze directed her way.

Myka tries now to meet that gaze, every time, meet and hold it as long as she can. And when she does, she finds that she is no longer met with that flash of annoyance from the first hallway encounter; it’s as if now that something, whatever it is, is definitely going to happen, Helena can look at Myka with less… worry? Fear? Good, Myka thinks. That’s good. That’s also good information: Myka should always have something planned. Something that makes her seem less dangerous to Helena. Anything that makes Myka seem safer: that’s good. Because the safer she is, Myka reasons, the more different she is from that other girl, that girl in the past.
original tumblr tags: I got nothing really, just a diversion of sorts, which frankly isn't that much of a diversion, seeing as it is about marginalization although of a completely different sort, anyway Abigail is kind of a balm to my soul right now
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

If you’re anything like me, being forced to spend days in an area with spotty wifi and very limited cell coverage will drive you rapidly insane. If you’re anything like me, such a situation will also make you think about communication, and the ease or difficulty thereof. How we take for granted in a lot of ways, at this moment in history, the ability to simply say whatever we want to say, to whomever we want. That’s an overgeneralization… but it’s more true now, as an idea, than it has been at pertinent points in the past.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Coal miners deposit rock into dirty metal cars, which crank their way up out of the mine. They disappear into dense wooded scenery when they reach the top of their track, then reappear back down in the mine to crank through again. And again.

A disastrous cave-in would make this far more realistic.

As Myka watches the tiny model miners perform their monotonous task, her damp hair—her hurriedly, thoughtlessly hatless hair—itches slightly, as if trying to curl its wet way out of its twist at her neck, and her dress sticks to her shoulders. The rain, which began right as she began her walk to the museum, had made her heart race, because it drove tourists inside, under roofs; too many tourists littered the Mall anyway, because Myka had neglected to account, in her fever to plan and convince, for that fact that this weekend is the Cherry Blossom Festival, that thousands of people who would not otherwise have been on the Mall would be clogging its benches and paths for two days. Was that better or worse? More people on the Mall meant less attention to particular people, surely. Just so they weren’t in A&I… but then the rain started, and they were in A&I, right as Myka was heading in too, and she wanted to yank on their arms and explain urgently to each and every one of them why nothing in Industrial Models could possibly hold the interest of cherry-blossom devotees, but they were intent on those models and would have shaken off her concern. Too many people, and in here that probably meant that if Helena was being followed—and why else would she not want to see Myka, because otherwise, who would know anything at all?—then it would be easy to lurk among the tourists to see whom she might speak to. Helena would see the situation immediately, and she might walk in and walk right back out again. Myka’s heart had beat so steadily, all week, but now all she hears it drum is the word “disaster.”

She is so intent on disaster, both in actual potential and as potentially figured by the model she is regarding, that a low voice in her ear saying “Well?” makes her start and stumble. She touches the tall case in front of her to steady herself, touches it to keep herself from turning to meet Helena’s eyes. If Helena is being followed, Myka’s own eyes will give everything away.

“Our Why would you do that to me?” she says, still facing the case.

“What would you have me do? Announce myself with a hearty ‘Hello, Myka!’?” Myka hears a tsk-tsk, then Helena says, “You can turn around. I’m reasonably certain that anyone watching me has remained outside the museum.”

So Myka turns around. She notices that most of the tourists have gone away. She notices also that
Helena is wearing her violin-playing outfit, her tweed skirt and white shirt. Her gloves look to be kid, not cotton like Myka’s. She could touch them and find out. She could tell Helena that she wants to touch them and find out. Instead, she says, “Did it stop raining?”

“I am not here to make small talk,” Helena says. “But yes. It did. You seem to have caught the worst of it.” She is looking at Myka’s hair, and her hand rises, as if to touch it. But she lowers her hand before anything can happen. She lowers her hand and busies herself removing her gloves. “Now tell me what you feel you must. What has Alan done now?”

“Not now. In 1951. I don’t know if it makes anything better or worse.”

“I don’t see how anything could be worse for him.”

“It’s MGB. They’re talking about Artichoke, and then they start talking about ‘Alan.’ And then they talk about how they think this idea is… funny? No, not funny, they said it was… predictable, but they were laughing, and what they say is that he studied gipnoz but is interested in vnusheniye.”

At the word “gipnoz,” Helena had coughed. At the word “vnusheniye,” now, she pales.

Myka says, “You know what that means.”

Helena nods.

“Does it have anything to do with your friend?”

Helena shakes her head no. “They aren’t saying his name, Myka. They’re saying ‘Allen,’ not ‘Alan.’ Think of what you heard. How did your MGB men pronounce it?”

The slip her pen had taken at the sound of the name… she had gone back and listened again, but that had compounded the error; she had wanted to hear “Alan,” to have something special, something useful, to report. Helena is right. “Allen,” she says, and this time she pronounces the “y” sound in the middle of the word, the second “l,” as they did, as she forgot to remember she heard, as they never would have said if they were saying “Alan.”

“Not so different in English,” Helena says.

Myka rubs her eyes. “Very different to a Russian speaker. As I supposedly am. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry I got it wrong.” Of course the disaster is taking a form she did not plan for. This is what trying manipulate Helena has won her: standing damply in front of a coal mine, apologizing to a woman she kissed in the distant past. Children want things to be as they were in the past. She is the child Helena accused her of being.

And while Myka is willing to be that child who is not a child at all—she looks at Helena’s hands and would accept, would not even mind, this humiliation if those hands would touch her—maybe this is growing up. Maybe it is facing the coal mine as the person you want tells you that you are wrong, tells you that and walks away. “I got everything wrong. I’m sorry. I’ll give you the transcript on Monday and I won’t do anything like this again. You were right. I guess you’re always right.”

Helena shakes her head again. “Not always.” She turns to go, then turns back. “Myka,” she says, and Myka despairs of ever hearing her name said by that voice again, “you do understand, don’t you?”

Myka tells the truth: “I don’t understand anything. I don’t understand what happens to me when I
look at you; I don’t understand why I look at you. I don’t understand why you look at me.” Now she does look at the coal mine, so she won’t be forced to watch Helena leave. “I don’t understand anything,” she repeats, and she breathes until the heat of tears behind her throat dissipates.

She turns back around, bracing her body for Helena to be gone. But she isn’t gone; she is there, and her gloves are still off. “I can’t explain it,” Helena says.

“Can’t or won’t?” Myka asks.

“Shouldn’t.”

“Couldn’t you explain something?”

“What?” Helena asks. It carries a hint of indulgence, this voice; it’s the voice of the woman who seemed delighted that Myka understood “Ornithology,” the voice that teased about being a double agent.

“Why did you come here?” Myka stops; she hears that Helena will hear her saying “come here today,” and she knows the answer to that question is “blackmail.” She amends, “To the Agency.”

“I told you. Because I send a particular signal.” Helena looks disappointed that Myka chose this question.

Myka tries again. “Why did you look like you’d seen a ghost when I said gipnoz and vnusheniye?”

Helena pauses; she blinks. Myka knows that’s better, particularly when Helena says slowly, “Because that is a signal too. An unexpected one.”

“Who’s Allen? Can you tell me?”

“Yes. That isn’t a secret,” Helena says. “Morse Allen. He works in your Scientific Intelligence Unit. I work with him. Or, no: my presence on his project signifies British interest in his work.”

“What’s his work? Gipnoz? Vnusheniye?”

And now Helena’s eyes sparkle. “I can’t tell you.”

Myka tries to make her voice match that sparkle as she asks, “Can’t, or won’t?”

“Shouldn’t,” Helena says. “But I will remind you of what I told you before: I have a unique set of skills.”

Now she looks exactly as she did, telling Myka “this is for you” before launching into “Ornithology.” A test, another test. A unique set of skills. A unique set of skills, a family of performers, magic, music… “Gipnoz?” she asks.

Myka’s heart begins to beat very differently when Helena smiles slyly and says, “Perhaps.”

“Vnusheniye too?” Myka asks.

“Not quite,” Helena says, still smiling.

“I wish I could.”

“Could what?”
“Control you.”

A joke? A pout? A real regret? Helena seems to respond to all three as she says, “Hm.” She reaches up and pulls a quarter from behind Myka’s ear. She displays it in her palm, then makes it disappear into her other hand.

Myka sighs. This now seems a test too, this magic trick, and she is going to fail one of these tests eventually, eventually and miserably. She opens her purse and finds a quarter; she offers it to Helena, who opens her hand and receives it as she asks, “What is that for?”

“I don’t know any magic,” Myka tells her. Plain words, to fit her plain self.

Helena’s response is to open her mouth and breathe. “I think you know more than you let on,” she says, low and slow. She drops her head, as if in prayer, but she is raising her palm too. She kisses the quarter and then, still open-palmed, offers it back to Myka.

The coin is a mark, the end of a line that demarcates or connects. Myka looks at Helena, her open mouth, that mouth that once rose to meet hers. It might have been a hundred years ago. It might take a hundred years to happen again.

The hand Myka reaches out is eager and reluctant; this is right and wrong, miracle and disaster. She expects the coin to disappear as her hand nears, but Helena does not move. Even Helena cannot make a coin disappear if she does not move at all.

Myka touches Helena’s palm. She lets her fingers brush warm skin as she takes the coin.

Helena nods. Then she turns and leaves.

The coal mine is still there when Myka looks back at it. It repeats its lesson: put the coal in the cart. Take it up the mountain. Disappear. Start again.

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Monday is a day like days were, months ago, before it all began. Tuesday is that same day. Wednesday follows, Thursday, Friday, another weekend. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. Myka sees Helena twice in that time, from a distance. In those sights, she finds dreams: she might have dreamed the museum, dreamed the coin—dreamed every coin—dreamed it all, dreamed even what happened in Helena’s office; she looks at that figure down the hall, a figure whose features she can barely discern, and she cannot possibly ever have been close enough to touch those features… but then a random moment will jump into focus: the warmth and length of Helena’s hand against her neck, or the heavy moist heat of Helena’s tongue against hers. And that is no dream, or rather it is a waking dream, and Myka will go back to the exact moment when her hands knew exactly what to do, when they began to find Helena’s skirt, Helena’s skirt and Helena’s legs. And Myka will feel faint from the hunger of that moment, and she will feel as empty and starved as an animal in an untended cage. But as she tries to grip the bars of that cage, to tighten her grasp on that intensity and hold it to her, it will slip away, and she will drift again, and it will seem a fading dream.

Thursday morning, as Myka approaches her desk, something tweaks at her brain; something is slightly different, slightly out of place.

It is her tape machine, which usually sits with its edge an even inch from the desk’s left side. Now the machine is shifted right, making the usually strict rectangular stripe of visible desk into a trapezoid… and as she comes to face the desk, she sees why: the machine has been moved so that a folded piece of paper could be placed underneath it. Myka sits down and pulls the paper free.
The front reads “Les Paul,” and Myka cannot begin to put words to the way the sight of that name makes her blood move. She unfolds the note, and inside it says, “3pm Saturday, Castle, Smithson’s crypt.” Quickly, as quickly as she can with numb and clumsy fingers, she refolds the note and puts it in her purse.

Abigail walks in a moment later, takes one look at Myka, and says, “Are you okay?” She has not said one word, not one in ten days, about what may or may not have happened at A&I.

“I can’t say,” Myka tells her.

“What does that mean? Can’t because you don’t know, or can’t because it’s a bad idea?”

Before Myka is able to voice an answer, she happens to look to the front of the room: Miss Calder is walking in, and trailing in her wake is—of course—Helena. Her eyes immediately find Myka’s, and everything that seemed a dying dream jolts back to life.

Some part of Myka is already leaping up, running to her, asking if the note means what she prays it means, possibly, maybe, please, please. Saying please, please, no matter what the note means.

“Myka!” Abigail says. Her voice is a whip; it stings enough to make Myka look away. “I think you had better take some time to… count those tapes sitting on your desk. Or count the fingers on your hands. No arguing.”

That is most likely Abigail’s mother’s voice that Myka just heard, and arguing indeed seems impossible as a response. Myka counts her tapes. And then she does count her fingers; she spreads them against the desk and she counts them, very slowly. Twice. When she looks up, Helena is gone. Myka looks over at Abigail. “Thank you,” she says, and Abigail nods.

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Myka and Abigail leave the building for lunch. They sit on a bench on the Mall again. One variety of cherry blossoms has peaked, and the other is yet to come; an overwhelming pink is everywhere, even in the air. Myka’s breathing, harsh in the building all morning, softens.

After several contemplative bites of her sandwich, Abigail opens with, “You might be surprised by how many people want to be alone with people these days. At this rate, I will run out of museums.”

Myka can’t find words.

“No one has told me anything,” Abigail says. “And I would like to keep it that way. But I’ll ask you one question.”

“Okay,” Myka says.

“What will you tell them in the box?”

Myka has built a wall, a new box, around what happened in the box. Those questions seem from a completely different realm of experience; they cannot possibly apply anymore, if they ever did. Besides, she was just in, and if she can keep from drawing attention to herself, they won’t put her back in for a while. By the time they do… but she has built a wall around what happened in the box.

In response to Abigail’s question, she shrugs. “There’s nothing to tell,” she says. Nothing to tell, because nothing is habitual, nothing is temperamental. For all the future Myka can see, nothing will ever even be repeated. All they will ever be able to do, she and Helena, is meet in museums
and say words about who can and can’t do magic.

“‘Keep it that way’ seems a ridiculous thing to say,” Abigail sighs. “And I know you’re getting tired of ‘be careful.’ It’s your lookout, anyway.”

“Why are you helping me and… him?” Myka asks.

Abigail nods. “Good. And since you ask, it’s because I like you, and I like him. I mean it might show I like you more if I refuse to answer these sentimental questions you and he are asking, and incidentally why everybody thinks I know everything in the first place I can’t imagine—”

“It’s because you do.”

“Anyway, I can’t imagine why, but if I can help people I like, then that’s what I want to do. Even if I don’t know anything about what they’re doing or why they want to do it, and like I said, I want to keep that that way.”

“I will not try to tell you the time of day,” Myka promises.

“Thanks,” Abigail says. “Listen, but I’ll tell you to make sure to tease this person about needing more practice on that sonata from Saturday. He was swearing at his violin like you wouldn’t believe.”

“I wish I’d heard that,” Myka says.

“I think this person does too.”

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At three on Saturday afternoon, a tall, green-eyed woman hurries into the north entrance of a castle. Her skin is reddening past the baby pink of the flowers that seem to cover every tree, and a casual observer would consider her blush the beginning of a burn from the unusually hot, bright sun that shines today. Yet she might not catch the attention of any observer, casual or otherwise, as she treads the stone floor of the castle, for she is wearing wedge sandals that make little sound.

She takes a turn to the left, still noising as slightly as a thief. She might be tiptoeing as she enters a small, solemn chapel space. Stained glass windows take the unusually bright sun and transform its merciless heat into benevolence, low display cases stand at the sides of the room, and a monumental platform topped by a low, wide marble urn stands at the far end.

The crypt is empty of the living.

The woman looks at her watch, a delicate golden cuff that circles her right wrist, over the short sleeve of her cotton glove.

She sags against a wall: exhaustion, disappointment, despair? But she waits.

Three fifteen. No other tourists seem interested, this lovely day, in paying their respects to James Smithson, so the woman, having apparently finished her own contemplation, turns away from the monument.

She is not alone anymore; another thief has stolen in. This thief is pale, her skin so cool it has refused to acknowledge the sun.

“I’m weak,” are the words she says.
original tumblr tags: Helena is no dummy, she knows it is a bad idea, in fact everybody but Myka knows for certain it is a bad idea, but what can any of us do when faced with those green eyes?, and who wants to make that face look sad?, and we're all weak for somebody or something, aren't we?
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

And in other news, here is the next part, containing some orations regarding what’s possible, and what isn’t possible, and what some people wish could be possible… and then things start to twist, just a bit. And they will twist a whole lot more before we’re done, because where is the space to unwind?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next words Helena says are, “And I’m certain I’m being followed. That’s why I was late.”

“You lost them?” Myka is hopeful now, because if Helena has managed to shed whoever is watching her, then she and Myka might find some freedom today…

“God no,” Helena says. So. No hope. “I can’t lose him; if I do, they’ll know I know what they are doing, and further they will know I have some reason to wish not to be followed. And then matters will escalate: am I in fact a double agent? Am I a security risk? Am I, at the very least, willing to tolerate or cultivate security risks, as my association with Alan suggests? In any case, they are not watching too terribly closely, not yet. But I couldn’t take a chance on anyone’s seeing you arrive after me and recognizing you. And drawing conclusions.”

“They haven’t already drawn the conclusion?” But Myka supposes she knows the answer to this. She would not be walking free, would not have a job to walk freely to on Monday morning, if the conclusion had already been definitively drawn.

“No yet. And, I hope, not ever, but I cannot afford to give anyone leverage, and neither can you.”

“So why are you here at all?”

“I told you. I’m weak.” Helena looks into Myka’s eyes and smiles, but the smile evaporates, evanesces into sorrow.

Myka looks around. They are all alone in the crypt, so she raises her right hand, as quickly as she can, and runs the backs of her fingers down Helena’s sad face. “Stop. You’re not.”

Myka’s hand is back at her side, but Helena’s head turns toward its ghost, as if the touch of her fingers might still have lingered in the air. “I am. Because I want to see you. I can’t keep myself from wanting that.”

“Then I’m weak too.”

Helena smiles again. “You’re not… because you don’t understand how you should fight against this. If you did—and you gave in—then yes. But you don’t understand.”

“No, I don’t,” Myka says. “I told you before that I don’t understand, and I still don’t. I don’t understand any part of it, how I feel, why it’s wrong. This should be so simple. Because it is simple: on a day like today, I just want… I just want to sit outside on a bench with you and look at the cherry blossoms. I want you to smile and say how lovely they are this year. And I want to lean over and kiss you and tell you that yes, the blossoms are lovely this year, but nothing, nothing in
any year, has ever been as lovely as you.” This is the most complete, coherent image that has come
to her of what she and Helena could be to each other, and she is overcome by the idea that they
could do that, that they could just sit on a bench and be any two people. It could be so very simple.

Helena says, softly, “I can’t let myself imagine that. Never mind wanting it.”

But at this, Myka snorts in disbelief. “Before, when you first came here, you would practically
have done that.”

“That is neither true nor fair,” Helena says, sternly. “I barely touched you.”

“Exactly. You barely touched me. And it was the first thing I’d ever felt.”

“You can’t say things like that.” But Helena’s eyelids flutter and close, almost exactly as they had
done when Myka kissed her.

Myka shakes her head. “You’re wrong. Saying things like that is all I can do.”

And because that is all Myka can do, all either of them can do, they fall into a pattern: every other
week, one leaves a note for the other, telling a place and a time, and that weekend, they meet and
talk. They stop relying on Abigail for suggestions (Abigail asks, “Did you find yourself a new
friend all of a sudden?” and Myka assures her no, that “we—he and I—just want you to be safe”).
Instead, they find their own quiet corners of museums and secluded spaces in monuments…

Helena says that it makes perfect sense for her to want to see such things, given that this is her first
sojourn in Washington, and that she would do so on a regular schedule is also perfectly normal.

“And no one is watching you, thank god,” she says. “Not yet.”

Myka shrugs this off. “Even if they were, I’m the kind of girl who goes to museums. That’s not
new.”

Helena smiles her most indulgent smile and says, “I like that you’re that kind of girl. And yet you
can’t have come to Washington just for museums, can you? And it wasn’t the war… what brought
you here?”

“Brought me to you…” Myka says. She is still, always, bewitched by that smile, and further by
anything Helena says that brings them closer together.

“Don’t think of it that way,” Helena says, with a head-shake, but her tone says the opposite, that
she does, and does want Myka to, think of it that way.

Myka says, “Eleanor Roosevelt.”

This makes Helena laugh, and Myka worships her laugh, warms to her laugh, could wrap herself in
that laugh and go to sleep and not fear nightmares in which she is constantly looking back over her
shoulder. “What in the world does Eleanor Roosevelt have to do with anything?” Helena asks.

“She came to Colorado Springs to give a speech, and she talked about government service. It made
me see stars. I had been thinking about math, about science…” Myka gestures at the case in front
of them; it holds the fossilized bones of some ancient aquatic creature, positioned against a black
background that makes it look like it is flying through a night sky rather than swimming in the sea.

“Creatures or numbers or systems, to keep on studying them. But then I heard Mrs. Roosevelt say
what she said, so I talked to my professors at college about the best way to get a job in the
government. My Russian’s very good, of course, and they needed that, and I could get a security
clearance, so the Agency made sense, there or State.” She exhales. “Particularly since I didn’t want
to stay in Colorado and get married.”
Helena clears her throat. “I’m sure you had… offers.” She is staring straight ahead, at the fossil.

“Just one. I tried to say yes.” She also has tried, in the intervening years, not to dwell so relentlessly on the way in which she tried to say yes. She distracts herself by examining Helena’s profile: her ear, her high cheekbone, the seemingly patrician slope of her nose. The angle sharpens her; this profile could not be that of someone who once melted against Myka. “I’m sure you had offers too.”

Helena smiles, turns slightly, softens. “Not really. There was the war, of course, and since then, trying to make my way at MI6. A woman must show interest in every man, just one man, or no man. I’ve chosen no man.”

“Until now,” Myka reminds her. Harshly, because she herself has been reminded, of that and of other things. “Until you had to change the picture.”

Helena nods, and it’s an apology as she says, “I didn’t want to. You know I didn’t want to. I wanted to play music for you.”

“Would you have kept on? Would it have gone on, like that, do you think?”

Helena nods again. “Until I could no longer help myself.” She lets her shoulder touch Myka’s, just the slightest brush. Any observer would think it accidental. “I would always have become weak for you.”

Myka asks, hungrily, “What would you have done?”

Helena does not blush, but Myka senses that her body temperature is rising in tandem with Myka’s own. “When I could no longer help myself? I would have contrived some way to be alone with you. I would have…” She stops, laughs. “I would have played the allemanda from Bach’s Partita 2 for you. I would have imagined myself irresistible.”

“You are irresistible,” Myka says. She could faint, just from imagining herself and Helena alone in a room, Helena intent on her violin, Myka free to watch her, to watch her so openly that her watching might disturb, might even break, that exquisite concentration. “I don’t know what Bach’s Partita 2 is, but I know you’re irresistible.”

Helena bows her head. “No… that’s you. I know it, because where am I right now, this moment?”

So many times, just as right now, this moment, it would be so easy to lean into each other, to touch, but they can’t touch, not the way they want to. They can talk; they can say all manner of quiet words about what they wish were possible, but all they can do is talk about it. They do talk, and Myka listens to Helena as she talks, but she also watches Helena’s mouth as she talks, and it agitates her, that mouth. Helena keeps insisting that she is weak, that she would not do this if she had any strength—yet Myka sees her, every time they meet, every minute they are together, prove her strength by resisting the urge to ignore their surroundings. She is shackling herself. And every time they meet, Myka understands a bit more about weakness, for she must shackle herself ever more strongly too.

Weeks pass, and still, every time, the sight of Helena making her way across the marble of a museum floor is enough, just in itself, to make Myka sigh and wish that this time she could lunge to meet her—but then, as Helena nears, Myka ties herself down. She says something about work; she asks a question about Helena’s past. One Saturday in June, she says, “I told you I speak Russian because of my grandparents. Why do you?”

“I’ve always been good with… let us say, things that correspond to other things. Maps. Codes.
Languages. These come easily to me.” She sighs; Myka has learned that this kind of sigh is a signal. It seems to mean—or perhaps Myka just likes to think it means—that she is about to be told the truth. “When I was a girl, I worshipped another girl, a Russian girl, whose family had come to England to escape the Revolution. They had been circus performers, and so my family helped them… some sort of fellowship of entertainers, solidarity, I suppose. She was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I followed her everywhere. I wanted to talk to her, of course, and I wanted her to talk to me, but she spoke only Russian. I don’t know why she didn’t learn English, but she didn’t. So I made her teach me Russian. I was quick; I already had French, and at the time, Russian seemed just a simple step to the side of that.”

Myka is learning another language too, a simple step to the side of what she already knows, all so she can talk to the most beautiful thing she has ever seen. She tries to picture Helena, a small, absurdly determined Helena, doing the same, prompted by some childlike version of what Myka is feeling now. “What happened then?”

Helena shrugs. “She and her family… one day they were simply gone. They traveled somewhere else to perform, I think I was told, but I knew only that she was gone. How I cried… but I continued to believe that she might come back to me, you see, so I made certain I would be able to speak with her when she did.”

“Did she?”

“Of course not. I never saw her again.” Helena’s body has stiffened, and Myka sees that that is all the truth she will get from her today.

When Myka finds herself back at her apartment, after any such rendezvous, their meetings do always seem to be something vaguely shameful, something that she should have promised herself she would not do but then has done anyway. Maybe she is like an alcoholic, because this, at least, has become habitual, though how anyone could blackmail her simply on the basis of the fact that she goes to museums to meet a coworker… but she isn’t stupid. No matter what Helena thinks, Myka really isn’t stupid. She has spent enough time with her mind on what she wants to do with, to do to, that coworker to be fully aware that it is supposed to be more than vaguely shameful. She is supposed to recoil from this itch, this ache, this knife that cuts her open, this surge in her heart, her blood, her temperature, when she sees that hair, those hands, those eyes, those arms (for now that it is full summer, she sees those arms). She is supposed to be disgusted by the hunger that dries and wets her mouth, this hunger of her mouth. Because her mouth wants Helena; her hands want Helena; even her skin, every cell of her skin shouts its want.

Myka likes explanations. She likes the one, two, three of steps in any process. She likes that so much that she will count, involuntarily, when she goes up and down a staircase: this is step one, step two, step three. But there is no one, two, three of Helena, no explanation. Is it alchemy? Lead into gold? No… gold into different gold, someone else’s jewelry melted down and poured into a mold that Myka could never have predicted was the form this most basic want would take.

Dying of such want seems like something that would happen to a countess in an enormous Russian novel, not to a woman who walks to an office every morning in the modern world, and yet in her own weaker moments, Myka concedes that she has always felt more at home in enormous Russian novels than in this modern world. Their novel, hers and Helena’s, is lengthening with each museum meeting, prolonging her want, staving off her death but reminding her of its imminence.

April, May, June. Then July.

Two things happen in July. Each changes a different part of the picture.
On a Monday morning, Myka comes back from a break to the sight of a red-haired young man standing next to Abigail’s desk. Abigail beckons Myka over. “Myka, this is Steve. He’s in Research with Joshua. And Steve, this is Myka.”

“Hi, Steve,” Myka says.

“Hi, Myka,” Steve answers. He meets her eyes once, then looks down, away, to the side, everywhere but at her face. Shy like Joshua? That doesn’t quite fit. Steve doesn’t seem to be built shy; he’s taller than Myka, his shirt sleeves are tight against his biceps, and the way he stands reminds her of the athletes at her high school, at college—and none of them, certainly not the ones who stood like this, were shy.

“Steve’s still kind of new,” Abigail says.

“Oh?” Myka says.

“He got here around when Miss Wells did.”

“Who’s Miss Wells?” Steve asks.

Myka says, quickly, “Nobody.”

“Anyway,” Abigail says, “I thought you two might have some things in common.”

“What?” Myka and Steve ask at the same time.

“Right. Things that I, for example, don’t know anything about.”

“Oh,” Myka says. “I see.”

“I don’t get it,” Steve says.

Myka tells him, “I think Abigail means that you and I should maybe eat lunch together. Outside the building.”

“But I…” Steve looks helplessly from Myka to Abigail, who nods. “I mean, okay, but—”

“Why don’t you meet me here around noon?” Myka suggests.

“Okay?” he says. “I guess? I mean, okay.” He backs away from them, looking for all the world like he’s afraid that if he turns around, they’ll pounce and eviscerate him.

Once he’s gone, Myka says to Abigail, “Right?”

“Right,” Abigail says. “Because I think you need some protection. And this person can’t protect you. You need to protect yourself.”

“And Steve needs protection too.”

“Right. Listen, I know it isn’t perfect.”

“No.” Myka smiles. “But I think you are.”

Abigail laughs. “Please. I know who you think is perfect.”

“Who’s that?” asks a voice from behind them; they both jump. It’s Miss Calder, and Myka can’t
think of a thing to say. Abigail saves her with, “Myka’s met this new guy. I guess she thinks he’s
dreamy or something.”

“Is he?” Miss Calder asks.

Abigail keeps talking. “My mother would say he’s a foreign devil, because he’s got red hair. I
guess it’s different when you’re from Colorado.”

This, Myka can respond to. “A lot of things are different when you’re from Colorado. And Steve is
cute.” She tells herself that that is not a betrayal of any sort. That is just a statement about
someone’s looks. It is objectively true: Steve is cute.

Miss Calder asks, “Just cute, not perfect?”

She’s teasing, and that makes Myka feel sick. “I think it’s a little early to say.”

Abigail says, “But he’s clearly got potential.”

“He’s got potential,” Myka affirms, because she knows she should. “We’re having lunch today, so
we’ll see.”

“That’s wonderful,” Miss Calder says. She squeezes Myka’s arm and walks to her desk.

“Is it?” Myka asks Abigail.

“To her,” Abigail says. “And that’s how you protect yourself.”

****

At lunch with Steve, Myka has what is probably the strangest conversation of her life. It is a series
of stops and starts, really, not a conversation at all, not at the beginning, with Steve saying “Myka,
I’m sure you’re nice, but I’m not—” and Myka interrupting with “I’m not either, and that’s why
Abigail—” to which he responds, “You mean you—”, and she says, “I’m not sure, but I—”

Eventually, Steve says, “It’s good for a fellow like me to be seen with a pretty girl.” It’s a very long
sentence, the longest she’s heard him utter.

“Thank you,” Myka says. “And it’s good for a girl like me to be seen with a handsome guy.”

He smiles. “Thank you too.”

“So…” she says. “Should we go to the movies or something? To be seen?”

“Let’s do that,” he says. “And I think we should both tell people how nice it is to have a date.
Right?”

“Right.” Now, at last, now they are on the same page. “Do you like Les Paul?” she asks.

“Love him, him and Mary Ford. But I like Patti Page’s voice more. Hey, how about Rosemary
Clooney?”

Myka thinks they will get along just fine. She tells him so. She tells him so, she walks back into
the Agency on his arm, and they go to the movies together on Friday. They see California
Conquest. It isn’t very good, but Myka has always liked Teresa Wright. She tells Steve this, and he
says, “Well, you would.” Myka suggests that he likes Cornel Wilde more than he lets on, and he
shushes her, but he laughs.
They both relax, just a little, just enough. Eating a hamburger in a diner with Steve, Myka feels nearly as comfortable, nearly as safe, as she does when she sits on the Mall with Abigail.

****

In the Peacock Room of the Freer Gallery, on Saturday at 3pm, Helena says, not casually at all, “And who is your new friend?”

Myka is moody today. Steve is tall and handsome and correct, and even if they are only useful to each other, they are still useful to each other. Helena is not useful at all; Helena is a drug that treats no disease. “Maybe I’m following your example,” Myka says. “Maybe I’m changing the picture too.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original tumblr tags: hope this part wasn't too boring, (they needed to get to know each other better), anyway hang on for the next part, because the second thing that changes the picture, is something that leads into another something, I need to stop being so vague, don't I
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Yeah, let’s ratchet things up a bit. The tension, the stakes, the temperature… stuff like that. Lots of things—some bad, some good, some perplexing—can result from pressure.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Helena doesn’t look at Myka. She directs her gaze toward the wall, which is adorned with representations of ostentatious peacocks. “Are you? Are you changing the picture?” she asks, in a whisper. Myka might read that whisper as upset, even stricken, on a normal day, whatever passes for normal between the two of them, but she is too annoyed, too out of sorts, to worry about Helena’s feelings.

She snaps, “I am not the one who hangs all over someone in the middle of a hallway at the Agency.”

She had seen Helena with Nate, on Thursday—not the first time she had seen them in each other’s presence since the symphony, but certainly the worst, for Helena had taken his arm, touched his face, perhaps playfully, perhaps seriously, Myka couldn’t tell, didn’t want to look at the scene long enough to be able to tell. The fact of the matter was that Helena touched him in public, could touch him in public, and it was a hammer of a reminder that she did touch him in private, and Myka has avoided asking any questions about that, because she would have to scream to drown out any words Helena gave in answer.

“How many times do I have to tell you?” Helena asks now.

“None. Zero. No times. Don’t tell me. I have nothing; he has everything.” Bitter, that is the entirety of how she feels. Bitter, with no sweet to temper it.

Helena says, and she sounds almost as bitter, “And yet someone has you now too.”

What right does she have? “No, he doesn’t. Do you know why? Because he doesn’t want me, just like I don’t want him. It’s not the same for you. Is it.”

“No. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. But Myka, please, I don’t know what else to do.”

Myka doesn’t care if Helena’s sorry, or desperate, or even ashamed. She doesn’t care at all how Helena feels about it, not today. “I think I’ve had enough,” she says.

“Enough?”

“Just… today. Right now. I can’t talk to you today. All I can see is you and him.”

Helena makes a low, pained noise. “I think of you,” she says.

“That’s worse. If thinking of me helps you? Helps you with him? That’s so much worse.” Of course this is a horrible thing to say. Myka hears another noise from beside her, a noise that might just be an intake of breath. An intake of wet, salty breath.
If Helena is crying, here in the Peacock Room at the Freer, let people think it is because she is moved by the beauty of what she sees before her. Because she and Myka? Today, Myka knows: they are nothing to each other, they will never be anything at all, nothing but untouchable figures that gaze and hunger, standing in front of walls and cases that display beautiful, untouchable artifacts from the past.

****

When Myka climbs out of her temper, later that night, all she can do is regret it. She can’t call Helena and apologize; she can’t camp out on her doorstep and wait until Helena is in a forgiving mood. She’s probably with Nate anyway, Myka thinks, and the pit of jealousy threatens to open again, just like that, under her.

It’s a mean-spirited sort of justice, then, that the only time she sees Helena, the following week, it is to dispense the opposite of an apology: Myka is leaving the Agency with Steve, on Friday, for the movies again, and Myka feels eyes on her, and she turns around, and there is Helena. She might as well be a ghost, for at the sight of Myka, the color in her face drains from pale to paler.

In atonement, Myka takes Saturday to try to find some amenable space in which the two of them have not yet met. Roaming the Mall and its edifices seems habitual now, and she feels—how did Abigail put it?—yes, that at this rate, she will run out of museums. She has already run out of any enthusiasm for museums; all she sees, anymore, is the configuration of their space. Are there corners around which she and Helena can turn? Are there displays behind which they can stand? Is the level of tourist traffic correct: not too many people, not too few?

After the movie with Steve, Myka had tried to write a letter home to her parents, to distract herself. She wrote, “I’ve visited a lot of museums over the past few months.” She wanted to give details, but all she remembered with any vividness were such things as “I told Helena about the time I nearly fell into the Grand Canyon” and “Helena talked about taking magic lessons with her brother.” She couldn’t write those things down on paper. Instead, she wrote that she had gone out with a good-looking, polite young scientist. Her mother would read that, set the letter down on the kitchen table in front of her, take off her glasses, and smile. Then she would sigh in the way she had sighed when a letterman from the football team showed up to take Myka’s sister, Tracy, to a dance—the way she never sighed when Myka showed her a debate-team trophy or flawless math test.

“I spend time with an extraordinary woman,” Myka couldn’t write, “but it’s never enough time. I always have to tell her goodbye. Can you explain why you and everyone else in the world think that’s the way things should be?”

Or: “Tomorrow I’ll be looking for a hiding place, and when we’re hidden in it, I’ll feel better, and worse, than I do anywhere else I draw breath. If you met her, you wouldn’t understand, but sometimes I try to imagine that you could.”

Instead, she wrote: “You should have seen the cherry blossoms this year. There aren’t many things more beautiful than Washington in April.” Only one thing: and even when the weight of the secrecy is too much, when Myka’s very posture begins to fail her because of that weight, she doesn’t forget that one thing; particularly today, when she’s atoning by pacing the wide sidewalk of Independence Avenue—thinking that she should probably try the Botanic Garden, yet resisting the idea because it will be so literally a hothouse on this sweltering July day—she doesn’t forget that one beautiful thing.

A bored guide who has recited his speech too many times to bother with inflection and emphasis (“…this is the Capitol Reflecting Pool and just as the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool reflects
the Lincoln Memorial and Washington Monument you can see that this pool reflects the Capitol Building and the U.S. Grant Memorial”) is herding a tour group in the direction of the Capitol, and Myka follows along, for want of any better ideas. She has not been to the Capitol before, as she has always been more interested in looking at things than in putting herself in spaces. Thus it is completely by accident that she makes a shamefully dazzling discovery: the ladies’ restrooms in the building—a building never intended for the comfort of women, for why should women spend time where men do the business of governing?—are small, meant for one person. At most, really, two women’s bodies could occupy any one of these few, tiny rooms.

And they lock.

****

A plan. By the time Myka gets back to her apartment, she has a feverish scheme in mind. She is making a plan, and the minute she is behind her own locked door, she is writing it down: she will go to the Capitol at… what time? three? next Saturday, and she will join the first tour after her arrival; she will lock herself in the tiny ladies room that she found to be the most remote facility anywhere near the tour’s route. Helena will arrive, say, fifteen minutes later, and she will join the next tour, and she will find that same room (because Myka is drawing her a map, which Helena will read perfectly because she is good with maps). Then they will need to have arranged some sort of signaling knock, something no one would ever tap out accidentally, and then Myka will open the door and let Helena in, and she cannot let herself think past that, because there is no way it will work, so she had better not, she tries to tell herself firmly, hold out any hope. No hope, but still, she refines the plan, writes the plan down, writes it again, revises it into as short an explanation as she can make it, but it is still so long, and she can’t take a chance on anyone other than Helena seeing this note, so she is going to have to run into her in the hallway again, which means further planning and timing.

She drives herself crazy every day, seeking but not finding her opportunity; by Thursday afternoon, Myka is in such a state that if Helena were to walk into the translation room, Myka would in turn walk up to her and simply hand her the note, possibly even while announcing to all the translators, “In two days she and I will truly be alone. Even if it lasts for only five minutes, we will be alone!” She has been counting down the days, five, four, three, now two, and other countdowns have been torture, but this is the best and worst kind.

Friday morning. Steve stops by to ask if they are going to the movies again, and Myka is paying enough attention to say yes, sure, of course, but she is watching the hallway too, and when she sees pale skin, black hair, and a gray flannel skirt walk briskly past, she says, “I have to go now” and leaps up, flies out of the room, hurtles after Helena—for it is Helena; for Myka, there is no mistaking the shine of that hair, the smooth grace of that body.

Myka catches up, plucks at her arm. Helena turns around with an impatient “Yes?” Her expression changes completely when she sees Myka’s face, however; she breathes Myka’s name, and when Myka presses the note—it’s a letter, really, with its length and its map—into her hand, she looks down at it. Myka thinks ruefully that all she has done, in the past week, is make Helena turn pale, because that is what happens, now, again.

“I should have slipped it into your pocket,” Myka says softly.

“Myka,” Helena breathes again. “What is this?”

“Please don’t be angry with me. Just read it and—well, just read it.” She tries to smile, as she would if they were simply coworkers passing in the hall, but she is too agitated for that. Instead she nods, in what she hopes is an encouraging fashion, and turns and walks away.
On Saturday, after finally falling asleep just before dawn, Myka awakens to a paradoxically darkening sky. Thunderstorms are threatening, but the air is still as humid and heavy as it has been all week, maybe even more so, for nothing has broken yet. She spends the morning in her robe and slippers, reading yesterday’s newspaper—if she had read it yesterday, the morning gloom would not have surprised her—and taking desultory sips from a cup of coffee that becomes thicker and thicker as she reheats it, again and again, in a small pot on her hot plate. She considers boiling an egg. The idea makes her feel ill.

By midmorning, rain showers have begun to come in waves, and the damp air is encouraging Myka’s hair to curl around against itself; if she does not put it up now, each lock will bend itself into a shape that refuses to lie down with any of the others. But the minute she starts getting herself ready to go, she will keep getting ready, and then she will find herself on the Mall, in what is sure to still be rain, and she will again feel like that damp girl in A&I, that first time, the girl who had got everything wrong. Her hair will just have to be unruly. She tries to work out the rate at which the strands will most likely curl, how bad it will look if she waits until the last possible minute to put on her clothes and her makeup. The longer she puts off dressing, she also reasons, the longer she can put off dwelling on what exactly she is dressing for.

And what, she tries to tell herself, if what she is dressing for does not even happen? What if Helena decides that she has had enough of Myka, that Myka’s note did not contain enough apology, that Myka’s plan is too sordid? Last week it had seemed so wondrous, the door and its lock the only important elements. Today, the part of Myka that still lives in Colorado, the same part that hurries to finish each translation as quickly as possible, the part that sweeps her apartment floor every morning… that part wants to sit here and let three o’clock pass by.

At ten minutes after three, Myka is watching her hands shake as they lock the door of a dim restroom in the Capitol. She has switched on the crystal-shrouded light by the mirror, but it is too weak to illuminate many details of this tiny space that hides, tight and dark and close, in the windowless interior of the building.

Myka was not rained upon during her walk, and the temperature had dropped, by some absurd number of degrees, from the week’s earlier mid-nineties heat. Yet despite the lowered temperature—for even in here, where the air is thicker than the freshened outdoors, the nineties are a thing of the past—Myka begins to sweat once she turns the lock. All she can do now is wait, wait to hear the Fibonacci series knocked upon the door. It had been the only pattern that had occurred to her, in her frenzied state, and then she hadn’t wanted to copy out the note again just to change that to “digits of pi” or “Morse code for Les Paul.” Or something equally ridiculous. What it is doesn’t matter, she tells herself. All that matters is that it’s Helena, that she shows up, that she knocks on the door, that Myka opens the door to her.

The secondhand on her watch ticks away. She might hallucinate knocks on the door, or she might want so desperately to hear the correct pattern that she would open the door to anyone, any knock at all.

She hears one tap. It could be anything. One more. Again, anything. Then two, and Myka is sure her own breathing must be audible to whoever is standing on the other side of the door.

Tock-tock-tock. It could be someone becoming impatient; Myka has sworn to herself that she will wait, wait through the five that must come next, wait through the eight, because no one would simply by chance knock three, then five, then eight.

She cannot help herself: more taps begin, and Myka is clawing at the lock, throwing it undone,
opening the door. And there Helena is, a vision once again, her eyes opaque in the dim light, her hair its usual slightly imperfect perfection. Her white, crisp shirtsleeves reveal her arms, and her skirt is a gently pleated light length of camel. Myka wants to touch every inch of her: hair, skin, clothes, all the features of her face.

Helena slips inside the room with all the grace Myka never moves with and certainly has no prayer of mustering today. She doesn’t look at Myka before turning and relocking the door.

She speaks softly, still turned away from Myka. “I thought you wouldn’t want to see me again. After last time. And then I was terrified, because your note was so long… I thought you were telling me goodbye. I couldn’t believe it when I saw that you had made this kind of plan.”

“I don’t care what you thought,” Myka tells her. “That doesn’t matter now. That door is locked. Helena, that door is locked, and we are here on the other side of it.”

Helena turns around now. She says, “I should never have said those things to you. If I can hurt you like that now, and hurt you even more if this goes on, what good is it?”

“I’m here,” Myka says. “I did want to see you again, of course I wanted to see you again. It doesn’t matter if you hurt me, or how much you hurt me. I don’t care.”

Helena says, “I care,” and she is turning back to the door, her hand rising to the lock again, and she is going to undo it; she is whispering “so I can’t, I can’t” and they are going to lose this chance, and now Myka is the one who can’t: she can’t plan this again, can’t go through the sweating, nervous days leading up to it, can’t spend again these last fretful minutes fearing that the wrong knock will come.

“Please,” Myka says, “please, please, just kiss me, just once, just once and that’s all, please, Helena, please, please,” because if Helena is listening to Myka’s voice then she is not unlocking the door. Myka moves even closer to Helena, stands behind her, leaves a tiny but real amount of space between their bodies; she could do what she did before and take Helena’s hair down, touch her anyway, but that isn’t right. That would make Helena weak. After these weeks and weeks of nothing but words, Helena would slacken against Myka. She would yield. But Myka wants sparkling Helena, the expert with her discipline and control. And if that Helena will not turn back around, Myka will have to let her leave.

“You are beautiful,” Myka hears that Helena say. “So trite to say, but you are, in so many ways. I can’t let such a beautiful girl come to harm.”

“It will hurt me more if you don’t stay here than if you do,” Myka says.

“No, Myka.” Helena turns around. “The mistakes compound. At every point, I know the right thing to do, and yet I do the opposite.”

“It isn’t wrong. It can’t be.”

“Perhaps not. But it is still not right.” Helena’s sigh is exhausted, sad, and Myka thinks that that is it, that she will make her escape now, as she will have to, any moment, regardless, that she will let whoever is following her find her again, and that she and Myka will never, never have another opportunity even to stand this close to each other.

But every time Myka has hung her head in resignation that this has reached its end, she has been wrong. She is wrong now, the right kind of wrong, because Helena places her hands on Myka’s shoulders. She draws her forward with little enough force that Myka could pull away if she wanted
to... but why would she want to, as Helena places a soft kiss on her cheek then says, directly into her ear, “You are such a problem.”

“Am I?” Myka gasps, with Helena’s breath on her ear, on her neck.

“God, yes.” The breath is moving from neck to jawline and back to neck, because Myka cannot hold her head up anymore; she has to give Helena more space to breathe and kiss, to kiss and breathe words, “I need to solve you. From that first moment, I should have known... that moment, all the moments—”

“There aren’t many more moments,” Myka says, insofar as she can say anything. “We don’t have any time.”

Helena’s hands are on Myka’s shirt front, moving as if she might simply rip it open, but “No we don’t,” she says, and her hands calm, and she does not ruin or even work at the buttons. She looks into Myka’s eyes and smiles, a slow smile that is as close to happy as Myka has seen her. “But time has no effect on how much I want you.”

And the word “want” is a pulled trigger; their bodies press together, mouths instantly slick, sliding, and Myka becomes the personification of that want, echoed and amplified as Helena murmurs against and between her lips, “Want you and want you...”

“They are saying this,” Myka whispers back, when she pulls her lips from Helena’s so she, too, can find ear and jaw and neck.

“Because I do want you... I can’t have you but I want you... more every moment since the first...” Now it is Helena’s head tilting back, Helena’s neck exposed, long, beautiful, mean and alien, like a swan.

“Don’t say that to me,” Myka warns, but her lips and tongue are moving all the way down that neck, down her neck and further still.

“Oh, why not—” and this is an answering gasp, as Myka’s hands pull Helena’s blouse free from her skirt, press against the small of her back; there is sweat gathering there, wet and sultry, and she moves and pushes to find more sweet, sticky heat as this body turns to honey under her hands—

—the loud rapping on the door might as well be a physical grab of Myka’s arms, a wrenching of them from Helena’s body. “One moment,” Helena says; she sounds, to Myka, hopelessly strangled, unconvincing, but “sorry” comes from the other side of the door, and then heels click, loud at first, then softer.

Myka leans away from Helena. “That’s why not,” Myka tells her, “because I won’t be able to keep from—”

Helena raises her hands, covers her mouth, breathes through her fingers. “I won’t either. God, I won’t either.” She bends to Myka, wraps an arm around her neck, says, “Please be careful, Myka. Please.” She raises her mouth, and Myka meets it, and they rise again, but softer, sweeter, less like want, more like adoration.

Their lips are still close when Helena says, “Lock the door after me. I’ll want back in; don’t let me. And don’t follow too quickly.”

“I’ll try.”

“Promise me you’ll be careful,” Helena says, with an intensity that seems out of place, even for
this.

But Myka promises, and “I’ll try,” she says again as she makes the promise, and Helena kisses her one more time. In this kiss, Myka can feel yielding, even the weakness Helena so often speaks of, so much that if she were to say “don’t leave,” Helena wouldn’t; she would stay here in this overheated little space with Myka until the police came and took them both away.

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On Monday, Myka does not see Helena. She tries to tell herself that this often happens; there is no reason, just because they have briefly closed the space between them, that anything that happens today, or any other day, should be any departure from what is standard.

She does not see Helena on Tuesday.

Or Wednesday, though at every opportunity she lingers in the hall down which Helena must walk to reach her office.

Or Thursday, though she repeats her loitering.

By Friday, Myka is watching the hallways as if she were herself a surveillance camera. She reminds herself that it took practically all of the previous week for her to pass Helena a note, that this is what happens, that the Agency is large, that Helena has meetings and conferences and all manner of business to occupy her time.

But she also reminds herself of how Helena’s skin felt under her hands. She reminds herself, constantly, of Helena’s smile, and the echo of her voice saying want… and then, the intensity of her begging Myka to be careful. Most of her thoughts make Myka close her eyes and sigh, but be careful prickles uncomfortably at her.

The discomfort wins. She goes to Helena’s office; she has a transcript in her hand that has only to do with agriculture in the Ukraine, but it is something to hold and pretend is business.

The office is locked. Be careful prickles again. And again. The office has never been locked. The file cabinets within it, yes, but never the office.

Myka goes back to her desk. She stares at its surface; she counts her tapes, as Abigail told her to do. She counts her fingers. It doesn’t help. She stands and walks to Abigail’s desk. She waits until her friend reaches a stopping point and pulls her headphones off. Abigail looks up at Myka, and she must not like what she sees, for all she says is, “Tell me.”

Myka says, “I need help.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original tumblr tags: I did take a bit of liberty with the, um, location situation but the limitations are not that far off from reality, because do you know when a ladies' room was finally installed for women senators?, it was 1993, and there was no ladies' room directly off the floor of the House until, wait for it (and wait and wait), 2011, (there has always been a men's room of course), oh also, did I steal the phrase 'mean and
alien, like a swan' from somebody?, because it sounds kind of familiar, so I apologize and will edit if so
Chapter 14

If you know the (somewhat obscure) history I’m referencing in this part, you’ll know that I’m messing with some details. It’s because of reasons, I promise, and they are important reasons, because some things of some importance are happening, and you may not immediately see where it’s going, but oh it’s going, like a boulder downhill it’s going, and the person who has set it all in motion doesn’t yet have any idea what she’s done. But she’s going to start getting an inkling.

“Okay,” Abigail says. “Lunch is a little over an hour from now. Can you keep yourself together until then?”

Myka is not at all sure that she can, but she nods.

“Okay,” Abigail says again. “Or listen, we can tell Miss Calder you’re sick. Do we need to do that? And if we do, can you sell it?”

Myka is completely sure that she can’t sell anything today. “I can wait till lunch,” she says.

The supposed hour lasts at least half a day, Myka is certain. She goes through three one-hour tapes, the Russians sounding like high-pitched cartoon characters, just to keep her mind occupied with something other than be careful and the wrong kind of locked door and no sight of Helena in a week. She’s fine, Myka tells herself as her Russians boast about how well wheat grows in the motherland. Of course she’s fine. Maybe someone sent a memo about how offices need to be locked. Maybe she was just more worried about being careful because of what we were doing... but what if she was right to be worried... oh god. Oh god.

Myka and Abigail are barely out of the Agency’s lobby when Myka starts babbling, “It’s my fault, I think it’s my fault, I think they found out about what happened on Saturday and so it’s my fault.”

Abigail pulls her to a stop and waves a hand in front of her face. “Myka! First, remember, you are not going to tell me anything, okay, and certainly not about anything that might or might not have happened on Saturday! But second, think! If something’s your fault, then how is it you’re walking around with me, talking about it?”

“What if they don’t know it was me?” Now that she’s said her first words about it, more come pouring out. “What if they just found out that... this person went to a place to meet another person? What if all they really wanted, all they ever wanted, was to get this person, catch this person, and they didn’t even care who the other person was? That’s how I could be walking around with you, but this person isn’t walking around at all. Oh my god, Abigail. It’s my fault.”

“Let me just get a little more unclear on what we’re talking about. You’re saying that you can’t find this person?”

“Yes!”
“So you think this person is gone. Taken away gone.” They are still stopped on the sidewalk, right outside the fence gates, but now Abigail motions Myka to start walking again. “Well. Okay. It’s true that Miss Calder said we wouldn’t be playing as a trio this weekend, but she didn’t say why. And I haven’t seen this person around either. So okay, let’s start simple and say this person is gone. That doesn’t mean anybody found out about anything. People go places all the time.”

“But she would have told me!”

Abigail shakes her head. “You don’t know that. Unlike you, this person is pretty good about not telling people things.”

“But we’re close. Closer. I mean, on Saturday, if we’d had any time at all, I—”

“Myka, if you don’t shut up, neither of us will be walking around anymore. You have got to stop talking. Stop talking, and start thinking.”

“I can’t think—no, I can think, but only one thing, that they found out, and they sent her away, and she’s in trouble, and I can’t do anything about it!”

Abigail raises her hand; she looks like she would be perfectly happy to slap Myka. Myka wishes she would. Instead, she says, “I swear, Myka, I am pretty sure you just said something about your sister who somebody found out was cheating on a math test and so she got sent away to the principal’s office and is in trouble. Or your mother, because she got sent away to… what, traffic court? central booking? because they found out that she had too many parking tickets. Or my mother, or my roommate. Right?”

Myka shudders. “Right.”

“Okay. Listen. There’s an easy first step: I ask Miss Calder why we aren’t playing tomorrow. I pretend like I actually wanted to work on Mozart, and I say I hope we can get back on schedule. Okay?” She waits until Myka nods. “Okay. Calm down. Some days I honestly don’t understand how somebody as nervous as you ever got a job at the Agency.”

This makes Myka smile, just enough. “I’ve never been this nervous before in my life,” she says.

“Someday,” Abigail says, “I am going to sit this person down and explain that he turned my friend into a basket case, and ask him to explain himself.” She smiles encouragingly. “Right? I’m going to do that, because I’m going to have an opportunity to do that. Okay?”

“Oh kay,” Myka agrees. She isn’t sure she believes Abigail. She isn’t sure, though, that she has any choice but to do so, not if she wants to keep walking around.

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“Well?” Myka asks, later, after Abigail has spoken to Miss Calder.

“Well, she is a tough nut to crack,” Abigail says, and under other circumstances Myka would laugh at how disappointed in herself Abigail seems. “But I have to tell you, she was very vague about the idea of any future playing… she didn’t sound too upset, though, and don’t you figure she would, if this person had really been taken away?”

Myka considers how Miss Calder had responded to the idea that Helena might have done something… “She’d be angry, I think. Did she seem angry?”

“No. Not at all. I really think you’re in the clear, Myka.”
“That’s great,” Myka says. “Or it would be.”

“Would be?”

“This person is still gone, Abigail.”

“This is why you have to think. Just because Miss Calder won’t tell me anything, that doesn’t mean you give up. You need to think about who might have information. And when it comes to that, you have a very helpful resource at your disposal.”

“I do?” Other than Abigail, what resources could there possibly—

Abigail says, “A resource that I’m pretty sure you’re going to the movies with tonight.”

“Steve? What would Steve know?” Steve isn’t a resource. Steve is protection.

“You might be surprised. He doesn’t talk much, but that’s mostly because he’s busy listening. Paying attention. And Research is a funny place… all sorts of people and projects pass through there. Not quite as much as those gadget guys in Tech Services see, but I think Steve is a good next step. And you know you can trust him.”

Late that night, when Myka and Steve are in a booth in what has quickly become “their” diner—it is just down the street from the Georgetown Theatre, where they see “their” movies—Myka says, “Steve, I have to ask you something.”

Steve looks down at his plate. He is avoiding her face, shuffling his eyes away and around as he did when they met, in that way that renders him shy.


He looks up. He’s relieved. “Okay. Who?”

“Abigail would probably say I shouldn’t tell you.”

“Okay,” he says again. “What should you tell me?”

“I think… I think I’ll start by telling you a word I know: Artichoke.”

Steve grimaces and shakes his head. “Oh, Myka. That’s not a good word to know. You don’t want to be mixed up with Artichoke.”

“Can you tell me what it is?”

“A program that’s been going on for years.”

“It was called Bluebird, before,” she says, because she knows this must be true.

“Yeah. I knew that, and okay, so do you. So what else do you know?”

“It has something to do with hypnosis. For mind control?”

“Myka,” Steve says, and he sighs. “I like you. You know what I mean: just as a… person. You’re smart, you can talk about a lot of things. I don’t want anything to happen to you, but if you get yourself involved in—”
“It already happened. Something already happened to me. I can’t change it. Whatever happens from now on is just… fallout.”

Steve looks down at his plate, then looks back up at her. “This probably has something to do with you jumping up and running after somebody, doesn’t it.”

She’d forgotten that he saw that. But Abigail’s right: Steve pays attention. “It probably does. But I shouldn’t tell you anything about that, because you shouldn’t have to know.”

He reaches across the table and touches her hand, just a brief pat. He breathes out heavily and says, “Okay. I’ll tell you what I do know: you’re right that Artichoke’s about mind control, but it’s not just hypnosis. All kinds of techniques. Drugs, deprivations, you name it. It’s Morse Allen’s project, and it used to be in Security—because they thought the Russians had these kinds of programs, and it was a security issue, to counter them—but they moved it to Sci Intel because he was so excited about it, because we were going to use it and beat the Russians at their own game. Because it was going to be the next big thing. But I don’t think it is.”

“Why not?”

“I think there’s an op going on right now,” he says, very quietly.

“Okay…”

“See,” Steve says, “Professor Thompson was around a lot last week.”

Myka says, “I don’t know what that means. Who’s Professor Thompson?”

“He’s a psychology professor. He consults. He’s only around when they’re gearing up for an op, and he was around. In Research, we’ve done some drug testing for him, so he comes by.”

“When he’s around.”

“Yeah.”

But this leaves Myka confused. “So there’s an op. So why does that mean Artichoke isn’t the next big thing?”

“Because it isn’t working. Whatever they’re trying to do, it isn’t working.”

“The… mind control?”

Steve shrugs, but it’s too casual. “I guess. Or Thompson’s drugs, or torture, or all of it combined. What I heard was that wherever it’s happening—they can’t do any of this on American soil of course—this was their last chance, and Allen’s angry, and Thompson’s angry, and the project’s dying. Or maybe it was already dead before they went. Thompson’s usually pretty upbeat, but he wasn’t last week.”

“So if the project’s dying…” She doesn’t want to say it.

Steve doesn’t want to say it either. “I don’t know what that means for… anybody you were chasing down the hall. I really don’t.”

Myka looks down at the grilled cheese sandwich she’d ordered. It’s cold now, cold and glistening uncomfortably at her. She pushes it away.

Steve apologizes. He apologizes for not knowing more, he apologizes for telling Myka just enough
to upset her more. He would keep apologizing, for anything and everything, but Myka tells him it’s all right, everything is all right, she just wanted information and he gave that to her and he shouldn’t have to say any kind of sorry for telling her what she asked, wanted, needed to know.

And so now she has information. She goes home and cleans her kitchenette and pretends she is not imagining all the ways, from benignly small to hugely terrifying, in which Helena could be involved with drugs and deprivations and things that can’t be done on American soil. And angry men whose project is dying. And then there is the matter of British interest in that project. If there is no project anymore, how can there be British interest in it? And if there is no British interest… there is nothing for Helena to signify.

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All weekend, she had tried and failed to stop thinking. Monday morning, she is still thinking, thinking about what Abigail said about resources, resources and who might have information. Myka needs at least—at the very least—confirmation that Steve is right, that the project is dead. A blank space impends after that confirmation, but the space is not there, and it is not blank, until she knows for sure.

Myka can think of one other person who would be likely to have information about Helena. Nausea overcomes her at the thought, but she pushes it down. She has to use the available resources.

She makes a plan, and when her next break comes, she sets off to find Nate.

Security is much quieter than most of the other areas. Myka doesn’t come here very often; her Russians generally don’t say things that would prompt the higher-ups to take defensive action, and this is where those actions, and all investigations of security risks, happen. The last time she was here was for her session in the box, all those months ago.

Myka is not a fool: she understands why Helena chose Nate, who could of course explain, because he would know, that Helena is clearly not herself a true security risk. Just as long as she was never caught with Myka, Nate’s story about her would be the only one. Myka has in the past thought herself into a state very close to this same point of physical illness as she considered the kind of story Nate might tell.

She feels ever closer to that illness as she walks the corridors that will take her near Nate’s office. She is clutching one of her agriculture transcripts again, and she is prepared, if anyone asks, to say with bewilderment that she isn’t sure why it has been requested, something about deep background, possibly for an op? She will put into her voice the requisite awe and wonder at the idea of someone from Security needing something from her.

Looking occupied until her intended target comes walking toward her down a hall is becoming second nature to Myka. She is standing as if briefly paused, leafing through the papers she holds—she has been standing here for at least five minutes—when she at last sees Nate. She walks purposefully in his direction, ready to collide if necessary—but he stops and puts a hand on her arm, a hand that grips just strongly enough that Myka feels an even tighter flutter of nerves.

“Are you in Security?” he asks, and it is as if he knows already that she is there for all the wrong reasons. As if Myka is somehow saying “Helena” under her breath, here and everywhere she goes. “No, I just needed to—”

“What’s your name? What’s your area?” Suspicious; he’s suspicious. He’s seeing some ghost of Helena in Myka’s face, or hearing her in Myka’s voice, and this is Security, so it would instantly be
the box. Instantly, the box, and Myka cannot go in the box, not now, not until she knows for sure about Helena, because she is not sleeping and she is not eating and she cannot face the box in this state.

She says, “Myka Bering. I’m in Translation. I work for Miss Calder.” Her heart’s thumping faster and faster, but that answer should be all right; obviously he knows Miss Calder. He’s been to her house. With Helena. Myka is choking. She is trying not to look at his hand on her arm, trying not to feel it, trying not to let her mind go anywhere near the idea of that hand and how it has touched Helena.

“I see,” he says.

Before he can ask any more questions, Myka hurries to start her script, stumbling a bit as she begins. “Forgive me, forgive me if I’m mistaken, but haven’t I seen you at the symphony? With Miss Calder’s friend, Miss Wells?”

He shrugs. “I’m sure you have. Helena loves the symphony. I can take it or leave it, but she’s some kind of musician.”

“Is she,” Myka says. Her jaw clenches. Some kind of musician. Several weeks ago, Myka bought a recording of Bach’s partitas for solo violin. The grooves on the Allemande from the second partita are now, already, visibly worn down, from her cheap needle crackling its way, over and over, through the notes. “How lovely. Aren’t they playing next Wednesday? With a guest conductor, I think. Will you be going?”

“No,” he says. “Helena’s… away. She’s gone.”

“Oh. Gone where?” Gone where, gone for now, gone forever, if he would just say something…

But he doesn’t. He shakes his thick, handsome head. “Can’t say. I’m sure you understand.”

All Myka understands is that she is going to pound her fists against him if she has to stand here much longer. “Of course,” she says, and then, so she can get away, “Sorry to have bothered you.”

“No bother. Miss Bering, Myka… you said you translate.” At Myka’s nod, he says, “What’s your language?”

“Russian.”

“Hm,” he says. He looks at Myka more closely. “I didn’t know we had any women. What’s your clearance?”

“Top secret.”

“And you translate, so you’ve got COMINT… can you think of any reason you couldn’t get sensitive compartmented clearance for a particular project?”

Just one… some kind of musician Myka dreams about every night… but she’s gone. “No,” Myka says.

“You may have just helped me out a lot, Myka. I need to get some things squared away, but if I do… you could be hearing from me. And keep your clearance in mind, all right? Don’t go selling any secrets over the next few weeks.” He laughs.

Myka gives the best facsimile of a laugh that she can manage, then ducks her head and escapes,
berating herself for stupidity. Not that she really could have done anything differently, in the moment… other than not talk to him to begin with, which would have been the better course of action, since the idea that she might have to talk to him again, even work with him? She doesn’t see how she can do that. She doesn’t see how she could ever, ever do that.

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She hates days. She hates the way they keep happening, the way she has to get out of bed in the morning, do these things, get back in bed at night. She hates nights, how many hours they take to pass. She hates how she keeps counting days, nights, hours, hates how long it’s been (twelve days, thirteen, fourteen), hates how her count will keep growing. Steve tells her, “I knew somebody once, somebody I… well, anyway, eventually, you calm down. You don’t get over it, but you calm down. I wish I could tell you that I forgot.” He sighs. “Him. I wish I could tell you that I forgot him.”

That Steve trusts her this much makes her want to cry. But she cries all the time when no one is watching; she can’t cry when she’s sitting with Steve in a diner.

She can’t cry when she’s sitting on the Mall with Abigail, either, though she comes very close sometimes, even closer than with Steve.

On the nineteenth day, Abigail says, “You should come to New York with me, one of these weekends, and visit the family. My mother remembers you from that time they came down here. She always tells me you’re too skinny; she wants to feed you jiāozi and yuè bǐng. She likes you.”

“She wouldn’t like me if she knew.” This is where the tears threaten: because Myka likes Abigail’s mother. She knows that Abigail, despite her complaints, loves, and even likes, her mother too. And the idea that that tiny, tyrannical Chinese woman would turn her back…

Abigail sighs. “Oh, Myka, my mother wouldn’t like me if she knew anything about what I’m really about. We’re all just—I mean, we’re who we are, and most people don’t get that. My mother. The Security Office. You know.”

“I do know,” Myka says. “But I never expected to know it this well.”

Myka and Abigail return from lunch to a wild afternoon: it is as if an open house has been declared, and Miss Calder looks like the harried hostess she would be at such an event, as there seem to be a hundred extra people in the translation room, asking about, and speaking, a hundred different languages. Myka can barely hear her Russians over and amidst the babble, even through her headphones, and even though she is concentrating as hard as she can: pshenitsa, podsolnechnik, yachmen’, sakharnaya svekla. All crops, all growing beautifully, producing record harvests. Vran’ye, Myka thinks at them in response. Lies.

Something hits her shoulder from behind, so hard that she grips her tape machine to steady herself; the fingers of her right hand catch in the tape, folding it, garbling the sound. She rips her headset off and turns around indignantly. Abigail is standing there, but why would Abigail have punched her in the shoulder? “What in the world,” Myka starts.

Abigail says, “Myka keep your cool.”

“Keep my cool? You just made me ruin my tape! How am I supposed to—”

“Turn around but I swear to god you better keep your cool.” Abigail puts her hand firmly on Myka’s shoulder, as if to hold her down.
Myka turns around.

“Oh god,” Myka says. “Oh god. Is she real? Abigail, is she real?”

But now their eyes are meeting, and she must be real, because Myka has tried constantly to remember those eyes, to picture how they fill with fear and worry and tenderness and heat, and she could never get them quite right, except when she was asleep, but she is not asleep now, or if she is she will refuse to wake up.

Myka is standing, though she doesn’t know how or when she shed Abigail’s hand to make that happen, and she must have moved closer to the front of the room, though she doesn’t know how or when she pushed her way past the countless people who would have been in her way, but she must have done these things, because she is hearing Miss Calder say, “Helena, what are you doing here? I thought it was over!”

Helena is looking at Myka as she answers, “It isn’t over. I’ll tell you everything when I get a chance, but… it isn’t over.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original tumblr tags: I know that I am putting Myka absolutely through it, but listen, if you don't go through it, you can't get to the other side, if there is in fact another side, but it isn't over, it might be just starting, and what I will tell you as a teaser for next time, is that Abigail is indeed a genius
Welcome to part 15! In which Abigail is a genius, Myka is dumbfounded, and Helena is… well, she’s pretty much Helena. That is basically the way of the world. Also contained herein: a discourse on ladies’ hats, a brief contemplation of diner fare, and some hot lesbian handholding. Which I must say is more than certain people were allowed to do on a certain TV show, so I am already miles ahead on that score, despite the fact that this takes place in 1952.

Myka doesn’t get a chance to say anything before Abigail is hauling her back to her desk, muttering, “What did I say to you? I said keep your cool. And what did you do? You took off toward her like a rocket… that is not keeping your cool, Myka. That is the opposite of keeping your cool. You’re going to get yourself fired, and then where will we all be?” She is muttering, Myka knows, so that Myka will not say anything out loud, anything stupid, anything that will be overheard. Abigail shoves her down into her chair. “And you’re not allowed to skulk around the hall this afternoon, either, because I just know how that’ll end up. I will tie you to this chair if I have to, do you hear me?”

At home at her apartment, in bed that night, Myka plays a loop of images in her head. She wishes Abigail had tied her to that chair and had refused to untie her, because at the end of the workday she could not help herself: as she was leaving, she looked down the hall of Helena’s office. The light was on, the door was open, and Myka thought that it was the end of the day, and so who would see? who would know? Just this once, just because Helena came back today, surely there could be some sort of providence, some dispensation, giving Myka just one minute to hear Helena say one word, two words, maybe just three words, about why it isn’t over.

Nate had walked out of the office. He was smiling. He was pulling Helena by the hand after him, and she was smiling too.

Myka is playing this loop, in front of her eyes when they are open, behind her lids when they are closed. It is a horror movie.

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Friday morning, Myka finds on her desk a note addressed to Les Paul. “Capitol again same plan, please” it says.

Myka is brought up short by her reaction to those words: a month ago, she would have been thrilled, anxious yet thrilled, but now… now, she is sighing with resignation that this is how it has to be, that nothing will ever change, that they will be constrained to meet in tiny wretched spaces forever. Yes, she decides, all right, she will meet Helena, and she will say that it is over, that she cannot do this anymore. Steve was right: she will never forget, but eventually she will calm down. And she needs to calm down, because Abigail is right, too: Myka is going to get herself fired. And while Helena might be worth it, worth paying any price for in some perfect version of the world, the version of the world they are living in is not perfect. Myka has to keep her job. She’s been willfully deaf to everyone speaking that truth, and it’s time to start listening again.
She comes back to her desk after lunch feeling slightly overheated, like she might have soaked up a bit too much sun on the Mall. She had been alone—Abigail said she had to run an errand, so Myka found a bench and tried not to think about what tomorrow would bring. She met with reasonable success; the sun was unobscured, the humidity high, and it was surprisingly easy to sit still, eyes shut, and consider nothing but the temperature and the humming sounds that might have been anything from insects to the conversations of tourists and office workers flowing past. Anything at all, as far as Myka was concerned.

A new note is waiting for Les Paul.

“Cancel Capitol—much better idea. You’ll see.”

An already overheated Les Paul is not at all pleased with the frisson of warm excitement this sends down and up her spine.

What is a much better idea? she spends the afternoon asking herself. Why, she asks herself also, if she is going to break it off, whatever “it” even is, why is she unable to concentrate on anything but what that much better idea might be?

Miss Calder beckons to her as the day ends, as the rest of the translators are tidying their desks.

“Did I do something wrong?” Myka asks.

“Hm,” Miss Calder says. “Are you free tomorrow evening?”

And Myka is free, because tonight is movie Friday with Steve, so every other evening, the evenings that are not movie Friday with Steve, she is free. Miss Calder tells Myka, quite sternly, to come to her house at five. “And don’t be late,” she warns. Myka says she won’t, but Miss Calder says, “I mean it. Don’t be a minute late.”

“Is this the better idea?” Myka asks, because she is remembering January, and rolled-up white sleeves, and holding a violin together, and that isn’t enough anymore, not nearly enough, but if she could sit and listen to them play again… well, it would not be enough, but it would be better than listening every moment for the police.

Miss Calder looks startled. “Better than what?”

So Myka shakes her head. “Nothing. I’ll be there, I promise.”

At the diner after the 7:00 showing of *The Big Sky*, Myka is staring at a pile of scrambled eggs. The food here always seems artificially bright: the yellow of the eggs is assaultive, so she pushes that plate to the side and pulls the smaller toast plate to rest in front of her. “Steve,” she says. “If you could tell me—if you don’t want to, that’s fine, and we’ll talk about Kirk Douglas instead, but if you could tell me—because I just want to know. What would you do if you saw him again?”

He doesn’t ask who. He eats three French fries very carefully, almost delicately, two bites each, dipping them neatly in ketchup each time. “Do you want me to be honest?”

Myka nods.

“I would slug him as hard as I could. And then I”—he looks around, lowers his voice—“well, I wouldn’t slug him.”

“I think I understand that,” Myka says. “As a feeling, I mean.”
He says, “It’s a weakness. The not slugging part.”

“I’m so tired of that word. It’s a weakness; it makes you weak.” She reaches over and takes one of his French fries; she dips it into the butter on her toast and takes an experimental bite.

“Why did you do that?” he asks.

“Just to try it. I don’t feel like eating anything normal. Why is it a weakness?”

“Because we’re supposed to resist. We’re supposed to be stronger than… it. Whatever it is that makes us this way.”

“If I loved you and you loved me, and we got married like we’re supposed to, how would that show we’re strong?”

He grins and pulls her plate of eggs over to his side of the table. “Well, it’d be a struggle, anyway.”

“Thanks a lot.” She shoves her toast in his direction. “You’d get to eat most of the food, at least. Let’s talk about Kirk Douglas now.”

Steve sighs. “Weakness,” he says, but it’s to make Myka laugh. She does.

****

At slightly after five on Saturday, Myka is standing in Miss Calder’s foyer. Miss Calder is looking quite pointedly at her, but she has not said anything since “hello, Myka” and “thank you for being on time.”

Miss Calder’s regard makes Myka feel that she is on a stage, that her performance should have already begun. She tries, “I don’t know what’s going on. Am I supposed to know?”

“No,” Miss Calder says. She is still looking at Myka. It is an echo of the reassessing gaze that Myka’s teachers used to level at her when they realized she was smart. It also carries a trace of the judgmental shift that boys’ eyes used to undergo when they realized Myka was smart.

“Are you being mysterious?” Myka asks. She doesn’t like the judgment. She wishes Miss Calder would laugh. Or smile. Or just look somewhere else.

She does smile. “Maybe a little mysterious,” she admits. “And I’m sorry for that, but I’m the one who thought it would be best if we kept you in the dark, to a certain extent.”

“In the dark about what?” Myka asks.

A strong yet strange rapping comes at the door, and it takes Myka a moment to realize: it’s the Fibonacci series again. The knocks get to five before Miss Calder sighs. “Well,” she says, as the succession of eight begins; she sounds uncomfortable. “About this.”

She pulls the door open, and Myka is not surprised, but she is still staggered enough for her vision to blur, as she watches Helena march through. An enormous, wide-brimmed, dark blue straw hat covers all of her hair; sunglasses hide her eyes; and she is holding her violin case. She drops the case, strips off the glasses, and begins to unpin the hat, complaining and explaining all the while: “This hat is atrocious; why can one not find a decent hat in the nation’s capital? Vanessa, I apologize profusely for it, but you should take it up with Mr. Woodward and Mr. Lothrop, if they have not already passed on to the next life, although they have most likely died of shame in any case from having such hideousness on display in their famed department store.”
Through the looking glass? Down the rabbit hole? That’s the best Myka can come up with as Helena continues to White-Rabbit, or perhaps Mad-Hatter, her way through a monologue about millinery. She at last wrestles the thing from her head and tosses it atop the violin case; her gloves follow. Helena takes a breath, then turns toward the door, where Miss Calder is still standing. “I can’t look,” she says. “Is it yes?”

Miss Calder rolls her eyes. “You are so melodramatic. Turn around if you’re that interested.”

Helena turns. She turns, and she looks at Myka, and her mouth starts to bow into what might have begun as a smirk but is rapidly curving and widening and threatening to damage her face with its dazzle. Myka reaches up to touch her own face—her cheeks are very warm—and realizes that she is presenting an answering smile that must be every bit as wide. Can they be smiling directly at each other like this, with Miss Calder standing right there, without her warning that they shouldn’t be in the same room and shouldn’t talk to each other and certainly shouldn’t smile at each other like this? Because all of these things are true.

“I don’t understand,” Myka says, her hands still at her face. “What in the world is happening?”

Miss Calder says, “I don’t think I should be the one to tell you. Why don’t we wait until Abigail gets here? She can explain everything. I’ll just…” She looks from Helena to Myka, still with that appraisal, that evaluation. Myka almost expects her to pull out some kind of questionnaire. “I’ll be in the kitchen. For a few minutes.”

Helena is still smiling, and Myka thinks she herself must be too, as she lets herself look at Helena, lets her eyes travel where they will. Helena is dressed as she was for the Capitol: short-sleeved blouse of white, skirt of some light camel-colored material; it swings more than her customary pencil skirts, and Myka feels a jolt as she realizes that she is wondering, that she is imagining what is under the skirt. “… and then I wouldn’t slug him,” Myka hears Steve saying, and Myka had said she understood, yet now her understanding has a shape, has a texture.

But so does her understanding of “I would slug him as hard as I could.”

She can’t slug Helena; that’s ridiculous. But she can ask, “What is happening?”

“I told you there was a much better idea,” Helena says. But she must be able to hear something amiss in Myka’s voice, for she does not move.

“That isn’t what I mean,” Myka says. “I mean what is happening? Why are you even here? Your project was supposed to be dead!”

Helena nods. “It was. It came back to life.”

“I don’t understand. And I am so tired of not understanding! You left and you knew you weren’t coming back and you didn’t say a single word!”

“But I am back.”

“How does that fix anything?”

“It doesn’t. But Myka, please, could we set that aside for just a moment?” She is moving toward Myka now; she is three steps away, now two, now one. She raises her left hand, runs its calloused fingers down Myka’s bare arm, slides her hand down to take Myka’s hand. “Can’t we please just…” She leans to Myka, offers the merest suggestion of a kiss against her cheek, lingers a moment against her face. She leans back but is still very close. And she is still holding Myka’s hand.
“I still don’t understand,” Myka says, and it is even more true now than it was seconds ago, before that kiss made her close her eyes.

Helena lifts Myka’s hand, turns it over, opens it; she kisses the palm. She talks to the palm of Myka’s hand. “That’s all there is to know, for now: the project was dead; now it isn’t. I was gone; now I’m not. The rest… you’ll hear it all. You will, but does it have to be tonight?” She looks up at Myka’s face. “Because perhaps, just tonight?” she asks.

“Just tonight what?” Myka asks. Her voice is lower than she intends, lower than she has heard herself speak before.

“This,” Helena says, as she leans closer again, her lips parted, and Myka is more than ready to meet those lips, because yes, just tonight this…

The knock on the door is like but unlike the one of a month ago. Sounds such as that, sounds that stop incidents, and almost-incidents, like this… even with so little practice, Myka knows immediately to take her hands away and move her body away. By the time Miss Calder returns from the kitchen, there is a yard of distance between Myka and Helena. Myka is looking at Helena’s mouth and wondering how she could have let it get so close to hers.

“That’ll be Abigail,” Miss Calder says, and “Come in!” she calls.

Abigail bursts in, smiling even more widely, Myka thinks, than Helena had, and practically yelling, “Hello, my fellow agents!”

Helena smiles again too, matching Abigail. She says, “I would be upset with you for interrupting, but I cannot be upset with you. Now or, I think, ever.”

And now they are all here, these musicians—whatever else they are—and Myka. They could be hers, this trio. For those brief, brief days, they had seemed to be hers. “You’re all really here?” she asks. “And I am too? So is this, is tonight, is it really going to be… like it used to be?”

Helena closes the yard of distance that separates the two of them. She says, “Well. In one sense, like that. In another sense, a bit different.”

“A bit different in what sense?” Myka feels Helena take her hand again. Her fingers tighten, relax, tighten again. They are standing together holding hands, as if that is something they do. As if it is something simple that they simply do. It is seven months later, and she is standing here, and everything is different, and Helena is holding on to her hand.

Abigail says, “A bit different in the sense of, you and Miss Wells, you get to have, and I mean have to yourselves, tonight, and most of tomorrow.”

Those are probably words, but Myka can’t believe they say what she thought she heard. “We what? We have what?”

And Abigail sounds enormously pleased with herself as she says, with transparently false modesty, “It’s not that complicated, as ops go. But I’m pretty sure we can pull it off, so it’s good practice. We worked it out.”

Miss Calder and Helena both say, “You worked it out.”

Abigail tilts her head back and forth, grinning. “Well, that’s true. I did.” She heads for the piano, ostentatiously stepping around the hand-holding couple in the middle of the room.
“But…” Myka looks among the three of them, “What? Here?”

“Yes,” Miss Calder sighs. “Here. Abigail will of course go home in a while, and… yes, I agreed to this crazy plan, so I’ll leave too.”

It doesn’t make any sense at all. “But… they’ll know Helena’s still here. They’ll know I’m still here. How can this even—”

Abigail plays a triumphant little melody on the piano. “No, no,” she says as she plays, “that’s the beauty of the timing. This is what I worked out. You got here first; nobody’s watching you. Then Miss Wells got here—they’re watching her.” The music turns somber. “Then I got here”—jaunty again—“so they know I’m here too. So for all anybody watching knows, Miss Wells and I are the only people who showed up tonight, and we are just piano-trioing our hearts out with Miss Calder.” Miss Calder gets a slightly less chirpy series of notes. “Which we’re going to do, by the way, just for the verisimilitude, and I had to agree to Mozart again,” and now she gives a furious run of notes, “so you better be appreciative, Myka. So anyway, after that, after loud and energetic music, we leave in reverse order: I go first—okay, I’m accounted for.” She plays the tune she played for herself before. “Then ‘Miss Wells’—or somebody wearing a hat and holding a violin case, anyway—leaves.” Myka gets it, because Abigail is playing the theme she used for Miss Calder. “Guess who tails the person wearing a hat and holding a violin case?”

“Oh,” is all Myka can manage.


“I can’t believe this,” Myka says.

Helena has moved closer still. “If it’s any consolation, I couldn’t either.” She tightens her hold on Myka’s hand again, and Myka wants to ask “what in the world are you doing,” because she can see Miss Calder looking at them, looking at their hands. She wants to tell Helena “please stop”—because it’s Miss Calder’s house, and Miss Calder could still take it away from them if she is too uncomfortable—but she also wants to tell Helena “closer, come even closer,” because the very idea is a dream, the logic of which makes no sense at all, so Helena should come closer.

Abigail says smoothly, “We should’ve been doing this all along, Myka, I mean even just so you could come listen to us, but of course Miss Calder just got converted to the cause.”

This does what it was clearly meant to: Miss Calder looks at Abigail instead of at Myka and Helena. “I am not converted to anything, thank you,” she says.

Abigail slumps down nearly enough to start sliding off the piano bench. “Well, it wouldn’t even be a big deal if you were. This is obviously not nearly as significant as if you suddenly decided to play that bebop cello I keep wishing for.”

“That will never happen,” Miss Calder declares.

Abigail says, as she sits back up, “It’s true that that’s about as likely as my mother deciding to marry me off to Charlie Parker.”

Helena turns her head toward the piano. “Do you want to marry Charlie Parker?” Helena asks this as if she’s really asking. As if she might somehow be able to make it happen, if Abigail truly had her heart set on it.

Abigail shrugs. “Not really; I think he’s a little old for me. I’m just saying it isn’t likely my mother
would set it up.”

“But where are you going?” Myka asks Miss Calder.

“I’m going to spend a luxurious night at Helena’s hotel. Any details beyond that are not your business.” She actually smiles a little at that.

“I don’t understand,” Myka says.

“Don’t say that!” Abigail tells her. “Yes you do. Or you’d better. I just read you into my op!” She is back to the jaunty melody again.

“Abigail,” Miss Calder says, with the air of a teacher who might be preparing to take away the crayons, “you may be just a bit too keyed up about this.”

Myka surprises herself completely by bursting into tears.

Miss Calder says, “And you may be too. Helena, I want to talk to you. Kitchen. Right now.” She stalks out of the room.

Helena kisses Myka’s cheek again, with that same extra second of contact.

When Helena is gone too, Abigail says to Myka, “But it’s a good idea, right?”

The tears might easily have come out as laughter instead, Myka is that thrown. “As an idea, it’s brilliant,” she says. “I’m just very very surprised.”

“But this is what you want, right?” Abigail asks. “It is, isn’t it? You and, you know, this person.”

Myka wants nothing more than this. She also understands, even if she doesn’t truly believe, that it is better to want nothing to do with this, because… “But what about the box.”

“Me, I’m golden in the box. All I’m personally doing tonight is playing some really rough Mozart. I’ll probably be too tired even to remember who was here.”

But as much as Myka wants Abigail to be safe—and she is beginning to think that Abigail would be safe even if she flew to Moscow, and then to Peking, and met with Stalin and Chairman Mao and made them paper hats out of mimeographed copies of Top Secret reports—she had begun to think that the box no longer posed any particular danger to her anymore either, with Helena gone, with Helena about to become nothing but a memory. That’s all changed. And if it changes more tonight… “What about me in the box?”

Abigail says, very seriously, “I think you should talk to Miss Calder about that.”

Their conversation had masked what was being said in the kitchen, but now they hear Miss Calder raise her voice: “You assured me!”

“She’s surprised!” Helena shouts back. “Who wouldn’t be? Months of nothing but… nothing at all, and then I disappear, and now this? Wouldn’t you be surprised?”

“This is not about me! Everything you’ve done to that girl is you in a nutshell!” Miss Calder barks. “And keep your voice down!”

Abigail says, “It’s kind of nice that they’re yelling about you, don’t you think? It means they care.” She raises her own voice. “I’m playing ‘Lullaby of Birdland’ right now if some people don’t throw some Mozart at me!”
“When did you start running the world?” Myka asks.

“Honestly? I’m pretty sure it was yesterday at lunch. People started saying ‘okay, Abigail’ and ‘yes, I can do that, Abigail.’ And Miss Wells said ‘Abigail, you’re brilliant.’ That was nice.”

Helena frowns as she enters the room. “Abigail, don’t you think you should call me Helena?”

“Oh, I already call you plenty of other things,” Abigail assures her.

Myka wants to giggle at the slightly alarmed look this brings to Helena’s face, the calculating “hm” she utters, and the face-saving way she says, “In any case, the Birdland threat was well played; the horror on Vanessa’s face was delightful to behold.”

Miss Calder says, “Horror is just about the only thing that’s been on my face lately. This Mozart had better help matters.”

“No guarantees,” Abigail tells her. “I complained about Brahms, didn’t I, back in the distant past… I was pretty young and naïve then.”

While Miss Calder and Helena establish themselves with their instruments, Myka is settling into her customary place on the sofa—that she should feel it as customary is surprising but wonderful—and she can’t keep from contrasting now and then. “God, I was too,” she says.

“You are still young and naïve,” Abigail says, and plays a little snippet of something.

“Thanks,” Myka tells her.

“Back me up here, Miss Wells.”

Helena shakes her head. “I don’t think you need any backup at all. I think you do just fine on your own. And don’t think I didn’t catch that that last little flourish was indeed from ‘Lullaby of Birdland.’” She plays the same notes on her violin.

And Myka would be jealous, but they begin playing, and as they do, Helena doesn’t even pretend; she isn’t hiding anything. She is looking directly at Myka, and everything in her gaze is asking Myka to look directly back at her. She is smiling at Myka and laughing at Abigail and Miss Calder and occasionally swearing at her violin, and for a while Myka smiles and laughs too, but what she is watching is too beautiful, what she is hearing is too intricate, too stirring. She begins crying again, as invisibly as she can, very quietly, trying to hold herself to moistened eyes, so she will not disturb what she is, so very unexpectedly, being allowed to rewitness.

Helena sees. She says, “Myka, come stand by me. Turn my music.”

Abigail turns around briefly, says, “You don’t need her to… oh. Never mind.”

Miss Calder gives the two of them one glance, just one, before she looks back down at her cello.

Myka leans down to set her own lips on Helena’s cheek. The kiss is brief, and Myka wishes it could convey everything: thanks and anger and frustration and adoration and wonder. She wants to keep her skin next to Helena’s forever, but she moves her head away and stands up again; Helena looks up at her. Now she is the one with glistening eyes.

TBC
original tumblr tags: don't worry, it will get better, but I would like to reiterate that Abigail is a genius, if only because she got everybody on board, and while that was clearly not as difficult as it would have been before, still she is a fast talker who should be running the world
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

This is the beginning of what is basically a two-part part. It is mostly, or rather should be, about two voices and bodies, and it’s just too much for one installment—particularly since I had to get to the just-them part in the first place.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

During dinner, Helena holds Myka’s hand under the table and smiles at her above it, all the while calmly talking about Mozart with Abigail and Miss Calder. Myka is past the point of being able to judge her own level of comfort or discomfort; she worries that she will also pass the point of understanding what they are saying about the music. They had been working on the third movement from something, something in C major. For some reason, Abigail keeps admonishing Myka to find this significant: “I thought it would be really sweet, you know? C major! Because it’s so sweet! Also, did anyone notice how hard I had to work?”

“I noticed that your fingers kept falling all over themselves,” Miss Calder says. “Despite the fact that it’s less than five minutes long. You should be glad I didn’t make you play the first movement.”

“I thought she did quite well,” Helena says.

“You would say that if she had played ‘Mary Had a Little Lamb’ and got every note wrong,” Miss Calder accuses, but she is smiling.

“It is true that she is one of my favorite people in the world at present. But I’m sure she would get at least one note right, purely by chance.”

“I am lucky that way,” Abigail says. “And you have to admit, my articulation was not that bad, particularly at the beginning.”

Miss Calder says, “Oh, you mean the brief moments when you were actually paying attention? It’s true that I’ve heard worse, but…” and proceeds to rattle off terminology that Myka can’t begin to follow.

After they have finished eating, Myka figures she will leave them to it for a bit. She stands up and says “let me clear the table” and begins to collect plates; she is not at all surprised, however, when Helena, who had given her a wounded look when she extricated her hand, leaps to her feet too, with an “I’ll help you,” and follows her into the kitchen.

Myka puts plates in the sink. She can feel Helena breathing behind her, breathing and radiating heat. She feels that breath and that heat against her back; she feels lips press her neck, just below her right ear. “Thank you for turning my music,” Helena says.

“I didn’t touch it,” Myka says to the dishes in front of her. “You didn’t need me.”

Helena moves to the other ear. “Mm. Didn’t I?”

“I am walking into the kitchen!” Abigail announces as she does so.
Myka is clinging to the edge of the sink. “I’m weak,” Helena had said, and Steve talked about weakness too, but Myka doesn’t feel that kind of failing. She feels actual, bodily weakness in her limbs; she has lost count of the number of times, since she met Helena Wells, that she has doubted her physical ability to hold her own body upright.

“Abigail,” Helena says, still speaking into Myka’s neck, “you remain among my favorites. But your status is dropping… dropping…”

Abigail says, “Irrelevant, because I’m going home, because that Mozart really did take it out of me.”

“Hm. You don’t actually want to torture Vanessa with Birdland or the like? I’m disappointed.”

“Miss Calder’s gone upstairs to get changed. Besides, you’re not disappointed at all. Myka, you back me up this time.”

“I have to agree with Helena on this.” Myka turns around a bit, and this allows Helena to rest her chin on Myka’s shoulder. “I don’t think you need any backup.”

“Oh, you’d agree with her on anything. ‘The earth is flat, Myka.’ ‘Oh, I agree.’ ‘Stalin’s actually a very nice fellow, Myka.’ ‘Oh, I agree.’” She laughs. “So sentimental.”

“I would not agree that Stalin is a nice fellow,” Myka protests.

“The earth is flat, Myka,” Helena says.

“Well, if you say so,” Myka tells her, and Helena kisses her behind her ear again.

“This isn’t real,” Myka thinks.

“Sentimental,” Abigail repeats, shaking her head.

Helena says, “I’ll take over the washing up. You two say your farewells.”

Once Abigail has collected her purse, her gloves, and a sheaf of sheet music—“Miss Calder was actually a little bit right; I need to work on the end, and I bet I can get most of that first movement too if I sneak some time on the church’s piano tomorrow afternoon”—she asks Myka, “It’s okay, right? How everything’s set up?”

Myka tells her, “I really don’t even know what to say. You are a mastermind.”

Abigail raises her eyebrows in comical affront. “Well, I don’t work for the CIA just so I can sit around and play tiddlywinks, Myka.”

Myka hugs her.

“Right, okay, knock it off. I don’t need this person getting jealous.” Abigail is not that much shorter than Myka is—four inches, maybe, and most women are shorter still—but they rarely stand this close together. So when Abigail looks up at Myka with seriousness, it seems a new perspective for them both. “You know, you look… I don’t know. I want to look like that someday. It’s practically Mahler.” Now she chuckles and raises her voice. “See you, this person!”

Helena raises her own voice from the kitchen, saying, “I don’t know what that means!”

“Then you’re not very smart!” Abigail shouts back. “This CIA/MI6 thing probably won’t work out, so I’d stick to the violin if I were you!”
Helena walks to them, drying her hands on a kitchen towel. “In all honesty, some days I wish I could. But alas, I think there may be fewer opportunities for women in music than for us in this business.”

“Lower stakes, though,” Abigail says.

Helena laughs. “Not to hear conductors tell it.”

Abigail laughs too. “Or Miss Calder, really.”

“Ahem,” Myka hears, and she turns to see Miss Calder approaching. “What about me?” She is now wearing a camel swing skirt and a white shirt, and she is carrying Helena’s violin case.

Helena says, “Abigail was just remarking on how important music is to you.”

“Oh, I’m sure she was.” Miss Calder gives Abigail a skeptical look.

“I think I better go,” Abigail says. “I’m going to surprise you next time, though, Miss Calder.”

“Abigail,” Miss Calder sighs, “I don’t see how you could ever come up with anything more surprising than this evening. And please don’t take that as a challenge, by the way.”

“When I convene the powers in your dining room to negotiate an end to the Korean War, you will change your tune.”

“I will personally change my tune to this ‘Lullaby of Birdland’ nonsense if that happens,” Miss Calder tells her.

Abigail says, in her best schemer’s voice, “Now that is a challenge. I gotta go. Lots of plans to make!” She dashes out the door, into the dusk.

“But I’m genuinely worried that she’ll do it,” Miss Calder says to Helena and Myka. “I’d never even heard of ‘Lullaby of Birdland’ before tonight.”

“It’s fairly new. I’ll buy you the record,” Helena tells her.

“Please don’t.” Miss Calder actually shudders.

“As an expression of gratitude.”

“If you were really grateful, you’d talk some musical sense into Abigail.”

“Certainly,” Helena says, with a formal bow of her head. Then her eyes twinkle. “Because Abigail is so open to persuasion in all matters, musical and otherwise.”

“Well, apparently I am.” Miss Calder says this seriously, with no twinkle or smile to match Helena’s.

“Well,” Helena says. She casts her eyes away from Miss Calder. She turns her head. She clears her throat.

“For heaven’s sake, Helena. Go put that towel away before you rip it in half,” Miss Calder commands.

Myka looks down at Helena’s hands: she has the towel wrapped around one fist, and she is yanking on it nervously with the other. “Right,” Helena says, and she flees to the kitchen.
“Thank you,” Myka tells Miss Calder, and she means it about Helena, just now, about the two of them, this evening and tonight, and about all the other times Miss Calder has said and done the right things. Even when Myka didn’t understand why, or whether, they were right.

But Miss Calder shakes her head. “Don’t thank me. I just want to stay in Abigail’s good graces so she won’t fire me when they make her Director. Or when she gets elected President.” Myka chuckles a little, and Miss Calder smiles. “But also—Myka, I may not understand… in fact, I certainly don’t understand. But I’m not blind. On Thursday, when you saw her, and she saw you?” She touches Myka’s face, just a pat. “You know that I love someone. And he’s given me so much trouble… but his face still looks like that when he looks at me.” Her tone turns businesslike. “I’ve made up the guest room. And the sofa in the music room folds out too, all right? If… well, if that’s what you need.”

Myka nods. The guest room… then she remembers: “Miss Calder? Abigail said I should talk to you. Because I’ll probably… because they’ll ask. In the box.”

Miss Calder says, “I could tell you what to do. But so can Helena, and I think you’d rather spend the time with her.” She picks up Helena’s blue hat and regards it with distaste. “Helena, this is a terrible hat!” she exclaims.

“I told you that it was,” Helena says, returning to Myka’s side, taking her hand yet again. “I also told you that it was the best available option. Had we been in London—now there is a civilized capital city.”

Miss Calder is fitting her light hair, her blond mixed with gray, up under the blue straw. “How’s that? I mean, can I walk around in it in this uncivilized town?” she asks, as she affixes pins to the back.

Helena says, “It’s actually quite a good color for you. Brings out the blue of your eyes. Which reminds me, you should take my sunglasses. You’re probably all right now, but you’ll need them tomorrow, given that my eyes have no blue to be brought out.”

“I’ll call you from the hotel before I come back. Late afternoon, all right? Four rings?”

Helena nods. Miss Calder nods back. Then she says a soft “good night” and slips out the door.

Myka is still waiting for something to happen to stop this, some knock on the door, some change of mind, because that interruption, that intrusion? It obviously must come. Because what she has learned, through all these months, is that things like this do not happen. Sometimes a glimpse, a vision—the idea of Helena looking up at cherry blossoms, beautiful and happy on a spring day—but that is all. The rest of it is stolen time and wishing. And the feeling, tonight, that Myka has had, of wishes coming true? Well, that will not keep it all from turning back into wishes tomorrow, never mind how real this has seemed. The physical closeness, the easy familiarity… Myka has been surprised by how real that familiarity feels. She had not known—she tells herself that she could not have known—that they would be like this together.

The knowledge that they can, that they are, is wonderful. And it is crushing.

“Well, Les Paul?” Helena says playfully, pulling Myka away from the foyer.

Yes, crushing; that they can be like this together, alone, right now, as if it were real. But now they are facing each other in Miss Calder’s living room, and it is not real, because it cannot be real.

“Well what?” Myka asks.
“Was it a better idea?”

She can’t stand it. “You tell me,” she says. “I was going to end this. In a bathroom in the Capitol Building, I was planning to end this.”

“What? Why?”

Myka shakes her head, because Helena actually looks confused. “Why? You are honestly going to stand there and ask me why?” And Helena might be starting to say something, but Myka cuts her off: “I’ll tell you why. I’ll tell you all the reasons why, and they start with what I saw on Thursday: you holding someone’s hand.” She raises their hands, still joined, then pulls hers away.

Helena takes a step back.

Myka nods. “Someone who wasn’t me, and you held his hand. And what do you and I have? We have an hour in a museum every two weeks, if we even have that—and you don’t even want to have that! You want to be so strong, strong enough not to even want that. You’re the one who wants to end this, who keeps trying to end this, you with your ‘never again,’ you with your disappearing without a word! Why shouldn’t I leave you? You left me!”

She would like to have some sympathy for Helena, she really would. But Helena’s answer is a weak, “I came back.”

“How dare you! You didn’t come back for me. You walked away. How could you do that? How could you do that to me?”

“Myka, what choice did I have? You don’t understand.”

“What don’t I understand, Helena? What exactly is it that you think I don’t understand?”

“You don’t understand love!” Helena says. She presses her mouth closed, exhales heavily through her nose. Then she says, abruptly, “You don’t understand love.”

Myka wants to snarl and laugh and even say a sickened thank you, because now it feels real, Helena setting herself up there, higher, the one with the all the knowledge, all the reasons. “How dare you,” she starts, but she runs out of breath immediately, and she has to start again, “how dare you stand there and say that to me? What do you think I’ve been going through for these weeks since you left? And what is it that you think has been happening, this entire time? I don’t understand love?”

Helena opens her mouth; Myka thinks for a moment she will try to defend herself, try to diminish Myka again. But her face falls, contorts as if she has suddenly been made to feel an always-present lance of pain—and in response, something in Myka’s anger twists, pivots, transforms itself. “Then I guess I don’t understand anything that happened tonight, do I?” she asks. Helena still doesn’t say anything. “I guess I don’t understand why you thought you could walk up to me after weeks and do this.” She goes to Helena, kisses her cheek, takes her hand; Myka’s smaller hand feels as if it barely will fit around Helena’s. “Or this.” She slips around Helena’s body and kisses her neck, just below her ear. “I guess I don’t understand that either.” She drops her arms and moves away. “So why am I still here?”

Helena says, “I don’t know.” She takes a deep breath. She clears her face, empties her voice. “Vanessa’s right; she’s been right all along. You shouldn’t be.”

“But I am. Why is that, Helena? If I don’t understand any of it? Why do you think that is?”
Helena’s only answer to this is a beseeching gaze. Then her eyes close.

“So you have no ideas? No ideas at all why I’m still here? You, the person who leaves notes for some girl you call Les Paul? You, the person who pulls quarters—not rubles—out of that girl’s ear? You, the person who would play the allemande from a particular Bach partita for that girl? Incidentally, I know that piece of music pretty well now. How many times do you think I’ve listened to it and thought about you?”

No answer.

Myka shakes her head. “Still no ideas. I think Abigail was right: I think you aren’t very smart. You need someone to give you some ideas.”

Helena says, faintly, “No.”

“Yes. Yes, you do. Do you know who’s going to give you ideas now?”

Still nearly noiseless: “No. No. Don’t.”

“I am.”

“Don’t.”

“Why not? Look at me, Helena,” she says, because Helena is looking everywhere else, blinking furiously, doing anything she can to keep from meeting Myka’s eyes. “Look at me, and tell me why not.”

Helena looks, and there is that spear, lodged in a wound, martyring her. “Because we could stop. If we stop right now, we could stop.”

“Now you really aren’t being smart. ‘If we stop right now, we could stop,’” Myka repeats. It is as absurd, when uttered in her voice, as it had been in Helena’s. “Neither of us can stop. Do you really think I would have been able to end it?”

“It doesn’t matter. You said it yourself: I was gone. I wasn’t going to come back.” She is trying to be blank, to be harsh; Myka does want to hit her for it, then kiss her; she feels compassion for this stern, aloof Helena who is fighting, who sometimes manages to fight so very hard, but who topples over to become the warm, assured Helena who kissed Myka’s neck in the kitchen; she resists so grimly, sometimes, with such determination, but then she forgets, or she is overcome, and Myka is herself overcome, to be the cause of that.

“If you hadn’t come back,” Myka tells her, “then I would have had to come get you. I think you don’t understand love.”

Helena looks like Myka actually has hit her. She is on her guard, physically, as if this were a fistfight, as if Myka might draw her arm back and slug her again. Instead, Myka walks to her and touches her arms, slides her hands to Helena’s back, pulls her close. She is not really that much taller than Helena, not really that much, but she has to lean down; Helena has to look up—she does lean down then, and after the briefest second, Helena does tilt her face up. Their mouths meet, softly at first, then faster, more solidly, and it takes Myka a moment to realize that Helena is trying to say words: “Send me away; it’s better; send me away, it was better when you were hating me.”

Myka pulls back. “Hating you?” She shakes her head. “I was angry. And I’m still angry, but I shouldn’t have been angry at you. Not the way I was, not for all of it. The only thing I’m still angry at you for, just at you, is that you left without telling me anything except ‘be careful.’ ‘Be careful’
is not the same thing as goodbye. Any decent person would have said goodbye.”

“I’m not a decent person,” Helena says. She pulls Myka’s head down again, kisses her; her hands move around to the fastenings on Myka’s skirt, and she is starting to undo them, and Myka is dying, but Helena is still talking, somehow managing to kiss her and talk at the same time, “Not decent at all. Because of what I want, and how badly I want it—it isn’t decent. It isn’t decent, it isn’t right,” and now, even though Myka’s hands are behind her too, helping Helena, easing hook out of eyelet, starting to move the skirt’s zipper down, Helena takes her own hands away.

“Don’t stop,” Myka begs. “You started. Don’t stop. Please.”

Helena looks down at her hands, rubs them together. Then she looks back up at Myka. “They feel cold,” she says.

Myka grasps one of those hands again. “Not to me.” Then she pulls, and Helena is docile; she lets Myka lead her. Myka doesn’t know where the guest room is, but she brings Helena up the stairs, down a hallway, not this door, not this one, but here, a plain little room, with an austere bed, its simplicity light and beautiful. It is exactly what Myka wants: to be in a bare room with Helena, for the two of them to share a space with no ornaments from the past, and no reminders that they need fear the future.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original tumblr tags: I think President Cho has a nice ring to it, alternatively I would watch the show in which Kelly Hu is Director of the CIA, or the one in which she negotiates peace between warring nations, and in her free time also manages to play bebop, and set up assignations for the lovelorn
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Yeah, so, I don’t want to oversell, so this is probably mostly sfw, but of course I don’t know where you work, so there could be some iffy sentences. Ladies wore a lot of undergarments in the 1950s, anyway. Like, so many that if I described getting people out of all of them? We would be here till Christmas, and you would be saying “how can there still be more hooks and clips and zippers, for pity’s sake?!” Honestly I don’t know how anybody had time to get dressed in the morning, I really don’t. Bonus hilarity: as I mentioned to a couple of people already, the Internet is now certain I am a fetishist of a quite particular sort, because of researching the aforementioned undergarments. (Before, the ads were all “oh, you like classical music; you are so sophisticated” and now it’s “yeah, we know what you’re into, pervert.”)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Helena is behind Myka as they enter the room, and suddenly Myka feels Helena’s hands against the back of her head—it takes a moment for her to realize that Helena is pulling at the pins that hold Myka’s long curls in place. She feels her hair tumble free, piece by piece; Helena is letting the pins fall too. When the task is complete, Helena’s hands drop away. She says, her voice as low as the dusky light, “I imagined your hair. How it would fall.”

“Did you get it right?” Myka asks without turning around. She uses her own hand to tousle the strands into more disarray, more freedom. Then she turns around.

In answer, Helena weaves her fingers through the curls and pulls Myka’s head toward her. She gives Myka a kiss so open and wet that some part of Myka is immediately gasping and swearing to wear her hair down for Helena always, just as Helena should wear her hair down for Myka always, because now, in an instant, Myka has reached to the back of Helena’s neck and thrown off that clip—they can find it tomorrow, if they find it at all, and Myka would be happy never to see it again, to have the softness of Helena’s beautiful hair pour through her fingers just like this, all the time.

She wants to hear that low voice again, so she asks, “What else did you imagine?”

“I can’t tell you.” Helena shakes her head, and Myka is almost as pleased with how that makes her hair move as she would have been with any words Helena said.

“Then show me,” she says. She herself is starting to show Helena what she has thought: she’s got her hands on Helena’s shirt, which is held closed by delicate, pretty pearl buttons. She unfastens the first, the second. The white cotton itself is starched, crisp stiffness against her hands, contrasting beautifully with the soft skin it hides; her fingers sneak inside to stroke against a collarbone, and she can’t wait to run them down the length of Helena’s torso with nothing to stop them, to feel all of her. A gnat of worry brushes against Myka—a woman, it hums, you want your hands on a woman—but Myka can’t heed it, because she is far too busy, because there is too much of this body she hasn’t yet touched. “Please,” she says, “show me.” She pulls the shirt’s collar farther open, exposing a shoulder, as well as a strap she wants immediately to push out of the way. “Show me.”

Helena pushes her backwards, toward the bed, backwards and down; now Myka is sitting on the
edge of the bed, and Helena comes to her and kneels, pushes her legs apart, pushes her body between them. The tulle of Myka’s crinoline resists her push, just a bit, but Helena runs her hands under it, up Myka’s legs, past her knees, sliding across the stockings—Myka’s are nylon, not silk like Helena’s, but Myka remembers that silk, and she can let herself understand, now, that even then she had itched to touch it—until she reaches the metal garter clips that hold the stockings in place. Six clips, two at the front of each thigh, one at the back. Six: it seems so many, and even though it is fewer than that impossible number of knocks on a restroom door that Myka could not wait through, still it may be a number of clips she cannot wait for Helena to undo, because Helena is manipulating the first one, just the first one, her fingers working against Myka’s thigh but not nearly fast enough, and she is easing the clip off so gently, but Myka wants to tell her to go faster, that she doesn’t care if the metal catches and stings; because if she feels like this after one she will not live through even one more.

Did Helena hear her thoughts? She leans back, moves away, and Myka says, “Put your hands back, please, hurry.”

“I can’t,” Helena says. She is looking down, her brow slightly furrowed, as if in some shock at how high up Myka’s body her skirt has climbed, or how much of her own body Myka has exposed.

“Why not?”

Helena stands, and though she is shrugging her shirt sleeve up over her shoulder, Myka realizes that she had not been looking at that or at Myka at all; instead, she had been looking, is still looking, at her hands: her hands, which are shaking infinitesimally, as if with the opening tremors of an earthquake.

“Are you afraid?” Myka asks, but she can’t imagine that Helena is afraid now, here. She looks as she had in her office, the first time Myka saw her with her hair down, with that same initial impropriety of undone buttons, but things are so different here: here it is darker and warmer and they are alone and so very, very close to safety. She can’t be afraid.

Helena says, “My hands are.” She looks at them again, as if they are something she found in the dirt, as if they are artifacts dowsing a looming natural disaster, as if the shaking will inevitably intensify, as if the only logical outcome is a catastrophic release of energy that reduces cities to rubble.

“Hold them still,” Myka tells her.

“I can’t,” Helena says. She grabs one with the other, but she’s right: that just reinforces and magnifies the movements, sending them up her arms to her shoulders.

“Your hands are afraid,” Myka says. “Of me? Of touching me? These hands? At first, I saw your hands.”

“Doing a parlor trick,” Helena scoffs weakly.

“No. Showing me something I’d never seen before.” She’s never seen this before, either: Myka thinks that if she left the room for an hour, for two hours, she would return to find Helena still mesmerized by her shivering fingers. “And you’re not afraid of that.”

“Of what?” Helena looks up.

“Of doing magic tricks. So do one now.”

“That’s… what?”
“Come on, magician,” Myka says. “If you can’t show me anything else, I know you can show me a magic trick.” She rises from the bed and moves to Helena; she doesn’t touch her hands. But she does undo another button of her shirt—that’s three; she is counting—and she does bend down to kiss the new skin she finds.

Helena says, “But I… I need a coin. Or a card.”

Myka kisses her mouth. “Then go find one, magician.”

“You’ll still be here?” Helena asks, and she is hesitant, so hesitant that Myka wants to sit her down and talk sense into her; wants to push her to the bed and use her fingers to carve sense into her.

Instead, she says, “I don’t think you’ve been paying attention. I’ll always be here.”

Helena’s gone for one minute, then two. Myka has just enough time for another tremor of doubt of her own—and she’s a woman, a woman is undressing you—and to answer it with but she has to, she’s the one who has to—before Helena comes back. She’s holding her hands in front of her, but they look themselves again, not alien; she is not bothering to look down as she turns a quarter across her right-hand knuckles. “Hold out your right hand,” she commands.

Myka does.

“Palm up,” Helena corrects.

Myka turns her hand over.

She thinks herself foolish for having been reminded of, for even having spared a thought for, what happened in Helena’s office, because now, this minute, is so much more: Helena is doing magic with her hair down and her shirt open, and Myka could never, never have stayed across the room if that had happened.

Helena places her left palm over Myka’s extended hand. She flourishes, in her other hand, the previously revolving quarter, which she now places on the back of the hand resting atop Myka’s.

“Ready?” she asks.

“God, yes,” Myka says.

Helena smacks her right palm against the back of her left hand, and—Myka wishes Helena would every now and then say “presto” or “abracadabra”—the quarter that had been resting atop the back of Helena’s hand is now nestled in Myka’s palm. She looks up at Helena, who shrugs and says, “Coin through the hand. It’s a simple trick.”

“It’s a good thing you never showed it to me before,” Myka says.

“Why?” says the woman whose hands are no longer shaking.

“Because,” she says, and it’s the most true thing she’s ever said, “you touching my ear was bad enough. If you’d touched my hand? I would have done this.” She grabs Helena, yanking their bodies together; she drops the quarter as she does so and hears it clank and roll on the wood floor. Then she hears an answering clank as Helena throws an arm around Myka’s neck and pulls her head down. “I wasn’t sure how you did that trick,” Myka says, “but I think I just got an idea.”

“You can guess how I do all my tricks, and you have plenty of your own. ‘Do one now, magician,’” Helena echoes. “You’re far too clever for me.”
“That wasn’t any kind of clever. That was desperation. You can’t start what you started and just stop.”

“What was it I started? I think you had better remind me,” Helena says, and this is how Myka wants to hear her talking; this is the Helena she wants, this one right here, the one who would press against her in the kitchen, putting heat against her back and breath on her neck, the one who does magic as if it were nothing, the one whom Myka is going to remind of exactly what she started, because this time she is the one doing the pushing, pushing her hands up to raise a skirt, up through a crunch of netting. She wonders if her skin felt this hot to Helena; she finds, as she tries to work a clip free from the top of a stocking, that that heat is rendering her own hands unsteady. She would laugh, but she’s a woman is sounding a bit louder now, a bit more persistent, and it slows Myka down and makes her fumble more, yet when Helena says, “I’m beginning to think you don’t know how these work. Don’t you fasten and unfasten your own?”, Myka does laugh. Helena goes on, “I think I remember now exactly where I was. But I think it would be easier if I could see what I’m doing.” Now she reaches for Myka and starts to work again on her skirt, and if Myka had known this was what would happen tonight, she would not have chosen one with a recalcitrant zipper; Helena struggles with it for a moment, then says, “I give up. Help, please?”

“I was helping, before, downstairs, and you stopped. You’re not going to do that again, are you?”

“No,” Helena says.

“Good.” Myka is frightened and brave, ready and not, as she gives the zipper the particular tug at the particular point that will make it move. “But the crinoline has to come off at the same time. It’s too wide for the skirt to go over.” She could take the skirt off over her head… but she is already feeling the awkwardness of this moment, more not than ready, and that would make things a thousand times worse.

“Well,” Helena says, “if you insist.” That closure, on the side under a seam, is much easier for her to manage. Helena kisses Myka for a long, deep moment. Then she says, and it is the presto and the abracadabra, “Step out.”

Half-undressed in front of another woman, half-undressed by another woman, and Myka is still nervous, but she is also still waiting for any of this to feel truly wrong. Yes, a little awkward, a little strange and embarrassing, but not wrong. And then there is nothing at all wrong with the way Helena kisses her, over and over, as her hands begin to move, clip by clip, around Myka’s legs.

“For someone who needed to see what she was doing, you don’t seem to be doing much looking,” Myka says when Helena takes her mouth away.

“Oh, I’m looking. Trust me. Your long legs with one garter undone? I looked at that. And now, with just one left on each leg? I will be looking very closely at that. Very closely indeed.” She drops to her knees.

Helena is breathing onto Myka’s thighs. Myka says weakly, “That does seem pretty close.”

“Mm. Doesn’t it? Oh, I think I see what needs to be done.” She looses the remaining suspender from Myka’s left stocking, kisses its former location, and pulls the stocking down and off. She repeats the operation on the right, then runs both her hands up Myka’s now-bare legs. She stands and says “The belt comes off. Now,” and Myka is quite frankly impressed by how deftly Helena manages to make her garter belt join the pile of clothes on the floor.

Impressed and suddenly very, very eager, because Helena still has so much clothing on, and Myka is thinking, is planning, how she will take all of it off. Part of Myka wants to rip and tear her way
through it all, but another part aches to open Helena so carefully, piece by piece, gently, slowly, so that this elation, if that is the right word for it, will persist. If they have this night and a day, she wants to take all of that night and day—but the violence and speed of ripping and tearing is somewhere there too; it has always been there, just as the softness has, but she never had anyone on whom she wanted to, needed to, bring any of it to bear. How much more has always been there? How much more is she going to find out?

She’d thought she had found it all out, before, with the man she tried to want to marry. She’d thought that how it went was this: the woman feels that it is wrong; the man explains that no, it isn’t, that she is not bad for wanting this—but Myka had thought, the whole time, no, if I wanted this, it would not be bad, but I don’t want this, not because anyone says it is bad, but simply because it is not what I want.

But this is not that: this is what she wants. And the man she had tried to want to marry had been wrong about a great many things, but right about one: she is not bad for wanting. She is not bad at all for wanting to feel her way up Helena’s skirt, to release her garters—now two, three, and in a rush the rest, tracing with her fingers the snapped, upward path of each suspender—to undo all the pearled buttons of her shirt—four, five, six, seven—to remove every intrusive undergarment, and why did women have to wear these anyway—but no, she knows why, to keep the sight and even the thought of this perfect beauty hidden away from the world.

Myka’s mouth falls to Helena’s breasts—a woman, a woman—but now it is just excitement, no fear, no worry, because she is in bed with Helena, Helena who belongs to her, it is Helena’s thigh against which Myka’s tongue is dragging, Helena’s hips that Myka’s hands are pulling closer, but it is also a woman’s thigh, a woman’s hips, and the difference and joy of that is overwhelming. When she hears Helena’s voice call her name, and when Helena’s hands bring her higher and at last it is presto, and abracadabra, she is laughing or she is crying, and she absolutely cannot tell the difference, but Helena must be able to, because she is saying, “oh god, did I hurt you, are you all right,” and Myka means to reassure her and say that of course she is all right, but she is not all right at all, so that is what she says. But now Helena is saying, “what’s wrong, what did I do wrong,” and Myka fears she will hear the word “mistake” again, and there is only one way to stop Helena from saying that word, or all the other words, so Myka kisses her. But that isn’t really what she is doing; it isn’t kissing, just their mouths open and together, open to each other.

“They wanted to keep this from me,” she says against Helena’s mouth. “You wanted to keep this from me.”

“No. I wanted this with you, so early, so soon.”

Myka believes her, believes her and doesn’t. “Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t you find a way?”

“I didn’t think I could.” She sighs, a little ghost of misery against Myka’s neck.

“We were made for this. Why would anyone keep this from us?”

“I don’t want to keep anything from you, I swear I don’t.”

She raises a hand, as if to touch Myka’s face, then seems to think better of it. Myka grabs the hand as it retreats, and she understands: there is again a tiny tremor, just a quaver, but why now, when they have already done so much and could do more? She kisses the hand, says, “Stop it.” Then she kisses Helena’s mouth and says, “Your hands, your stupid, shaking hands, they belong on me.” She pulls the hand she is holding down to her hip and places it firmly there, then says, with mock
authority, “Only me. Are we clear?”

She is pleased to hear Helena chuckle. “Only you? What about the violin?”

Myka shakes her head against Helena’s. “You have to ask my permission. To touch anything but me.”

“Possessive,” Helena chides, but she is moving her hand that is on Myka’s hip in a way that might itself be called possessive. Greedy, even.

“This night, yes. This night and tomorrow.”

“Vanessa took the case but left the violin… so may I play for you tomorrow?”

“That depends. Can you play if I’m pressed against you like this?”

“If I can’t, I will never play again,” Helena declares. “I will never do anything again if you aren’t pressed against me like this.”


She feels Helena’s lips smile against her, against that spot, right below her ear. “Da,” Helena agrees.


“Milaya,” Helena says. Sweet. “I learned that so I could say it to her, when she came back to me, but I see it now: it was always meant for you.”

“Vozlyublennaya,” Myka says again. It feels so right in her mouth, this word for a woman, this word she is saying to a woman. “Lyubimaya, milaya, Helena.”

Her darling, her sweet, her Helena.


“V etu noch’,” Myka corrects. This night.

“It’s far too difficult to make love to you in Russian,” Helena complains. She pulls her hand from Myka’s hip and covers her face in a parody of despair.

Myka laughs. “I thought languages were easy for you.”

“Not as easy as this,” Helena says, and she puts her stupid, shaking hands—which are neither stupid nor shaking, not anymore—onto Myka again.

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“What are we going to do?” Myka asks, much later, in the dark. This night’s dark is nothing she ever thought to predict, nothing for which she could ever have planned: her naked body is molded exactly to another woman’s naked body, breast to breast, hip to hip, and she cannot understand wanting anything else. Helena feels so good against her, just warm enough, just smooth enough, as Myka runs her hand over hip, down thigh and back up again. The world isn’t this small, but it should be.

“Pretend,” Helena says. Her mouth is close, so they kiss again, slowly, because their mouths know.
Their mouths will always know this, no matter what happens in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening, in all the other mornings and afternoons and evenings that are going to come between them and this night.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original tumblr tags: here's hoping this turned out okay, please note that I still have not yet cut to the morning after!, though I confess that's when the next part will start, and seriously the undergarments are insane, I did not even get into the question of girdles, because I think wearing a girdle in DC in late summer could cause heatstroke, I'm sure some very ladylike ladies wore them though, my grandmother for one, because she was the most ladylike lady who ever ladied
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

[This intro will make very clear when exactly this was posted to tumblr!] That was quite the B&W Christmas season, wasn’t it? But back to business: happy new year! Sort of... it might take more than the turning of one year to get some gay women in the 1950s all the way to happy. I will continue to do my plot-contriving best, though there is a wringer or several yet to be gone through. I know, you feel like it’s been going on forever already, but there is a lot of history to take one’s storytelling machete to.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Early morning.

Barely any light. Rose of dawn.

Myka’s eyes open slowly to this; they open because she feels fingers against her skin, brushing gently down her arm, to her torso, her hip, her thigh. Her eyes open to the light, but they open also to Helena’s face, to her eyes that are as dark as the night that is fading. And this is yet one more thing that has been kept from her: waking up like this.

Helena puts her lips to Myka’s shoulder. Then she says, “I was trying not to touch you too much. I didn’t want to wake you. Your face, asleep…” Now she puts her lips to Myka’s mouth.

Myka says, “I didn’t get to see your face asleep.” It’s a grumble, an accusation: an intimacy.

And she gets defiant intimacy in return. “Well, I’m not going to go to sleep again just so you can.”

“No?” She tries to sound disappointed.

“No. I have much more important things to do.”

Now Helena’s hands aren’t moving softly or idly anymore; now they’re seeking and finding, and Myka’s hips are moving because they have no choice. She should have some way to make sense of this, she thinks; it should be like something else, she should be thinking of magic or music or some other way that she can categorize it—she is hypnotized, perhaps, her mind and her body being controlled—but it isn’t like anything. Maybe she has felt every one of these emotions she is feeling, but never all together, never joy and grief and power and helplessness, everything at the same time, everything, because when Helena’s purposeful hands make Myka struggle against her with pleasure, and Myka says yes over and over, she also means no: no, don’t show me this again; no, don’t show me why I love you, don’t make me feel how much I love you, don’t let me see how much more I could love you.

Because even with as much as she feels now, she can see still more, she can see more than this, opening up before them, if only it were possible, if only. She wonders if this is what a honeymoon feels like—if this is what a honeymoon is for, this sinking into each other, this strange arresting thought of “what are we doing, what have we done” followed immediately by the sliding, decadent indulgence of “yes, this is what we are doing; this is what we have done.” Yes, if they could have
days to spend like this, just like this, close enough to touch, close enough and touching, days and
days to spend together, days to start a life that they would spend together…

“Do you feel it too?” she asks as she now moves with purpose, as her hands find the places she
already, after one short night, knows will make Helena gasp and cry. One short night: yet there
should be so many more nights, long nights, long days.

“Of course I do,” Helena says, and it doesn’t matter if they are talking about the same thing.
Nothing at all matters but Helena breathing the words “I love you” over and over next to Myka’s
ear, against her neck, and at last into the air, with her head thrown back, because Myka knows this
too, after this one short night: when Helena’s neck begins to twist, when she cannot hold her head
still anymore, that is when to push and press, and then to wonder at and worship her.

After a while, a very quiet while during which they listen to each other breathe, Myka sits up. Then
she tries to stand up from the bed, but she sways, lightheaded, and has to sit back down again. It is
this love, she thinks. “I think you make me dizzy,” she tells Helena.

But Helena laughs. She says, “I don’t think that’s it.” She waits for a response from Myka, who
shakes her head. Helena laughs again. “You make me dizzy as well, but… I think you’re thirsty.
And hungry. I know I am.”

And for some reason this strikes Myka as absolutely hilarious. She laughs and laughs, because of
course she is thirsty and of course she is hungry, but she had forgotten that those words could
apply to anything other than love.

So they rise and dress—not completely, merely enough for decency. “I wish I were a kid again,”
Myka says as she’s zipping her skirt closed. “I mean, the idea of being able to wear anything at
all… I practically lived in overalls until I was eight or nine. I can’t believe my mother let me do
that, but I wanted them, so she let me. There’s a picture of me and everything.”

“I can’t imagine anything more darling,” Helena tells her. “My mother would have fallen over in a
faint to see me wearing such a garment. Now, if it had been part of a theatrical costume, that would
have been an entirely different matter.”

And Myka thinks back to her idea of small, determined Helena, learning Russian with no sense that
it might prove impossible, or even difficult. Myka thinks that little girl into overalls.

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It is still early morning, so they make breakfast. “Miss Calder won’t mind, will she?” Myka asks
anxiously, though why this should bother her where the guest room did not, does not, she has no
idea. Cooking in a full kitchen again seems luxurious, practically as decadent as what they have
been doing upstairs, and she says as much to Helena, who agrees, “I’ve been in that hotel forever, it
seems.”

As they are eating, Helena gestures toward the items on the table: milk, jam, butter. The eggs and
toast on their plates. “All this still seems strange to me. All this food, that it’s just… there. That one
could eat all of that, then simply go and buy more, with so little thought. They fed us reasonably
well at—where I was, during the war, but I remember my mother, trying to set a table, all that
time… and Charles was married in the middle of the war, so his wife too, from that point on. And
of course now, still. I think if Charles could contrive a way to bring his family here, he would. He
hates the idea of Jane and the children being deprived of anything, and who knows how long it
might last.”
“I hadn’t thought about it,” Myka says. “How lucky Americans are. We are. I am. Compared to you, I mean. I measure us against the Russians, mostly, and I know we have it better than they do—the ones who aren’t in the Politburo, that is.”

“MPs, too, can most likely enjoy all the bacon they wish,” Helena says. “And chocolate and cigarettes and everything else. I smoked myself sick, here, once I realized how little your cigarettes cost. Now I can barely look at them anymore.”

“Too much of a good thing?” Myka asks.

“That, and I don’t want to become accustomed. I can take them or leave them, really, and it will be easier to go back if I pretend that conditions here are the same as conditions there. It’s always been easier not to care, anyhow… easier to eat the Woolton pies than to worry that there was no meat, to eat the carrot cakes than to bemoan the lack of finer sweets.”

She sounds moody, and that makes Myka moody too. “Easier to say ‘never again’?” she prods, but she regrets it when Helena’s expression sharpens and darkens.

“Rationing ends,” Helena snaps. “Eventually. If you think that’s the same, then god help you.” She stands, seizes her plate, carries it to the kitchen.

“God help me anyway,” Myka throws at her, even as she stands too, and follows, for she is thinking that they should not fight, should not say even one word that puts them at odds.

And Helena seems to have the same thought: “God help us both,” Myka hears her say softly. “Although he does not seem inclined to.”

Myka goes to stand behind her, kisses her below the ear, just as Helena had done, what now seems like such a length of time ago… but it has been only hours since then. Only hours. “You didn’t think we would have even this,” she says, and she tries to sound, and to feel, strong. “I didn’t think so either, but just look. Look at my arms around you. Look at how I don’t have to let go, not yet.”

“But you will,” Helena says. She’s clutching Myka’s arms as they wrap around her, drawing them closer.

Myka is the strong one now, but she’s going to lose her strength at some point, because that is the way of this: there seems to be no way for them both to maintain any optimism, not at the same time, and certainly not when faced with everything they face. Which in turn reminds her of a particular obstacle, one that Miss Calder said that Helena knows how to overcome… “Helena,” she says now. “I need your help with something.”

“What is it?” She turns around in Myka’s arms, and Myka kisses her, because she still can, and because she knows Helena’s mouth will be warm and welcoming. The kiss is long and delicious, and when it ends, Helena says, “I’m glad you needed help with that. I’d like to be the only one who helps you with that, please.”

Myka smiles, but she takes her arms from Helena’s body and moves away. “You are. You will be, I promise you that. But there’s one problem with it.”

“Only one?”

“Well. As far as I’m concerned, there aren’t any problems at all. But as far as… as far as the Security Office is concerned. The one problem is that I can’t pass the box. Not now. Not now that we’re… that we’ve…”
Myka is astonished when Helena laughs—meanly, but she laughs. “Your silly box. They wouldn’t
dare hook me up to it, but even if they did, it would make no difference. I know they damaged you,
before, and if I could have intervened then, I swear to you, I would have… but I didn’t see it
coming, first of all, and I couldn’t have told you anything then that would have made it easier. To
tell you anything would have been to suggest… well. What I wanted, and I couldn’t say that, then.
You know now what I wanted from you.”

“I wanted the same thing from you.”

“But you didn’t know it yet. You didn’t even know how to think it yet.”

“No,” Myka says. “I didn’t. I didn’t know anything.”

“And that, my darling, sweet love, is why your box is so stupid. As are the people who wield it.
You didn’t lie, did you?”

“No.”

Helena looks at her, as if she expects Myka to say something else. When Myka doesn’t, Helena
says, “Think, love. There are two ways to get the better of that box. One: don’t lie. Or two: control
every physiological process it measures. Obviously, the first way is easier.”

“But they ask. I have to tell the truth.”

Helena shakes her head. “No. That is not so. What you have to do is refrain from lying.”

And Myka shakes her head, too. “I don’t understand.”

“Are you a homosexual?” Helena asks.

The question is a slap in the face; this is practically like being there, bound into the chair, wires
transmitting every response. “What?”

“They asked you that, didn’t they?” Helena says this dispassionately. Myka nods, and Helena goes
on, “And they’ll ask you again. So: are you a homosexual?”

“I… don’t know. Am I?”

Helena sighs. “What is a homosexual?”

All the things Myka has been told, all the things she has assumed, has surmised, are any of them
true? Some, all, none? “Someone who’s… abnormal. That’s what I… I mean, what it always—”

“All right then,” Helena interrupts. “Do you feel abnormal?”

That is easy: “No.”

“How do you feel?”

“This moment?” Myka asks. Helena tilts her head, raises a delicate eyebrow, and Myka cannot
contain her smile. “I feel happy. I feel… in love.”

Helena says, with an answering smile, “Then I’ll ask this: are you abnormal?”

“No.”
“So are you a homosexual?”

“No?” It feels… not quite right. Right for the box, of course, and Myka thinks that she could, she really could, say it in the box as the truth… but there is something wrong, something that betrays herself, and Helena… and Steve. And everyone else who might not be abnormal in this way.

Helena says, “We use language for all sorts of purposes. Questions are made up of words. Words mean only what we believe they mean. Is Helena Wells a homosexual?”

This staggers Myka. Would they ask this? Did they ask this? She can’t remember. “I don’t know,” she says, and when Helena goggles at her, she goes on, “Well, I don’t. I can’t read your mind.”

Helena frowns. “Can’t you?” Then she stops, turns her head. “Actually, that is a very important thing to remember: that box cannot read your mind. It can read only physiological changes, ones that often accompany the telling of a lie.” She rotates her neck, almost as she does… Myka can barely think it, but almost as she does in bed, when she is about to…

“Is Helena Wells abnormal?” she asks.

The truest response Myka can give, at this moment, is, “Yes.” And as Helena’s face becomes a comic study in something like “what could you possibly mean?”, Myka says, “You’re better than normal.”

“Hm,” Helena says, but she is smiling again, “I think your interrogators are likely to define it down. I think ‘no’ is a safer response to many questions. Is Helena Wells… subnormal?”

Myka shakes her head so hard her hair flies. “No,” she says, and Helena laughs.

“Then,” says Myka’s laughing lover, “is Helena Wells a homosexual?”

“No,” Myka tells her, because that is what she wants to hear.

Helena is looking at her with that laughter, looking at her with soft, sweet love. “Do you want to kiss Helena Wells?” she asks.

Myka makes a show of considering her answer. “You say it’s the safer response, so… no.”

Helena tilts her head again, squints at Myka in a caricature of scientific scrutiny. “Hm… I’m observing physiological changes that often accompany the telling of a lie.”

“Such as?” Myka doesn’t, as a rule, do very well with teasing. But she does know that she wants Helena to keep on playing, so she will keep playing along…

“Dilation of pupils,” Helena says now. “Quickening of breathing. Slightly elevated heart rate. Blood rising to the skin. Coincidentally,” she says, and she begins gliding toward Myka, “those physiological changes are also consistent with your wanting to kiss me. Isn’t that funny.”

Helena comes closer, and Myka is hard put not to swoon, for she brings her face very near to Myka’s; she doesn’t let their lips touch, but she is inches, now an inch, less than an inch away, and Myka is laughing even as she doesn’t quite swoon: “So they had better not ask me if I want to kiss you,” she says as her lips chase Helena’s, chase them until she has to grab Helena’s arms and hold her still so that she can finally bring their mouths together. “Because if they ask me that?” She kisses Helena again, long and deep, as if it is the end of all kisses…

“If they ask you that?” Helena says, slow, falling to Myka’s lips again as she says it.
"I won’t say no.” They spend long, easy moments not saying no; they say yes, and more, and they will be back upstairs in one moment… “Oh Helena,” Myka says, “if they ask me if I want to kiss you…”

Helena draws back a bit. “They won’t. I know what they ask.” She pauses. “They’ll ask you this, if they haven’t already: Have you had sexual relations with a man.”

“They did ask me that,” Myka says.

“And what did you answer?”

It hurts Myka to say it, hurts her that she is standing in Helena’s arms as she does. “Yes.”

Helena’s face twitches; it hurts her, too, Myka thinks, to have heard it. She wants to apologize, to explain what an awful mistake it had been, that she had known it was a mistake but not why, not really why, that she could not have known why, that she would have waited forever for Helena, if she had only known. But before she can say any of that, Helena says a soft, “All right.” She breathes. “All right. But. Was that like… was that like what you and I. Well. What you and I… have done? What we—”


“So when they ask the next question… have you had sexual relations with a woman. What would your answer be?”

And Myka sees that Helena is exactly right: the answer to the second question cannot be the same as the answer to the first. What she and Helena have done—what she wants them to never stop doing—is something entirely different. It is not a mistake, it did not, will not, make her feel wrong or abnormal. “No,” she says, and then, again, “no,” full of love.

Helena’s voice is full too as she says, “Good. But you can’t smile like that when you say it.”

“So when they ask the next question… have you had sexual relations with a woman. What would your answer be?”

“Why not?” Myka asks. “Abigail smiles in the box all the time, at least to hear her tell it. She jokes with them.”

Helena shakes her head. “If I were you, I would not take my cue from Abigail. She is a singular specimen.”

Myka knows she shouldn’t be hurt, shouldn’t be jealous; she knows that Helena thinks Abigail is smart and talented, and Helena is right to think that, because she is. And Abigail is responsible for this night and this day, so Myka admonishes herself to just unclench her jaw and—

“It isn’t a zero-sum game,” Helena says softly. “You’re quite the singular specimen yourself.”

“You don’t have to say that just because I have a thin skin.” But Myka does have a thin skin, and when Helena leans to kiss her, a sweet, reassuring kiss, Myka does take comfort in it.

“I don’t have to say it at all. Myka, once you determine what you really want, you will be formidable indeed. But I don’t think you want to plan and execute ops for the CIA. I don’t think you want to translate Russian for the rest of your life either. Do you?”

“I don’t know,” Myka says. It is the truth.

“Your problem,” Helena says, with another quiet kiss, “insofar as it is a problem, is that your talents are quite subtle. Abigail is far more flamboyantly skilled, so it’s far easier to see what to do
with her. Vanessa is bringing her along very carefully indeed. Perhaps too carefully; I might turn her loose on something bigger, just to see what happens, but then of course that is one of the salient differences between Vanessa and myself.”

“What do you mean? How is Miss Calder bringing her along?”

“Well. It isn’t really my place to say, but honestly, Myka. You can’t think that all Vanessa Calder—Vanessa Calder!—does is coordinate translation services.” She pauses. “Can you? I mean, can you?”

“Obviously I’m supposed to say no… but the real answer is yes. Yes, I can think that. That’s what I think. Or, I guess, thought.” Myka wants to slap herself. “Proving that I’m not that singular specimen after all.”

Helena kisses her jaw. “Stop it. You are so very smart, but also so very straightforward. And you expect others to be straightforward as well. There is so much daylight in your world, compared to the things I’ve helped lead you into, Myka… I don’t think these things were ever meant for you.”

Now Myka wants to slap her. “These things. What does that mean? These things. Things like you? Things like last night?”

“That isn’t what I mean. I know why you think that, but that isn’t what I mean. I don’t want to talk about it yet, but…” She looks around, everywhere but at Myka—and that’s hard for her to do, given that Myka’s face is right in front of hers. “Let’s leave it at, I don’t want to talk about it yet.”

“This is about your project coming back to life,” Myka says. “That’s it, isn’t it? Even somebody as straightforward as I am can see that.”

“Don’t make me tell you,” Helena says. “Not now, not yet. Please. Not yet.” She starts working at Myka’s clothes again, and her hands are very sure, offensively so, as she handles shirt buttons, then moves to the skirt. She has somehow mastered the tug on the zipper. “Please,” she says again, and Myka knows she isn’t singular at all, isn’t at all different from anyone else, because anyone else, anyone in the world would give in, would collapse, just like this, at the sound of Helena Wells saying “please.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original tumblr tags: lots of talking, but some things had to be addressed, and in relative privacy, which I realize means there was less time for other things, but at least nobody passed out
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

I knew how this story would go before I started it, of course, and yet there is still a part of me that wants to leave them in that house and wave my hands and say “they magically lived happily ever after!” But this is not that. It’s not a tragedy, but it’s not that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes


They are still in bed. Hours have passed, but they are still in bed, because they do not know when, or if, they will ever be in bed like this again. There is no clock in this bedroom, no ticking to kick them to awareness of time’s passing… but there is no need for a clock. Every breath has been a tick, every heartbeat a tock. Sighs and cries have chimed the hours.

One more ring. That is all.

“Not Vanessa,” Helena says. “But we should—”

“No,” Myka says. “No.” She is hot with the need to shed tears, but she is not going to cry. She is just going to refuse. “We can both say no.”

She is up on one elbow, having just moved her weight, her hips, from Helena’s body. Helena just looks up at her, and this view… as the afternoon slants across the room, turning Helena’s skin from ivory to gold… gold poured just for Myka… “No,” Myka says again. She can barely move, the sheets are sticking to her, and she is nauseous; she is at the same time alive and in love, and the union between her skin and Helena’s is exalted. “No.”

Helena says nothing: not an echo of Myka’s no, not a contradictory yes. Instead, she sits up. She leans down for one more soaring, sinking kiss; then she stands. She says nothing as she gathers her clothes—all of her clothes this time—and begins to dress.

How could anything happen today that is more intimate than what they have already done? Yet this is: Helena covering herself, piece by piece, strap by strap, layer by layer. Myka could strip it all from her again, but that would be less private than what Helena is showing her now, this process, these movements of every day that are hers alone. Hers, now shared with Myka.

“Do you want me to go downstairs?” Helena asks as she nears the end. Her last act is to take her hair clip—it was easy to see, glinting against a floorboard—and gather her beautiful locks together, constraining them. As if she has to, because otherwise they might still find a way to trail all over Myka.

Myka wonders if she will ever say a word other than “no,” because that is what she says again. “No,” because if she has felt this closeness, she wants Helena to feel it too, and “no,” because being parted is a waste. There is a relentlessly beating countdown now, one made of minutes, not hours.

First layer: not difficult. Embarrassing—and she wants to ask Helena if she had been embarrassed,
moments ago—but not difficult. The garter belt must come next, however, and her fingers fumble with it; it is definitive, to put it back on, for in it, in her garters and stockings and then crinoline and skirt and all the rest, she will walk back into the world.

“I’ll help,” Helena says. “I took it off you; I should do you the courtesy.” She stands behind Myka, positions the belt, pulls it tight, hooks it closed, and while Myka had not imagined that she was through with what Helena’s hands could do her, she had thought her senses dulled, tired. But still, again, she feels this pulse, this rush that she understands now to be want, and she is leaning back against Helena’s body, leaning back to feel that breath at her neck, and take it off me again is what she wants to say.

She chokes and moves away. Stockings now, garters. She looks at her crinoline, alone where it had fallen last night, and her skirt, beside the bed, where Helena had dropped it this morning. Very aware of the fact that she is wearing nothing but undergarments, she places the skirt over the crinoline carefully, so she can step into them both at the same time. Step out, she remembers from last night. Step out.

So instead of take it off me again, what she says to Helena is “Someday, again.” She pulls her skirt and its accompaniment up her body, and she says “someday, again.” And Helena responds by wrapping Myka’s shirt around Myka’s body, doing up the buttons, her lips pressed to Myka’s as she does so.

Helena says, “Someday again.”

“Do you promise?” Myka asks, as if that will make a difference.

“My love,” Helena says. “I promise that you are my love.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Myka says. “Promise me we will have this again.”

“I can’t,” Helena says.

“So it’s up to me. All right. I will figure it out.” She is already trying to think out spaces, restrooms—it is awful that that is what she is thinking, but what choice is there. What choice.

They strip the sheets from the bed, fold them, find the laundry basket, put them in.

“I want to apologize to Miss Calder,” Myka says.

“Why?”

“Because of how we’ve been, here in her house… because of what we’ve done.”

“She was in the war, Myka,” Helena says. “She knows how precious… well. I imagine that is precisely why she gave us this opportunity. She would understand more clearly if one of us were a man, of course, though why that is so… I, if no one else, certainly gave her reason to see…”

And this startles Myka. “You and Miss Calder?”

Helena laughs, just a little. “No, my love. Of course not. But she could have helped destroy me. She did not. And for some time, I thought that meant… she was truly sympathetic. And then she was not… and now she is. As far as I can tell. She is, ironically, an enigma.”

“I don’t see why that’s ironic.”
“That is a very long story.”

“I swear, Helena, someday I will make you tell me everything. About everything.”

“And someday I will tell you,” Helena says. “Or someone will. But it will be years, years, before
you can know.”

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

“No, I don’t. I love you. I love you.” They are in the music room, and Myka draws Helena down to
the sofa with her.

“Wasn’t I to play for you?” Helena asks. “I want to. But I don’t want to.”

“Don’t,” Myka tells her. “I love you when you play. But I love you just as much when you don’t,
so hold me. If I have to choose between music and this? This, this, this.”

“I should be offended.”

“Why? Because I still think your hands belong on me instead of on your violin?”

“I play very well,” Helena says. But she pulls Myka to settle against her, and they sit like that, like
lovers who have done what they have done for hours and hours, and Helena’s mouth is again at her
neck, at her ear.

“I want to live with you,” Myka says. “Every single day with you.”

“The things I want with you… I can’t speak of them. I can barely even think of them.”

“Someday you will,” Myka tells her.

Helena exhales, and Myka’s body sinks in concert with her chest. “I wish I could believe you.”

“Someday you will,” Myka says again. Repetition should be irrevocable: saying something twice
should make it an incantation, should bring the truth of it into being. But Helena’s arms tighten: I
love you but I won’t ever believe you, they answer back. Myka’s bone-deepness rebels at this,
though her surfaces, those parts of her that are nearest Helena now and that will not be near her
soon, tell her that Helena has it right.

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The four rings have come and gone.

They might as well be listening to Miss Calder’s footsteps as she makes her way from the hotel
back to this house. Myka feels Helena’s arms around her become less and less pliable, until they
are not even pretending to rest against her body, but rather forming a rigid cage.

At the knock on the door, the cage springs open. “Tell her to come in,” Helena instructs. “I can’t do
the accent.”

“Come in,” Myka says. Her voice wobbles, so she tries it again. A little stronger. Not strong, but a
little stronger.

Miss Calder enters the house, and that is that: Myka and Helena are no longer alone. “I still don’t
like this hat,” she says in greeting, then, “are you two all right?”


Miss Calder walks into the music room. Her hair is down now, and she is carrying Helena’s violin case. It is hanging open, empty. “Myka, and you?” she asks.

“Yes,” Myka says, “but like Helena said.”

No one says a word for a while. Myka and Helena are still sitting together, but separate, and Miss Calder is studying them. Will they pass whatever test this is? Miss Calder opens her mouth, closes it. Then she opens it again to say, “We should play something.”


Miss Calder sighs. “Because ‘you’ just showed up at my house with your violin, that’s why. Did one night make you forget everything you ever knew about appearances?”

“Apparently,” Helena says. She looks over at Myka. “I suppose I’ll be playing for you after all.”

“Are you glad you waited?” Myka asks, and Helena smiles.

Miss Calder pointedly turns her back on them and begins rummaging through a stack of sheet music on a short table next to the piano. “I have invention number thirteen, transcribed for violin and cello. We could give that a try.”

Helena stands and clears her throat. “Well. And in the end Bach, as it happens.” She takes her violin and bow from the top of the piano and plays the first few notes of the allemande that Myka knows so well.

Now Myka smiles. “That wouldn’t have… I mean, you would never have had to.”

“But I like to show off for you,” Helena says. She has put something of the night, the morning, and the afternoon into her voice, and that note makes Myka want to ignore everything else in the world and rip into her again.

Miss Calder is hauling her cello towards her chair. “I suppose that’s true about the showing off. Yesterday evening? She played better than she has in months, Myka.”

“Guilty,” Helena says. She shrugs and raises the violin to her chin as Miss Calder situates herself. They should trade instruments, Myka thinks; the more delicate Miss Calder seems the right scale to hold the violin, and Helena’s large hands would not engulf the cello.

They play. Helena is terrible. Even Myka can hear it, and after a while Miss Calder says, “Oh, stop!” She shakes her bow at Helena. “I take it back. Showing off? I’ve heard four-year-olds with more legato.”

“My hands aren’t steady,” Helena says. She doesn’t look at Myka.

“I can tell. Once more, with concentration this time.”

Helena obeys. She braces her feet slightly differently on the floor; her brow furrows; and she moves her body less as she plays. Myka can hear a difference, although whether it will please Miss Calder… Helena seems not to know either, for when she looks up, her face wears an expression that says both that she wants approval and that she fears she will not get it. That she will never get
it.

Myka has not stopped to think about Helena’s parents, not much beyond what a funny idea it is to marry not for love or money but for hands. But now she wonders what they think of their daughter, her magic and her violin and her war and her intelligence work. Their son is married and has children. Their daughter… their daughter can palm a card far more easily than her brother can.

“Much better,” Miss Calder says.

Helena bows her head.

Myka is pleased for her, proud of her… but then she realizes the problem with Helena having played well: the session is over. Miss Calder is moving to restore her cello to its case, clearly expecting Helena to do the same with her violin.

For hours, their day has been ending, but now it has ended.

Helena doesn’t look at Myka as she puts her violin away, turns the clasp that holds the bow in its place, and latches the housing closed. “I have to leave before you,” she says. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to be the one who leaves, but I have to go first.”

Better if she had said nothing at all. Better if she had just gone to the front door without a single word and walked out through it. Myka had avoided tears earlier, but she can’t now: her eyes and her nose start to run, and she says “don’t go,” and she puts her arms around Helena. Miss Calder turns away. “Don’t go,” Myka says again.

Helena kisses her. Slow, sorrowful. “I have to,” she says.

“No,” Myka tells her. “No.” She is fully crying now; she must be turning red, her face a wet chaos as she says “no” again and again. She is in Helena’s arms, and her head is against Helena’s neck, and “no” is being dragged and drawn from her, over and over, and Helena’s hands are not enough to stop it, and Helena’s increasingly desperate repetitions of “my love” and “don’t do this” are not enough to stop it, and in the end the only thing that stops it is a sharp “Myka!” from Miss Calder. Myka breathes in another sob, but she raises her head.

“Take this handkerchief,” Miss Calder orders, holding out a white square, and Myka does. “Clean your face.” Myka wipes at her eyes, her nose. “Now,” Miss Calder says, “Helena, go.”

Helena kisses Myka one last time. She says “my love” one last time. Then, carrying her violin case, handbag, gloves, and the blue hat, she goes.

“Come sit down,” Miss Calder tells Myka.

That seems as reasonable a thing to do as anything else, now, so Myka walks to the sofa and sits. Miss Calder sits beside her. “Blow your nose,” she tells Myka. Myka blows her nose.

They sit in silence until Miss Calder shakes her head and says, “I should never have agreed to this. I should have known how it would hurt you.”

Myka can’t imagine what she could mean. “This didn’t hurt me. Not having this is what hurts me.”

“It did hurt you. Forbidden fruit is forbidden for a reason.”

Myka brings herself part of the distance to a laugh. “I wasn’t in any kind of paradise before this, before last night.”
“Maybe not. But you seemed to feel better than you do now.”

“What am I supposed to do?” She doesn’t expect Miss Calder to know, but she’ll at least say something.

“Oh, Myka,” is what Miss Calder says. “You do whatever you can, I suppose, but the world won’t change just because you or I or anyone else is unhappy with it.”

Myka blows her nose again. “Helena says you don’t just supervise the translation section.”

Miss Calder raises her eyebrows. She had clearly not been expecting that, but she says, drily, “Helena is extremely chatty.”

“Is that you doing whatever you can? Because you aren’t happy with the world?”

“In a way. I have some friends who respect my opinions, that’s all.”

“About Abigail?”

“Abigail won’t actually be Director,” Miss Calder says with a laugh, one that she gets all the way to. “Or President. Lifetimes aren’t long enough, I’m afraid.”

“But she’ll be something,” Myka pushes.

“Yes, she will.”

“What about me?”

Miss Calder says, “I don’t know what you want to be.”

“Neither do I.”

“I’m not lying when I say you’re my best. Abigail is clear. Very clear, the most clear. But you’re my best. So once you get an idea…”

“Is that why you wanted Helena to stay away from me?” Myka asks.

“Well, Helena,” Miss Calder sighs. “She’s everyone’s best. And yet there is absolutely nothing to be done with her.” She leans her head back against the sofa, as if even thinking that briefly about Helena is exhausting.

“What’s she doing here, then, if there’s nothing to be done with her?” Myka is thinking that this is likely to be her only opportunity for real information. That it took this disastrous situation to get it makes her sick, and that she is thinking that she can use the disaster, sicker still, but it’s like Abigail said: resources. Miss Calder is a resource. Myka’s heartbreak is a resource.

“She’s here because—well, you know about the project she’s on… was on. I don’t know what’s happening to it now, but it was something that the British didn’t have much faith in. And yet they had to pretend to support it, so Stewart Menzies decided to kill two problematic birds—show support, but not too much support—with one problematic stone named Helena.”

“Why is she problematic?”

“She is the kind of person who can be very useful to have around, but only if you can suffer through the times when she’s less useful to have around. She’s always been a peculiar girl, with a peculiar set of skills.”
“Why don’t they just use her as a spy? Wouldn’t she be a natural at that?”

“She is, and they have. But you know what Artichoke is—was—about.”

Myka nods. “Things that Helena knows about.” She stops. “So is it still about the same thing? Now that it’s back?”

“I don’t know,” Miss Calder says.

And Myka believes her, believes she is telling the truth, despite what she understands now, about the box and questions and answers and lies that are not. She complains, “She won’t tell me anything, but she keeps hinting. Whatever it is, it must be bad.”

“Things that come back from the dead are rarely benign,” Miss Calder says. Coming from anyone else, such a statement might sound too portentous, too much, something like silly. Coming from Miss Calder… it sounds cold.

Myka is talking to herself, mostly, when she says, “But it brought her back to me. At least it did that.”

Miss Calder doesn’t respond to that.

They are silent again, and Myka’s hands begin to knead the handkerchief she holds, simply for want of anything else to do. She looks down at the flimsy square as she twists it: it is damp, dirty. Ruined.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original tumblr tags: ends of idylls are never good, but all is not lost, (that beat comes later), and a big reason for telling a story like this is to show that, it doesn't have to end in tragedy, even if it feels like it will, even if it seems like there's no way out or around or through, because the world won't change just because you're unhappy with it, but if everybody does whatever they can, well then, maybe there will be fewer tragedies anyway
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

History, and the things on which it turns. I am not sure I have a whole lot else to say. This is a “point it in the next big direction” chapter: Myka has no idea what she has wrought… but this is how history happens. It is one decision, one action at a time, and you can’t know outcomes ahead of time, and further, it’s actually pretty rare that you can look back on something you did and say “Everything else that happened? It happened because I did this.” You might want to bear that in mind as we go forward.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Turn them down,” Steve tells Myka. “Say you won’t go.”

“How is she supposed to do that?” Abigail demands.

“She’s a girl,” Joshua says. “There are all kinds of things nobody would ask questions about.”

Abigail’s jaw drops. “What would you know about it?”

“My little sister tells me everything, whether I want her to or not, so I know you girls can basically do whatever you feel like doing.”

“Remind me to educate you later. Right now, this is about Myka.”

“Who has to turn them down,” Steve says, and Joshua nods.

They are all four in a booth at the diner. It is late Friday night, but no one has gone to the movies; instead, Abigail, Steve, and Joshua are arguing about Myka’s future, her immediate future, and Myka is letting them do it, if only because Steve got so agitated when he heard what was happening that he’d found it necessary not only to talk to her himself, but to call in reinforcements.

“Look,” Steve goes on now, “just tell your Miss Calder, tell her you can’t do it, and sure, maybe you’ll get in some trouble in the short run, but it is nothing like what’s likely to happen if you go. I told you not to get mixed up in this.”

Abigail says, “It’s a Security project now. Do you think it’s any kind of smart move for her to be turning down orders from Security? Attracting attention from Security?”

“It seems to me like she’s already attracted plenty of attention,” Steve says. He is more serious than Myka has ever heard him, and she is genuinely touched that he is so concerned for her well-being.

“Right,” Abigail says. “And so you think it’s a good idea for her to make them angry? They need a woman who translates and speaks Russian. We have only one woman who does that, unless you can find one on really short notice and get her a top secret clearance and sensitive compartmented. Can you do that, Steve? I know you’re a smart guy, but can you do that?”

“Of course I can’t do that!” Steve mutters. “Keep your voice down. I’m just saying that I don’t want anything to happen to Myka, and I would think you’d say the same thing.”
“If I could think of a way to get her out of this, I would! I of all people, Steve, because believe me, when it comes to saving Myka from herself, it should be clear that I have made that a priority!”

Joshua starts, “I still think—”

Abigail turns on him. “If you say one more word about her being a girl, so help me, I will kill you right here, and after that, I will never speak to you again. She cannot turn them down for any reason, do you understand me?”

Myka thinks they might go on all night like this. She finally says, “I don’t want to.”

“Go, right?” Steve asks her. “You don’t want to go?”

“No,” Myka says. “I don’t want to turn them down. I’m going, Steve. I told you before, whatever happens is just fallout, and this is part of it. I did this…I did this to myself. Whatever happens, I’m the one who set this whole thing in motion.”

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On Monday afternoon, Miss Calder had come to Myka’s desk. “There’s a meeting in Security that you need to be part of,” she said. “I’ve told them I’m sitting in too, so you don’t need to worry, but you do need to know before we go in: Helena will be there. And so will Nate. Will you be all right?”

Myka could not imagine being in the same room with Helena, and certainly not with Helena and Nate. “I don’t know,” she told Miss Calder. “Is it about… I mean, did someone see…”

Miss Calder shook her head. “No. Nothing at all like that. But you’re going to find out why Helena was trying so hard to keep from talking to you about the project.”

Myka had been in one-on-one meetings, of course; she’d been in larger ones, too, ones with all the Russian translators, or all the translators who dealt with enemy communications, or all who had top secret clearances. This was her first actual project meeting—if she were Abigail, she would have been exploding with glee—yet following Miss Calder out of the Translation room felt like the beginning of the long walk to an execution.

“What’s up?” Abigail whispered as Myka passed her desk.

“Tell you later,” Myka murmured back. Abigail had asked her a simple “you okay?” that morning, upon seeing Myka’s exhausted face, her swollen eyes. And Myka had said back, as simply, “no,” but she had also offered a more complicated “I will never be able to thank you enough.”

Miss Calder walked into the conference room first, and Myka, head down, followed. If she could just keep her head down… just keep her head down and not look up at anyone… but she looked, and there was Helena, and Myka pretended to cough, so that she could duck her head again, so that she could at least make some noise, something to take the place of the howl that wanted to escape her—because Helena was sitting next to Nate.

A long table and chairs, that was all the room contained. The furniture was simple, just flat surfaces, and Myka understood: few places to hide anything, whether a bug or a paper message or any other means of covert communication.

Three other people, other men, sat in the room. Myka recognized only one of them: Robert Bannerman, the deputy director of the Security Office.
Bannerman said, “Can we Hound-Dog everything and get on with it? I’ve got a half-dozen different places to be right now.”

Nate beckoned to a pocket-protectored tech who had appeared outside the door. He carried a metal box about the size of brick, a silver brick that whined and screeched as he carried it around the room, pointing it at each piece of furniture, at the light fixture, and then finally at each person—but apparently the whining and screeching was all good news, because the tech said, “Clear.” He backed out of the room and closed the door. Myka had never seen a Hound Dog before; she knew all the offices were swept regularly, but that usually happened after hours… the better to keep anyone from finding out who or what might have been compromised.

“Show on the road,” Bannerman now said. He was shorter than the other men, his black-framed glasses and slightly rumpled gray suit giving him a professorial air, but he was very clearly in command.

“All right,” Nate said. “Everybody, this is Myka Bering, from translation, and she—or rather, her voice—is going to make the Artichoke treatment work like it’s supposed to.”

Make Artichoke work… she was going to make Artichoke work? Myka couldn’t help herself; she looked again at Helena. Helena met her eyes but did not move; she barely blinked. Myka felt her own hands clenching, unclenching, clenching again. She brought her palms together and folded her fingers down. She had to hold herself still, or she would do something. She would twitch or make a sound or somehow some other way show that she was not prepared to be in this room, and whether that was due to Helena or Artichoke or any combination of those or any other things wouldn’t matter. Myka was in a project meeting with the deputy director of Security.

And Helena. Being across the room from Helena was barely tolerable, worse than Myka had imagined it would be, but it was better, slightly, than if she had had to be close to her. Being near would have meant seeing details: not just her hands but the pads of her fingers, the roughness of those on the left hand. Not just her hair but the downy softness of her hairline; not just her eyes but her eyelashes… and yet even from this distance Myka could see, and was unkindly pleased to note, that those eyes were dark underneath; she looked like she’d slept as little last night as Myka had. Two nights of little sleep, one of them after a day of almost no food… she should look terrible, just like I do, Myka thought. And yet the sight also made her want to bring Helena home and feed her and take her to bed, to sleep deeply this time, but then to wake up like they had… like they had yesterday. That was yesterday. That was yesterday, and today they were sitting across a table from each other and pretending, just as Helena had said they would do.

Nate went on, “Myka, what we’re going to do is re-run an op that had a fatal flaw… one that I think you can correct. These fools decided to use a male translator in a situation that clearly called for—”

One of the men Myka did not know, a rabbity man with reddish hair, said, “Don’t call me a fool. It wasn’t a flaw, and it wasn’t fatal. We were getting results.”

“Not good enough, Morse, and you know it.” Bannerman said. “You’re all going, correct?”

“I’m not,” Miss Calder said.

“Really, Vanessa? I thought this girl was yours. Sure you don’t want to get back out in the field, keep her safe from these goons?”

“She is mine, and these goons had better keep that in mind. But the op isn’t mine. I don’t want anything to do with it.”
Nate said, “Well, that’s good, because it’s mine now.”

The rabbity man, who Myka now knew was Morse Allen, said, “It’s still mine! It’s been mine for years! It’s been mine since it was Bluebird!”

“Morse, you’re mine now,” Nate said. He said it calmly, but with a hint of something else… the power and authority and threat that Myka remembered from his grasp on her arm, weeks ago.

Bannerman didn’t seem to care. He sighed and said, “Good luck there, Nate. Sci Intel sure as hell didn’t want him anymore.”

Nate said, “Sir, that’s because Sci Intel didn’t have the good luck to run into Myka Bering, who made me see the extremely clear flaw in their fucked-up—sorry, ladies, fouled-up—op.”

“It wasn’t a flaw!” Allen yelped again. “It shouldn’t have mattered, not if she—” and he jerked his head at Helena, “had done the hypnosis right in the first place! And you think to fix it we should bring another woman into this?”

Myka saw how Helena kept her mouth pressed shut. She also kept her hands very still.

Allen went on, “Look, Wendt’s new drug cocktail will be enough. He says it goes way beyond what Thompson approved, doesn’t it, doc?”

The other man—Wendt—finally spoke. “This cocktail and the hypnosis together, guaranteed.”

Paunchy, graying, slightly red-faced, particularly around the nose. He looked like he enjoyed cocktails of the more traditional kind, probably far too many and far too often.

Bannerman barked, “Where is Thompson? What happened to drugs being his baby?”

Wendt said, “Thompson’s stuck a decade ago, drugwise. Morse came calling, looking for something better, and I’ll tell you the same thing I’ve been telling him: this cocktail is it.”

Helena spoke for the first time. “I don’t see how you expect to obtain any sort of useful data if you vary the drugs this time. If both the drugs and the voice are different, how will you know what element is essential?”

“Helena, we can’t keep running this thing indefinitely,” Nate said. “We’ll run out of subjects.”

Helena kept going. “Different subjects each time. Yet another variable…” As she spoke, Myka watched the men’s faces. She wanted to tell Helena to stop talking, that they didn’t care what she had to say—but more than that, that their lack of caring proved that they didn’t deserve to hear anything she had to say.

“Look,” Nate said, “we have to be able to get results with anybody.” Myka was sure he was bothering to respond only because he and Helena, only because they…

Bannerman waved this off. “You have to get results with somebody. If this doesn’t work, I don’t care if you’ve got a hundred more subjects, this project dies its final death, and I start funding something with an actual prayer of success. Does everyone in this room understand me? Nate?” He got a nod. “Morse?” Another nod. “Wendt?” Another. “And what about you, Miss British Liaison? No, don’t bother; I’ll tell you what you can do. You can carry this message back to Menzies: we’ll do what we goddamn please, and he can like it, or get the hell out. We clear on that?” Helena nodded. “And Vanessa, your girl here will do her job?”

Miss Calder nodded too. “As long as it’s her job that she’s supposed to be doing.”
This made Bannerman laugh. “She sticks to translating, I’ll be happy. The last thing I need—from any of you—is somebody running off the reservation. I’ve got plenty of fires to put out elsewhere. Everybody got that too?”

Nods all around.

“All right. Get your asses to Frankfurt and show me some reason to believe we can really get these commie bastards to talk without knowing they did.”

Frankfurt?

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As the participants left the meeting, Helena jerked her head to indicate that Miss Calder should follow her, and since Myka had to go the same way… well, what could it hurt for her to follow a while too? But when they came to the hallway where Myka would have had to turn for Translation, Miss Calder said, “Oh no. You’re coming with us.” Helena nodded.

And so Myka found herself in Helena’s office for the first time in a very long time.

“Well, that was certainly ridiculous,” Helena said the second that she pulled the door closed behind them.

Myka’s surprise at the remark must have been apparent on her face, for Miss Calder said, “Don’t worry about bugs. It was wired up like a Christmas tree by the time Helena left, but they cleared it when the project died. I had it swept again this morning, right before Helena read me in on the whole sordid business.”

“So you can speak freely!” Helena said. “Quietly, but freely.”

“Really?” Myka asked, and Helena nodded. She was looking at Myka like she had on Saturday evening, with that same direct, open gaze, and her eyes seemed less tired, her face less pale—sitting in that meeting, Myka had begun to feel that Helena would always look at her like that, unmoving and unmoved. Now Myka sent up a prayer of thanks and said, “Miss Calder, could I ask you one more favor? If Helena and I could just have one second…”

“Oh lord.” Miss Calder shook her head. “Didn’t we have enough of this yesterday?” She didn’t leave the office, but she turned and faced the door all the same, and Myka pulled Helena to her and kissed her. She wanted the kiss to say something like “they don’t value you, but I do” or “they don’t know you, but I do,” but she forgot that idea the minute they were actually in each other’s arms again; all the kiss could possibly have been saying was “this is where I want to be.” And it was such a blessed surprise to find herself there, because she hadn’t let herself expect even to see Helena today, much less touch her. Certainly not kiss her. For just a second, she let herself forget where they were… we are together, we are together somewhere that is ours and ours alone… and then they parted, because of course they had to part, but Helena was smiling when they did. She was still smiling when she moved away and sat down behind her desk. She smiled even more widely when Myka seated herself across from Helena and said, in her best Abigail voice, “Okay, Miss Calder. Sentimentality over.”

Miss Calder turned back around and seated herself next to Myka. She directed at both other women a look that managed to combine indulgence with dismay. But the next thing Myka said was not an apology or a defense; the next thing she said was, “Frankfurt?”

“They’re doing this in Germany,” Miss Calder said. “Not on American soil.” Just as Steve had
“Morse tried some variation in Panama early this year, before I got here, or so I’m told. But last month was Germany as well. More Soviet agents in custody there.”

“Why exactly am I involved?” Myka asked. “In the meeting… what does it have to do with my voice? My being a female translator?”

Miss Calder said, “I think you had better make this part very clear, Helena.”

“Right. The fatal flaw they were discussing is this: they were trying to convince a Soviet agent that he was talking not to interrogators but to his wife… for which purpose they used a male translator, a male voice.”

“The agent was hypnotized,” Myka said. “And drugged?”

“That’s why they thought it wouldn’t make a difference.”

“But they were wrong,” Myka said.

Helena nodded. “Apparently.”

“But you could—” Myka glanced at Miss Calder.

“She knows,” Helena said.

“I do know,” Miss Calder said. “I also know what’s coming next.” She shook her head.

Myka said, “Okay. You could have done it.”

“I’ve told you I can’t reveal that.”

“But you could have saved the whole thing! Fixed it, made it work! And then the project wouldn’t have died, and you could have come back.”

Helena picked up a quarter. It began to take its customary tumble over her right-hand knuckles, and Myka did not like that this idea seemed to make Helena nervous. “There are many reasons why I could not have done any such thing,” Helena said. “Chief among them, if I had suddenly begun speaking Russian, do you think I would have been allowed to set foot on an airplane bound for the United States? I would have been sent back to England every bit as quickly as I was when they killed the project, in addition making it far more unlikely that I could ever come back here again. Would you consider that a positive outcome?”

“I can’t believe they would care, not if you made everything work.”

Miss Calder said, “Myka. You were in that meeting. Allen and Bannerman don’t want her here, and they don’t want her on the project. You of all people know how hard they’ve been trying to find reasons to get rid of her.”

Myka looked at Helena. “But don’t they need you for the hypnosis?”

“They do… well. To some extent, but Morse thinks they don’t. He took one weekend seminar, from someone whom I believe I can safely call a charlatan, and he fancies himself an expert. ‘I hypnotized secretaries and made them carry classified documents out of the building!’ he boasted to me. Well, congratulations, Mesmer Junior.” The quarter was moving faster, back and forth, back and forth. Myka wondered if this was how she actually would hypnotize someone: a Russian agent,
a secretary, anyone. “Hypnosis is interesting, is challenging, only when the person you are attempting to hypnotize has some reason to resist. Tell a secretary she’ll lose her job if she doesn’t let you hypnotize her? Amateur hour!”

Miss Calder said, “Helena, you’re getting a little disproportionately upset. I know what these meetings do to you, but you have got to calm down.”

“I am not in any kind of mood to calm down.” Helena smacked her left hand on the desk, and a stack of papers jumped.

Myka jumped a bit too, and she worried about those hands again. “Helena,” she said softly. This, too, was an intimacy, one that before Saturday evening, Saturday night, Sunday, she would most likely not have felt free to offer.


Myka heard a chuckle from Miss Calder, who said, “I think it might be of general benefit to the world, Myka, if we could actually employ you as her tamer.”

“I am not a circus animal, thank you very much,” said the beast in question.

“I’m pretty sure I just said you were a lion. Aren’t you flattered?” Which made Helena raise her shoulders and stiffen her neck, just as a cat might. Myka would not have been surprised to hear her voice a small, disgruntled hiss.

“Abigail would love to be hearing this,” Myka said. Abigail would love it, and Myka did love it, that she could be sitting here in this office once again, that she was the one who made this happen. She understood now that if she had not gone to see Nate, if she had not made him think that a woman’s voice—her voice—could save the project, then none of this would be happening. She was responsible for bringing Helena back, for giving them this second chance. The project had got a second chance too, but the project mattered not at all. She felt gleeful, a huge overflowing of self-confidence, almost self-congratulation. She thought that perhaps this was what Abigail felt most of the time.

“Abigail would love to be running this,” Miss Calder said. “You two, the op, the entire situation.”

Helena said, “I’d rather she were. The entire situation would be quite different, I suspect. We certainly would not be going back to Germany on Sunday with an amateur hypnotist itching to throw me over, an untested drug cocktail that, who knows, could render a subject speechless… and finally a translator who has no idea what she’s let herself in for.”

“Hey!” Myka protested.

“You don’t have any idea,” Miss Calder said. She crossed her arms, as if to ward off both Myka and Helena. “It’s a sordid op. I wasn’t lying when I said I didn’t want any part of it.”

“She isn’t wrong, but I don’t want you to worry too much, Myka,” Helena said. “I’ll do everything I can to keep you safe.”

“I’m not worried,” Myka said, but it had nothing to do with whether she believed Helena could keep her safe. She was the exact opposite of worried: she was excited. Sunday. How could she possibly be expected to wait until Sunday?

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“I don’t care what you set in motion,” Steve says stubbornly. “Some avalanche that’s going to bury you, as far as I can see, but you can still get out of the way. Myka, everything Artichoke is about… you shouldn’t be about any of those things.”

Myka sighs. “I work here, Steve. So do you. So do Abigail and Joshua. We all work here, and we all know the Agency does some things. I don’t see you quitting, so I think you’re about those things, and I’m about those things, and so’s Abigail, and so’s Joshua. You may not like it, but it’s true.”

“I for one,” Abigail says, “would not put it past this person to have a plan of some kind.” She eats a contented bite of her BLT. She and Joshua are the only ones eating: Steve is too upset, and Myka is too wound up.

Myka can’t help herself; she snorts a laugh. “I for one am starting to think that this person just makes it up as this person goes along.”

Joshua says, “Wait, do I know who this person is?”

“No,” Abigail tells him. “And you definitely should keep it that way.”

“But am I the only one here who doesn’t know?” he persists. “Steve, do you know?”

Steve says, “The only thing I really know is that it’s a bad idea.”

“Steve,” Myka says. “I will go, and I will do my job, and then I will come home. That’s all.”

Steve says, “It’s Artichoke, Myka. That won’t be all.” He shakes his head like he is a child trying to keep from crying.

Myka wants to reassure him, but all she can think, all she has been able to think since Monday, is that she and Helena are allowed to talk to each other again without arousing any kind of suspicion, that they have kissed each other—extremely quietly, extremely cautiously—in her office more than once this week, and that she herself is responsible for this amazing state of affairs. She and Helena can talk to each other, and it is safe for them to close a door to separate themselves from the rest of the world. Artichoke doesn’t even matter, now that these things are true. Artichoke doesn’t even matter.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original tumblr tags: I say the following because I am pretty sure I know it for a fact:, being crazy in love feels strong, but it is often a shaky foundation, and it can take an awful lot of sweat equity, to build that house into something of value that'll stand, but I will also say that that sweat you put in, can take a lot of different forms
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

The original posting of this chapter on tumblr was delayed a bit by a plumbing mishap, and I introduced it thusly: "So I beg your indulgence—I wish I could say I would give you narrative butterflies and cupcakes to make up for it, but instead there’s going to be a lot of… not cupcakes. Maybe some sorta hot not-cupcakes? That's the best I got for the time being." That's pretty much still the best I got, so I should probably still beg your indulgence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It is Sunday morning. Myka is in the front seat of a staff car headed to Andrews Air Force Base, and she is letting the driver, an airman, try to make conversation with her. He is young. He is handsome. He is polite—he says he is from the South, where they remember what manners are for, ma’am. He is planning to become an officer. He wants to fly, any kind of planes, so he is extremely pleased to be taking these Agency folks to the flight line. It is usually generals and admirals, to and from the Pentagon, or Capitol Hill, just office to office. He also rarely has the pleasure of driving lovely ladies anywhere at all, ma’am.

He is not interesting enough to keep her from spending most of her awareness on the back seat of the car, where Helena is sitting next to Nate. Nate, who had simply helped Helena into the back seat and then slid in beside her.

"We must be extremely careful," Helena had warned her, and Myka knew that meant many things, but at the start that she must not allow Nate’s assumptions to make her bristle; she let the polite young airman help her into the front of the car, said “thank you,” and did not look at Helena, in whose arms she had been barely a half-hour before, behind that closed office door, stealing five minutes before they were to leave, stealing ten, talking in the most quiet of whispers, breathing love into each other’s ears.

“How am I to resist you in your new suit?” Helena had asked, running her hands all over the dark sherry rayon of the jacket, making Myka pant, shallowly, to keep from gasping. “What have you done with your wide skirt and your crinolines?”

“You said to pack for a week!” Myka accused.

“I see. No room in the suitcase?”

“I had to buy two suits,” Myka told her, also accusingly.

“I think the fit of this one on you is divine,” Helena said as she pulled Myka’s hips against hers. “But I wish the skirt were shorter.”

Myka kissed her. “Thinking about you saying that… thinking about you thinking it… is not going make ‘be extremely careful’ any easier.” She kissed her again. “I don’t understand how you do it.”

“Do what?”
“Keep from thinking about this all the time.”

Helena gave a nearly silent chuckle. Or a choke. “I don’t keep from thinking about this all the time. I knew I would never be able to, for as I tell you over and over again, I’m weak. Why won’t you ever believe me?”

“Because you are so very strong,” Myka said, and this time it was her hands traveling, tempted and threatening to go where they should not. Helena’s skirt was shorter than Myka’s: the previous year’s length, and now Myka was sure she would be thinking about that, too.

“You’re stronger,” Helena said.

Now Myka sits in the front seat and tries to tell herself that this is such a small thing: she can certainly withstand Nate appropriating what should have been, what should always be, Myka’s place at Helena’s side. She can certainly, certainly withstand hearing every other word as they talk to each other in some kind of operational shorthand… because at least she is not being subjected to smiling and laughing.

“So where y’all from?” the airman asks Myka. “Because I never met anybody in Washington who was from Washington. Or can’t you tell me, if you work for the spies?”

A small thing: to take her attention away from the back seat. To do just that, that alone. “I should say it’s top secret,” Myka tells him, and she tries out a laugh. “But… Colorado. I’m from Colorado.”

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A warm wind blows over the tarmac where their airplane sits. Luggage is being put into the hold by young men uniformed like their driver, who had told Myka it had been a real pleasure meeting her and that he hoped to go to Colorado someday now because she’d made it sound so fun, except he might not be real good at Coloradoing because it was cold, but he’d be willing to try. So she’d got that right, at least.

As they arrived, Myka had noticed a Navy admiral near the plane, accompanied by yet another very young, very handsome man in uniform. Myka recognized Allen and Wendt as well, and standing apart from them, off to the side, was a blond woman who looked to be about Myka’s age.

Now Nate is talking to the admiral, Wendt, and Allen, but he had looked Helena off when she tried to approach them. So Helena is staring daggers at all the men, and yet from Myka’s perspective that is oddly fine, because she’s standing near Myka as she does it. Myka wishes she were Helena’s tamer. That way it would be perfectly acceptable for her to put a hand on a tweed-covered arm and stroke softly. As it is, all she can do is say, “Are you all right?”

Helena snaps, “I want to commit murder. Thus: situation normal.”

The blond woman sees that Myka and Helena are talking, and she walks to them. “Hi,” she says. Her voice is high, a little breathy. “I’m Barbara, Dr. Wendt’s assistant. Are you the other assistants?”

She is tentative. Myka wants immediately to reassure her, to say that she is among friends, but then Helena swivels her head to glare. And now Myka wants immediately to head off anything Helena might be inclined to say, so she tells Barbara, “Well, I translate Russian. And Helena, I mean Miss Wells, is part of the operations team. I don’t actually think there are any other assistants.”

Helena says, and it is nasty and angry and does not surprise Myka at all, “The admiral has an aide,
that young man in uniform over there. Perhaps you and he could find common ground.” Myka wants to hand her a roll of quarters and a deck of cards and send her to a corner.

Instead, she tries to ignore Helena’s radiating hostility. She says, “I guess we didn’t know Dr. Wendt would be bringing anyone with him.”

Barbara shrugs—it’s a helpless little gesture. “I guess they didn’t either,” and she tilts her head in the direction of Nate and the others, “because I’m pretty sure they’re arguing about me.”

“It’ll be fine,” Myka says. “Don’t worry. I mean, either way, I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“I wouldn’t want to be you if they cross him.”

Helena sniffs. “I believe we can handle ourselves.”

“You can’t handle him.”


Barbara looks around, then says quietly, “He’s the kind of man who gets upset. Who needs someone to calm him down, and I can do that.”

Helena says, “Doubtless.” The sneer and the innuendo in the word are palpable. It is the meanest thing Myka has ever heard her say, and she looks at Helena in astonishment.

Helena looks back at her with narrowed, cold eyes, and Myka wants to ask why they are having a fight about this girl, when whatever her relationship with Wendt, it is clear that she is simply in a strange situation, one that she fears could turn ugly. “I am in the same kind of situation,” Myka wants to remind Helena. She can’t do that, so she thinks it would be better not to talk to Helena at all. She asks Barbara, “So do you and Dr. Wendt travel a lot? For his work?”

“He does some consulting for the military,” Barbara says. She moves away from Helena, closer to Myka, and that makes Helena glower even more ostentatiously. “So he goes to bases. I went with him to Florida last month.”

“Was it nice?” Myka asks. “I’ve never been to Florida.”

Barbara shakes her head. “It was hot. I see why people go in the wintertime instead.”

Helena mutters, “This is inane,” and she stalks toward the argument the men are having. Myka can see whose side in that argument Helena is likely to take, and if she had any pull at all, Barbara would be hustled without ceremony into the car with the conversational southern airman and be on her way home before the airplane finishes loading.

But Helena has no pull at all. Moments later, Wendt beckons Barbara to him, confidently, reassuringly, and now Myka is alone. There aren’t any other assistants… but there aren’t any other translators, either.

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Myka had been excited about every part of the operation, but especially about flying, about being on an airplane for the first time in her life. “You think you’ll like it, but you won’t,” Helena had told her. “Transatlantic flights are interminable. And hideously loud.”

“Hideously loud” turns out to have been accurate; as the engines started, Myka had thought “Well,
this isn’t so bad,” but she hadn’t considered how she would feel after an hour. After two hours. Now the novelty has worn off, now she is trying to read—Turgenev’s *Ottsy i deti*, just to make sure she has recently thought fully in Russian and not English—but she can’t concentrate, because noise is the only thing in the world. It has taken up residence in her ears; it pulses behind her eyes; the vibrations threaten to shake her body into pieces… they will be fed meals on the flight, Helena has told her, but at this point Myka expects her senses of smell and taste, too, to be blunted by this unrelenting, and Helena was right about this too, seemingly interminable roar.

She wishes she were sitting with Helena, but Helena is once again beside Nate. Allen is with the admiral (his last name is Hill, but no one addresses him as anything but “Admiral” or calls him anything but “the admiral”); Wendt is with Barbara. Myka is sitting next to the admiral’s aide, and that makes very clear where the translator falls in this group. The aide is lovely, beautifully clean-cut, but once he’d heard that Myka’s reason for being here was her mastery of Russian—and once he’d seen her take out a book that looked like something Stalin himself would read—he seemed to decide that she was practically a commie herself and that he would be better off not getting to know her very well at all.

So she sits and presses her fingers to her temples against the building force of her headache and tries not to look at the back of Helena’s head, at her neck and shoulders. It is practically the symphony all over again. Helena’s shoulders are not bare, but it is practically the symphony. This week has been the symphony: last weekend sounded of Mahler, but now there is cacophony, in Myka’s ears and in her mind, that might as well be Schoenberg. Practically the symphony, with wardrobe the distinguishing difference: suits instead of gowns and party dresses.

And yet one other thing, Myka reminds herself, tries to keep reminding herself: you know, now, that you love her, and that she loves you.

That knowledge should make it better, or tolerable at least, that Myka is once again not beside Helena. That knowledge should be enough for now, for this flight on this plane. But there are ten more hours of this flight on this plane. Ten more hours of roaring and pounding and this is what they should do to that Soviet spy, she thinks, because Myka would now, already, tell anybody anything, about the Agency or the Soviets or even what she imagines when she looks at Helena’s neck and shoulders, if that would earn her a moment of silence.

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She had been supposed to see someplace foreign, someplace different, but instead, all she is seeing is a dark road illuminated only by headlights, as she once again sits in the front seat of a military staff car. The driver of this one is not interested in conversation; he stares straight ahead and drives very fast.

It’s three in the morning here? Four? She is still dazed from the noise of the plane, such that she can barely discern the engine of the car as it revs along. They are being driven outside the city to an inn, somewhere far out in the country, near the house where they will do… what they are here to do. Steve was right: this isn’t what Myka is about. Myka is about sitting at her desk and getting her work done, not racing through the German countryside to a place where American laws can’t find anyone. And yet maybe that is exactly what an op is about: turning into someone else. She doesn’t want to do that; all she wants to do is go home to her apartment and sleep. She does not even care, not at this moment, that Helena is in the back seat of the car—is Helena turning into someone else too?—that Nate is there, and this time Allen also; the three of them are part of this strangeness, this play or this movie that is running all around her. Myka doesn’t belong in it. Nate and Allen do, and maybe even Helena does, but Myka doesn’t.
Their car arrives before the admiral’s; rooms are parceled out to them, on the third floor, so they
climb stairs that are dark and paneled and from some century that is not this one, and Myka carries
her own suitcase because Nate is carrying Helena’s and Allen has made it plain that he intends to
ignore Myka just as heavily and angrily as he does the hypnotist who preempts him.

And suddenly she is alone in a room, but it is not her apartment. It has fixtures and features that are
mostly familiar, yet alien enough to make her jittery. She sits on the bed—it seems set too high.
Her eyes are shrinking from the too-yellow lamplight, trying to crawl backwards into her head; she
wants to sleep, but she dozed on and off on the plane, despite the noise, despite Helena’s neck and
shoulders, and is it even worth it to get undressed, to actually go to bed? They are to begin the
operation when morning comes, and that will happen in a mere few hours.

A basin and a pitcher sit on a low—too low—table near the far wall. Myka goes to see if she might
be able to splash her face with water, to clean up, to shock herself back to herself. Fortunately, the
pitcher is full, and she finds that she does, with her face wet, feel slightly less like she has found
herself on Mars.

The uncanniness begins to return, however, as she listens to voices rise in the next room: men’s
voices. The one on this side is Allen’s room, she thinks she remembers; she thinks also, but is not
sure, that Helena is to her right.

She can’t hear all the words. “No… not run the… And if you… last time? … fix it for you… your
job… hers. End of discussion, Morse.” Nate. Louder at the end. Emphatic.

“You weren’t even there,” Allen shouts, and Myka can hear every word quite clearly: he is furious.
“Everyone knows exactly why you brought that British bitch back, and it’s got shit to do with this
op, which she fucked over in the first place!”

“You think you know it all, Morse?” Nate says. His voice is still loud, but it isn’t angry like
Allen’s. It’s… relaxed. Unconcerned. Myka can hear, very clearly, that Allen really is his. “I’ll
give you one important piece of information: you say anything out loud again about what I do or
why I do it, you get ready for consequences.” He could have Allen fired, Myka knows. Arrested.
Questioned. Worse? And if he could have Allen fired, arrested, questioned, or worse? This is
Nate’s op. He could do the same to any of them. Any of them.

Myka is standing in a room in Germany. She is not carrying a civilian passport, and she does not
know if that means she could even leave the country if she were not under the auspices of the
military or the Agency. Her anticipatory excitement at the idea of being in a foreign country is fast
turning into very real dread at being in a completely foreign situation… Helena’s presence was
supposed to be, was at least in Myka’s mind supposed to be, the most exciting part, yet they have
barely spoken to each other. They have been closer while standing in a museum, having a
clandestine conversation about their childhoods, than they have been thus far here, than Myka now
expects they will ever be able to be here. Why had she been so foolish as to think that “be
extremely careful” would mean anything other than “keep even our eyes from meeting”?

They had had their words on the ground at Andrews, and then the slightest of exchanges when they
stopped to refuel: “Myka?” Helena had said, and her voice had barely even been a sound, more a
gentle vibration that miraculously made its way through the ringing in Myka’s ears.

“I’m okay,” Myka said to her. She held up the Turgenev. “Practice.” She’d also found that
wrapping her fingers around the book and gripping as tightly as she could gave her some strange
measure of relief from the headache, so she was reluctant to let it leave her hands.

“I can’t read the title, of course,” Helena said. But she smiled, and that acknowledgement of shared
secrets wasn’t much… but it had been enough to get Myka through the rest of the flight.

Now she hears the door of the room next to hers slam: it doesn’t seem like Nate’s style to slam a door—and he wasn’t the angry one—so it must be Allen in some display of petulance. Another door opens, closes. Nate in his room? It doesn’t matter, she tries to tell herself. And yet if she feels like this already, now… what about when the op starts? But she isn’t really involved in it; it doesn’t matter what happens; all that matters is that she go where she’s told to go and do the talking she’s told to do. It isn’t her op.

She decides, very consciously, that what she will do is take off her jacket and lie down, on this bed that is too high. If she sleeps, fine. If not, then at least she’ll be nearly dressed, ready for the morning.

Another door opens and closes. The washroom is at the end of the hallway; doors will open and close. She will drive herself crazy if she tries to figure out who is doing what all the time. Better not to hear, better not to know…

She hears a quiet tap: just one. It can’t be her door; it’s too quiet. Then there is one more, and it might be near her door? Then two. Three, barely pats, but when more begin, she knows there will be five, and she flies from the bed to the door. She had paid no attention, when she came in, to whether it squeaked or creaked or was heavy or light, so now she pulls too hard, because it is lighter than it looks, and it moves too fast, so Helena is caught off-balance. She stumbles into the room, and Myka tries to close the door quickly behind her, but that makes it squeak, so she slows down and it quiets, but now she is moving so slowly that anyone might emerge from a room, might see Helena here… but that would be fine, wouldn’t it? They are the only women on the op—the only women from the Agency on the op—and women talk to each other. It would be fine. Helena can’t be expected to sit beside Nate every single moment, can she?

But she can, and Myka knows it—because Myka may be responsible for what is happening, but the op is Nate’s, and they are all Nate’s. So Myka says to Helena, “You can’t be here. You have to get out.”

“I wanted to make sure you were all right,” Helena says.

“I’m fine. But I really think you should go.” She doesn’t think Helena should go at all. They are behind a door… behind a door in a room with a bed, and Helena is still wearing that skirt… but it is an op, and it starts in hours, and they do not belong to each other here, they belong to someone else…

Helena’s face is pure disbelief, and it causes Myka agony. “You do?” she asks. She is too loud. She is not paying attention, and she is too loud.

“Sssshh,” Myka tells her. “Didn’t you hear them before? Nate and Allen? They were arguing, and okay, they were yelling, but Nate wasn’t at first, and if I could hear that, then someone will hear us, right now.”

“What were they arguing about?”

Myka wonders if she could get away with lying to Helena… “You. Allen was saying Nate wasn’t there last time, and that you’d ruined the op, and that he’d brought you back for reasons that had nothing to do with the op anyway.”

“He didn’t say it that delicately, I’m sure. I’m sorry you had to hear it.” She hangs her head. “I know you know that Nate is here, but I hope you also know that what I want is not what he—”
She shouldn’t have to say it. Myka heard Allen say it, but she knew it already, and Helena shouldn’t have to say it too. Myka tells her, “I’m trying not to think about it, okay? But if you’re standing right here I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.” And she is standing right here, because otherwise they can’t hear each other whisper, and Helena’s face is so sad, so regretful, so desolate—and yet so beautiful, and Myka can’t stand being the cause of the desolation, the regret. She wants to be strong, but she understands, now, that she is about to be weak, and of course it will happen in a moment when she feels herself physically strong, when she knows her body will hold her steady as can be, because her arms are seizing Helena, shoving that skirt up as she’d wanted to before, finding exactly what she wants, and Helena is smiling and her neck is moving and she is whispering I love you and Myka believes her.

This is weakness. Succumbing to Helena’s sad eyes, exulting in her loving smile, encouraging Helena’s hands in turn to touch her own new skirt, to do more than touch, to move it as she will… this is weakness. Letting Helena move her to the bed, accepting her hands, her mouth… this is weakness. She knows they should not, but she wants it so badly, so very badly that she cannot say stop, cannot beg for this to stop… this is weakness.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

Historical note: I could have Warehoused this chunk of the narrative up a lot more, but I wanted to keep it very close to reality, as is the goal for most of this story, because I am really very interested in the history (seen, of course, through the lens of a particular romance). Allen was a real person; so was Wendt. An admiral did accompany them on a trip very similar to this one; I gave him a name and an aide. Wendt did bring his (female) assistant with him on that trip, and she was a point of contention. She was the only woman who was part of it. I gave her a name too. I like to think I also gave her an ally of sorts, but we’ll see.

Original tumblr tags: they might not actually have left from Andrews, I couldn't get that info locked down in time, but I will try to find out for sure before transfer to AO3, also they may have flown a C-121 outfitted for passengers, but that's a pretty big plane, so I will try to work that out too [update: Andrews and a C-121 are still my best guesses, but I'm happy to be corrected if anybody's got better information]
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

No, seriously, and then they all lived happily ever after, somehow, eventually, because I am not going to kill anybody. I have really really REALLY had enough of dead lesbians to last me a good long time. (Unless it’s mrsdaphnefielding who’s killing them; then it’s epic and amazing and even then NOT OKAY, but I will reluctantly accept death if it is that well done.) So anyway, here’s some more of a story in which gay women are not going to die. They are going to suffer almost as much as they might if they were in a Russian novel, but they are not going to die.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Helena does not stay in Myka’s bed for long. She slips away before the sun truly begins to rise, and in her absence the room becomes foreign again, its proportions askew, its very air turning sideways to fit uncomfortably into Myka’s lungs.

“This is no way to be careful,” she’d said to Helena as they lay together, alone in bed, alone behind the door. Alone, but surrounded.

“I know.” Helena was breathing against Myka’s collarbone, creating a small jungle of warm humidity near Myka’s neck. It was so easy for Myka to tilt her mouth down into that space, to kiss Helena again, to close her eyes and pretend that they were truly sheltered. That they could shelter each other. So easy, so seductive to imagine that…

But as morning approaches, they must see to their safety. Even alone, each in her own room, they are not safe—they are never safe—but they are safer. So Myka now lies by herself in a room on Mars, her arm pressed against her chest in a hopeless attempt to soothe her weak, yet unmanageable heart, her hand resting against her cool, dry collarbone.

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Breakfast is a bizarre affair, as their entire party gathers in the inn’s dining room. Helena tells Myka good morning, in the course of saying the same thing to everyone, and Myka does not understand how the same person who can maintain this distance in the company of others—who can be so careful in this way—could possibly have been so rash as to knock on Myka’s door last night.

Myka sits with Barbara for the meal. “Did you sleep at all?” Barbara asks.


“Me neither. I had a headache from the plane. I still have a headache from the plane. I think I might have a headache from the plane from now on.”

Myka laughs a little at that. “Helena—I mean Miss Wells—tried to warn me about the noise, but I didn’t believe her.”

“Are you and she friends? Like, not just at work? Because I won’t tell anybody; you don’t have to
keep correcting yourself.”

“We… sort of know each other. She’s really good friends with two other people I work with, and they—”

“Because maybe if I don’t tell on you, then you wouldn’t tell on me?”

“About?” Myka asks.

“About me and Richard.” To Myka’s uncomprehending head-shake, she says, “Richard. Dr. Wendt. Because we… you know.”


“That’s a relief. Because you seemed like such a nice person, and I just… I hate the idea of having to hide everything from everybody. You know what I mean?”

It would be safer to say no. But instead, “Yes,” Myka says. Her eyes desperately want to flick to Helena, who is sitting, per usual, next to Nate. To stop herself, she has to look down at her food—a bread roll, soft cheese, tomato slices—and then pinch the bridge of her nose to hold her weak, traitorous gaze there. “I am pretty sure I do know what you mean.”

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They are driven, in staff cars again, to the house where the MGB agent is being held. From the outside, the building might be just another part of the rural landscape, just a place where a hardworking farmer and his family rest their heads at night. They would rest their heads in this pretty, charming white house with dark shutters and a dark, sloping roof… it is practically like something out of a fairy tale.

Stepping inside yields a different picture entirely: the space has been altered completely, modified for the purpose of holding and interrogating. The windows that seemed so charming, covered as they are on the outside by rustic shutters, let in no light. The reconstructed interior of the house is a warren of smaller spaces. There are interview rooms wired for recording, as well as reinforced cells constructed in the house’s interior so that they will have no windows. This is so that no one can see in, Myka understands, but also so that prisoners cannot see out and track the passage of time. Military police guard the entire… facility, is the best word Myka can come up with, but they do so from inside, discreetly. Myka wonders if there might be a fake German farmer living there too, just for cover.

Nate tells Wendt to get started, and one of the soldiers takes him and Barbara, who is carrying a suitcase that must contain the drugs, down one hallway of the warren.

The admiral tells Nate, “I’ll be on the phone for a while. Let me know if everything isn’t in order for you, but otherwise, I’ll leave you to it.”

Myka thinks she might be able to risk asking Helena a question, a real factual question. “Doesn’t he want to know what’s happening? I mean, while it happens?”

Nate is the one who answers. “He’s here only for approvals, if we need extra assistance. Or if something goes wrong, he’ll help clean up the mess.”

“The mess?” Myka asks before she can stop herself.
“Figuratively,” Nate says. “All kinds of things can happen during an op, even something like this, one that should be easy to keep quiet. Local police can be a problem.”

Helena says, “That’s true. And, strangely, so can children. They like to observe unusual goings-on, then run and tell about them to their parents.” Nate nods in agreement, and Myka seethes. *Don’t have things in common with each other,* she wants to shout. She wants to throw something at both of them, to break their solidarity, because this accord, professional accord? It is not like Helena taking his arm: it is not in any way fake.

Allen does her the favor, figuratively: “Can’t you two reminisce on your own time? Could we just get on with this? The faster we get something to give Bannerman, the faster we start pushing this out into the field.”

Helena curls her lip, just slightly. “You know perfectly well that we shouldn’t try to make him say much today. I need to determine how suggestible he is, how easily he’ll go into a trance.”

“So I have to translate the part where you hypnotize him?” Myka asks. “Where you tell him to go into a trance, or whatever it is you say?”

Helena doesn’t smile at Myka, but she does remove the sneer. “With luck, there will be no need to tell him anything. Physical manipulation is enough for some people. The agent last time was very easy to put under… as it happens, when people are accustomed to following orders, to doing as they are told, it can be quite easy indeed. He of course will be trying to resist, but I am assuming that Dr. Wendt’s drugs will break down that initial level of self-control.”

“Of course they will,” Allen says. “More than that. I mean, even Thompson’s weak stuff could do that. And since this’ll be stronger, I don’t see why you can’t just get started.”

Helena says, and the sneer is back, more prominent, “Oh, yes, we’ll simply get started. Before determining not only suggestibility, but the several other things we need to know as well. We don’t even know how he feels about his wife! Does he love her? Does he trust her? Can we make him trust her?”

“At least he’s got a wife,” Nate says, and Myka knows, and hates that she knows, that she herself would use precisely that tone if she were trying to get Helena to calm down. “Apparently we’ve got a spare out here who isn’t even married.”

Myka tries not to focus on the word *spare.* She says, “But even him… he’s got a mother, though.”

“Men don’t tell things to their mothers,” Nate explains, as if to a naïve child. “They tell them to their wives.”

Allen says, with a more open tone of contempt, “Wives, whatever: they tell them to women. Their mothers aren’t women.”

It’s true that Myka doesn’t tell her own mother much of anything… and wouldn’t, not even if her mother asked. She has generally not told things to anyone… but she would tell them to Helena. If she were sure she was talking to Helena? She would tell her just about anything.

Allen adds, “But by the time Wendt’s done with him, he won’t even know that his mother’s human. Or his wife. I’m telling you, it isn’t going to matter whose voice it is, just so it’s speaking Russian.”

“Well,” Helena says, tightly, holding herself back again, “fortunately, Myka does speak Russian. So let’s look on her being a woman as insurance, shall we?”
A soldier comes to Nate and says, “Sir, the doctor says you can get started.”

“Excellent,” Nate says. “Morse, honestly, there’s no real hurry today. But I do want to see where we stand.”

The soldier leads them in the same direction Wendt and Barbara were taken; they come to a long window in the hallway. Myka sees that it must be a two-way mirror, for it looks in on a glaringly white room that is empty except for a metal chair in which their subject—his given name is Alex, Nate says, but no one is to know his family name—sits. He is slumping forward a bit. Already too drugged to sit up? Just dazed?

It’s ridiculous, given where she works, but still, she expected someone who would look different somehow: someone who would look, that is, like a spy. This man is just someone tired, middle-aged. He’s just a man. He might be thirty-five, forty. Just a man, one with sandy hair and slightly broad facial features… he might be Myka’s cousin. He *might* be Myka’s cousin; she has no idea where he’s from, who his people are. If he weren’t MGB, she might have heard him on one of her more boring tapes, talking about setting monetary policy or directing resource extraction or distilling vodka in the basement of some ministry building.

But he is MGB, Myka reminds herself. He is MGB, and his goal is to weaken, and to destroy, the United States. What a strange, enormous goal for this man who might be her cousin… just as Myka has no interest in destroying Russia, she imagines that her cousin here—*stop thinking that*—has no interest in destroying the United States. If her grandparents had stayed in Russia, would that be their thought? But her grandfather is not the kind of person who would support the MGB, is he? And yet here is his granddaughter, who he would surely say is not the sort of person who would support the CIA, not *this* CIA. Not without becoming a different person…

Everyone is becoming different here, transforming in unexpected ways. Myka watches as, right in front of her, Helena now alters her posture, relaxes it somehow, sinks into her own body, disappears. Myka had thought she had seen Helena’s face blank before. She had been wrong.

The woman who walks into the white room is an instrument.

She walks toward Alex slowly; he looks up at her and cocks his head. “Kto ty?” he asks, a bit thickly. *Who are you?* Every word uttered in that room is being recorded, and also transmitted to the observers at the window. Myka realizes that only she and Helena will know, for now, what Alex is saying. More secrets.

“Kto ty?” he asks again. Helena doesn’t respond. She keeps moving to him, walks all the way around the chair. “Zhenshchina? Pochemu?” he asks now. *A woman? Why?*

She says nothing, just walks in a circle around him in one direction, then the other. She does this three times.

“Jesus,” Allen says. “Just like last time. What is this shit she’s doing? When I learned hypnosis, nobody ever—”

Nate looks at him once, and Allen quiets. Then Nate looks back into the room, at Helena. His face is as avid as Myka fears her own is, but he gets to look avid. He gets to. Myka does not, should not. She looks down, then up again, trying to change her face, knowing that she is not succeeding in doing so. But no one is taking any interest in Myka, and that is fortunate, because she could not help but reveal that she might as well be in that room herself, sitting in that chair: she is that captivated by what Helena is doing.
Helena has stationed herself now in front of Alex; he is looking up at her. She takes both of his hands, which are resting on the arms of the chair, in hers and pulls, until his arms are extended. She lets go, and he lets them fall. She does it again, and this time her meaning is clear: don’t move.

He doesn’t. His arms remain rigidly outstretched. Helena moves to his right. All she does is stare. Then she moves to his left. Still more staring.

It’s the swinging watch, Myka realizes, the swinging watch that you always see hypnotists use in movies. Her body is the watch.

She moves again to the right. This time, she takes hold of Alex’s right arm—his arm is thin, and against it, her hands look nearly as large as they do on the violin—and bends his elbow slightly. Just slightly. She steps back and observes, then moves to his left and does the same thing on the other side, large hands around his left forearm. Back to the right: a little more of a bend, and now a slight, very slight, barely an inch, push of the arm downward. The same on the left. And now again on the right, bend and push. Left, bend and push. Right, again. Left, again. Bend, push. Bend, push.

Suddenly she makes Myka, and the rest of the observers, jump: she grabs Alex’s hands in hers and forces them the rest of the way down into his lap. His head slumps forward, slack on his neck, and Helena raises both her hands to press against his scalp, then lets go. Nothing happens, nothing at all. Helena holds her hands out in front of her, however, palms toward him, as if to fend him off should he jump at her.

Nothing happens. Alex’s head sways slightly, but nothing happens.

And Myka finds herself looking not at Alex, but at Helena’s hands… those hands that touched Myka last night.

Helena repeats her performance twice more over the course of the day, with the same result each time: Alex collapses. Helena waits for that moment, with her own arms outstretched, then measures his body temperature, examines his eyes, and, in doing so, apparently satisfies herself that she has achieved the desired end. Then each time, just as she did after the first, she carries out the series of movements in reverse, raising his arms, straightening them until they are extended in front of him—and always, by the time she is through, his eyes are open, and he is blinking as if he has just been awakened from real sleep.

“He’s quite decently suggestible,” she says after all of it. “Goes into trance nicely.”

Allen demands, “Then why won’t you just keep going? Why couldn’t we get the doc to give him the next round of drugs and get some intel out of him right now?”

“I do not see any need to add actual sleep deprivation to the equation as yet, do you?” Helena snaps. “Right now, this moment, I could send him into trance again, and I could make him squawk like a chicken or perform any number of other ridiculous acts; even you could make him do the same, I suspect. But regressing him to a point at which he will genuinely believe he is speaking to his wife? Such that he will speak about anything of importance with his wife? Did you learn nothing from last time? This is difficult, and it is delicate. And you of all people know that it is far more likely to go wrong than it is to go right.”

She stalks away from the room, down the hall. Allen raises his hands to Nate in appeal, but Nate shrugs. “She knows more than you do about this,” he says. “That’s your problem, not mine.” He follows Helena.
Allen makes a fist of his right hand and smacks it into his left palm. Then he seems to realize that Myka is still there. “You better do your job tomorrow,” he tells her.

Myka nods.

****

Since there was no real hurry today, since according to the men nothing of real importance or interest happened, Nate announces he will be taking Helena into Frankfurt for dinner. Myka is so tired that she is very close to not caring… at least, that is what she is telling herself. She stumbles up the stairs with the rest of them, following behind, as everyone heads for their rooms. On the third floor, Helena takes Nate’s arm, just for a second—she bends it, just as she did Alex’s—and tells him, “Just give me ten minutes.” He nods. He is all over calm, the same kind of calm Myka always hears in his voice, that assured sense of ownership. Like they are all dogs whose obedience is certain: yes, they may yip and nip on occasion, but they will all fall to heel when the command is given. And Helena behaves as a favored pet should.

But as Helena passes by Myka, as she brushes past, close enough to touch, in the narrow hallway, Helena whispers, “Leave your door unlocked tonight.”

Jealous Myka wants to say, very clearly, “absolutely not.” Or she should just lock the door, and let Helena try it and try it and try it until she realizes that Myka should not have to wait through dinner tonight, then sit upstairs in her room alone and wait and wait and wait for Helena to return from her evening out. It is the car and the plane again, but worse, because Myka will have to imagine it all, and “tell him no,” Myka wants to say: “tell him no and don’t go with him and then I will leave the door unlocked.”

Myka should be getting better at this. Some part of her thinks this, it really does. Helena must be seen with Nate, and Myka should be able to understand that that is all it is; and yet her jealousy is like the engine noise polluting that plane journey: constantly there, pounding in her head, quieting only when she is alone with Helena, when she knows that Helena is looking at her and no one else.

Wendt decides that he and Barbara should go to Frankfurt with, as he puts it, “the other couple in our midst”—so much for Barbara’s worries about people finding out—and though Nate must be annoyed by the idea, he agrees. Myka is sorry about that, because she can already hear the tone of every word Helena will say to Barbara; that is, if she deigns to speak directly to her. Helena hasn’t said a thing to Barbara, other than today’s brief “good morning,” since those first moments at Andrews. Of course she hasn’t said very much to Myka either… but they have things to hide. What if Myka were, to Helena, nothing more than a translator? What would she say then?

Thus for dinner at the inn, it is Myka, Allen, the admiral, and the admiral’s aide. Allen and the admiral talk about the military. They talk about the war. The aide eats large quantities of the bread, sausage, and cheese on offer; he doesn’t say anything except “yes, sir” when the admiral offhands a sentence at him. Myka doesn’t say anything either, other than “danke” to the woman who brings them their plates. She wishes she had even basic conversational German, just a bit more than the few utilitarian words she knows, but the Slavic languages have always been home to her. As a consequence, here in Europe she would be more comfortable amongst enemies than she is in the company of her country’s supposed friends.

Right now she would certainly be more comfortable with Alex the MGB agent than she is with her countrymen.

She excuses herself as early as she can and escapes upstairs. Since she is the only one on the third floor right now, she feels it would be all right to commandeer the washroom for a time, to take an
actual bath. The water is tepid, but it is clear, and there is a relief in being truly, fully clean for the
first time in more hours than she wants to take the time to count.

Once she is back in her room, she realizes that she has, without thought, locked the door behind
her. She would prefer not to consider what that might mean, so she occupies herself with mundane
tasks: she pins her hair back, in hopes that it will dry tamely and make her morning task that much
easier. She brushes out her sherry rayon suit, hangs it to air, makes sure that her other suit is
reasonably unwrinkled and can be worn tomorrow. She then takes up her Turgenev and sits back
on the bed. Perhaps reading it will soothe her, soothe her right to sleep, and any decision about the
doors will be taken out of her hands… but she has reached the point in the novel at which Bazarov
has begun to realize his feelings for Madame Odintsova. He is tormented, because to have these
tender feelings is so against his ideals; he thinks himself so committed, so right, but he cannot keep
thoughts of her from his mind.

To recognize love, to appreciate it, to know it as itself… that is a gift. Turgenev is telling her so,
and who is Myka Bering to question Turgenev?

She sighs. She sets the novel aside. She gets up from the bed, and she unlocks the door.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original Tumblr tags: man this was a difficult one, and I fear the next one will be
rougier still, but I am plowing through, and will continue to do so as long as my house
stays in one piece, I think I can get this done before 2016, jk, no I can't, jk again, if I
don't finish this in not too long there will be serious consequences, mostly for my
sanity
Chapter Notes

I would totally write a Turgenev AU based on Fathers and Sons, which is what Myka’s been reading on and off here, except Myka would probably be Bazarov, which would mean (spoilers!) she’d have to die. And nobody is dying. They might wish they could, eventually, or at certain points, but that is a different thing entirely.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I love you,” says a woman’s voice. The woman might be speaking Russian. She might be speaking English.

“Not if you knew what I have done,” says another voice, a broken voice, and this voice is a man’s voice. Or it is a woman’s. “You could not.”

“It doesn’t matter what you’ve done,” says the first voice. “I love you.”

Myka dreams this dream less often now than she once did. She knows that when the woman speaks Russian, when a man responds, it is a dream about something that happened in a white room in a farmhouse in Germany, and she wakes up sweating but safe, because that is a part of the past. She knows that when it is two women, when they speak English, it is something that never happened, that will never happen… and she wakes up keening, calling out for someone who is not there.

****

Helena had come into Myka’s room through that unlocked door, very late at night. Myka tried to remember the lesson she thought she had learned about love and its importance, but instead, in the dark, all she could remember was resentment. All she could hear was herself asking why and she tried not to feel this way, tried to disassemble her mood and put it back together and fix it, but it was that day in the Peacock Room again, when everything was wrong, when Myka was blaming Helena, Helena and only Helena, for all of it, and she could not get over it or by it or around it, and now every kiss was an insult, every touch an injury. Helena smelled of cigarettes and alcohol and other people, and she pleaded with Myka; she whispered, “You don’t understand how much I need you. Need this. Especially now, to…”

“To what?” She wanted to say it louder, say it with some meaning, instead of just in a whisper, wanted to throw it at Helena, but instead it was just a tiny gust of air, its bitterness evaporating into the silence.

“To… let’s say, to remind me.” And any other time, any other time in the dark, or even in the light, Myka would have asked what she meant, would have tried to understand. But now, as Helena tried again to kiss her, Myka felt that it might be her own arm, this time, being bent at the elbow. She pulled away, and in response Helena became angry too, and again it was the Peacock Room, because again Myka wanted to yell that Helena had no right. She had all the control; she did not have to stand in the background and watch and wait and read Turgenev and push thoughts from her mind and wait and wait and wait still more.

A ludicrous irony: in that moment, right then, right there, it would have been so much easier, so
much safer, for them to love than for them to argue.

Helena left the room without another word, without another touch.

The morning found Myka reluctant to go downstairs. When she did go, her eyes wanted to find Helena, as they always did, but now she was afraid—more afraid—of what she would see, afraid of receiving real coldness rather than yesterday’s careful distance in return. She had not realized, not fully, how much she had relied on the very idea of Helena, even Helena at that practiced distance, as security. So she avoided her, sat with Barbara again—Wendt was busy with the men, of course—and asked if she enjoyed her evening in the city.

“Your Miss Wells hates me,” Barbara said, first thing.

Myka considered demurring, saying “I’m sure she doesn’t,” but that would have been a flat-out lie, so instead she said, “Does she,” in a way that she hoped would convey “I know she does.”

Barbara nodded. “I think she might hate everybody. Obviously she hates Richard, and even though I guess she likes her boyfriend, she wasn’t treating him very well either.”

“Oh?” Myka said, and some visceral part of her smiled with its teeth, even as she tried to remember that she was angry with Helena. “Maybe she was just tired.”

“Maybe. But you know how men are. Take Richard, he likes to be told how smart he is.”

“Doesn’t everybody like to be told how smart they are?” Myka asked.

Barbara put her coffee cup down and smoothed her platinum-blond hair. “I like to be told how pretty I am.” Myka couldn’t immediately tell if she really knew what she was saying, but Barbara added, “Being smart might lose me my job.”

“I see what you mean,” Myka said. “So you think Helena should be telling Nate how smart he is?”

“She can tell him whatever she wants. But if she wants to keep working for him, she should probably treat him better.”

“She doesn’t work for him. Not exactly.” But what would happen, Myka wondered, when they all went back to Washington? Would Helena then be working for Nate, now that he was overseeing Artichoke? What would that mean for the whole… situation? Myka had not wanted to do any thinking, not right now, beyond this morning’s bread and cheese, but now, she did start to think… maybe if Helena worked for Nate directly, she wouldn’t be able to date him. Surely there were some Agency rules about that kind of thing. She would most likely have to find someone else, and then… and then, maybe Steve could help find her someone else.

The thought gave Myka such glorious pause that she looked up, across the room, at Helena, and smiled. Helena’s face registered surprise, a question, and then a hesitant, answering smile. Myka dropped her gaze immediately, but the damage, or something, was done.

Barbara commented, “You must be the only person she likes.”

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They were today sorted into the cars as they had been sorted for last night’s dinner: Myka, Allen, the admiral, and his aide together, Myka and the aide silent again, Allen and the admiral carrying on about commies and fighting them and the possibilities, re that, that would open up, once this “experimental” phase of Artichoke was complete. “Get women out of the equation,” Allen said,
with a brief glance at Myka, and she knew he meant Helena too. But he hadn’t been able to get her out of the equation yet, had he?

At the house, Wendt and Barbara were taken away first again, then the admiral made his officious escape to do whatever it was he did. In response to a query from Nate, a soldier led him, Allen, Helena, and Myka to a small and unsurprisingly bare conference room. The only difference between this space and the one in Security, at the Agency, was its size—and the fact that the wire snaking up the side of the wall made it very clear what a Hound Dog sweep would find.

Helena and Myka sat side by side on one side of the table, and Myka glanced at Helena from time to time, even as she tried to look at Nate and Allen too, for show, for balance, but their faces barely registered. Sitting next to Helena, all she could think was that if only they could have had this time, this space, for a real conversation, for explanations, if only they had time, space, time, space. She couldn’t trust herself to look fully at Helena now; that smile at breakfast had been dangerous enough. Businesslike, businesslike. She would sit next to Helena and be businesslike.

Nate briefed them on what he expected for the day, ending with, “Since Wendt’s working his magic now, Helena, you’re up in not too long. In the meantime, get clear with Myka on what’ll happen when her part starts, all right? Morse, you come with me for a bit. We need to talk.”

That left Myka and Helena alone.

Helena touched her ear, then brought her finger to her lips. Her message was clear, and Myka wanted to tell her, “I am not a child. I saw the wire.” Instead, she said, “Fine. What’s going to happen?”

“What’s intended to happen,” Helena said, “is that I will put him under again. Ideally, what I would like you to do is speak to him very quietly at first… ask him questions about the early part of his relationship with his wife—or rather, with you. Ask if he remembers when you met. When you would see each other. Don’t be too specific; we want him to be the one who provides information on which we can build. Will you be able to remember what he tells you, or will you need to take notes?”

“I can remember,” Myka said, and she barely was able to stop herself from adding, “you know that.” Instead, she said, “I have a very good memory.”

Helena opened her mouth, then closed it. Under the table, Helena took Myka’s hand. That was all, just Helena’s hand, her left hand holding Myka’s right. If only this were a language, a real one, that they could speak together, not some game of charades in which no one could even shout out an interpretation. She could not even make a guess out loud as to what Helena intended the touch of her hand to mean. And she had three choices, in response: she could take her hand away, she could leave it completely still, or she could tighten her fingers around Helena’s. She knew what she wanted each of those actions to mean: I can’t do this now (but please don’t misunderstand; it’s not that I can’t ever do it again), your hand holding mine is fine (but do not do anything else, because what surrounds us is too close), and I love you and I forgive you and I want you to forgive me (but we cannot keep doing this). So she decided to do all three: she gripped Helena’s hand, then held still for a moment, then let go.

As a resolution to an argument that had not even really happened, it was terrible. As something they could do in the middle of enemy territory, it was a triumph.

Myka coughed. “What’s my name?”

“What?”
“His wife’s name isn’t Myka,” Myka said. “What’s my name?”

“Eva,” Helena told her.

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Helena performed the same trick she had done the day before, and Alex’s head slumped to his chest, just as it had then. A soldier carried two chairs into the room, and Nate motioned Myka in, once the soldier had gone. When the door closed behind her, there they were: Myka and Helena and Alex, in a white room with three chairs. Helena came near Myka, uncomfortably near, almost as close as she would have been if they were truly behind a closed door together, and said softly, “Sit directly opposite him. I’ll sit by you so you can tell me what he says, and then I’ll tell you what to say… but we’ll both need to speak very quietly. Your voice, your voice speaking Russian, should be the only one he hears.”

So Myka sat. She looked at the top of Alex’s head, his fair hair like dirty straw. He needs a haircut, she thought, and that was something she imagined a wife would say, so that was the first thing she said: “Vy dolzhny podstrich’ya.”

He shook his head, so she said it again, “Alex, you need a haircut. Don’t I always tell you this?”

He shook his head again, but he mumbled, too.

“You do,” she said. “Don’t you believe your wife anymore?”

“Eva?” he said, far more distinctly.

“He loves her,” Myka felt Helena breathe at her, from right beside her ear. And then, even more quietly, “You have an instinct for this, Les Paul.”

If Myka had moved her head back, even a little, Helena’s lips would have met her skin.

She did not move back. Instead, she leaned forward and told Alex, “Yes. It’s Eva. You’re home with me.”

“Yes, Alex. Home.”

For hours, they talked, of home (not Vladivostok, and Myka was relieved well beyond reason at that), of their children (a girl and a boy), of, as Helena had instructed earlier, how they met (in school, when they were very young), when they married (too young, according to Eva’s parents, but Alex had been so persistent they gave in), how happy they had been. They had been so happy, they both agreed. And then Katerina was born, and they were happier still.

Myka and Helena were pulled out of the room eventually, and Myka told Nate and Allen, who were waiting for them, what Alex had said. She was careful to “tell” Helena details too, and then Helena and the two men immediately disappeared. A soldier handed Myka a glass of water, which she gulped down, and a sandwich—cheese and sausage and thick bread again—of which she managed to take two bites. She was told the location of a bathroom. When she got back to the window, Wendt was in the room, injecting Alex with something… something else? More of the same?

He came out and saw Myka. “Heard it isn’t going so well,” he told her. It was the first sentence he had ever said directly to her.
“He’s talking,” Myka said. “I thought that was the idea.”

Wendt said, “He may be talking, but not about the right things, honey.” He leaned closer to her, looked intently at her eyes. “You have your lunch?”

“I wasn’t really hungry,” Myka confessed. She moved back a bit.

“Something to drink, at least? You were in there for over six hours, and the body can’t keep that kind of thing up for too long. I am a doctor, you know.”

“Water,” Myka said. “I had a glass of water.” Maybe if she didn’t say much to him, he would go back to not talking to her at all. How did Barbara stand it?

Nate, Allen, and Helena returned then, and Myka was relieved to see all of them, despite the fact that both Helena and Allen were complaining loudly at each other. Nate was between them, and he might have been their father, or a teacher, tired of, yet thoroughly accustomed to, the squabbling of the children who surrounded him.

“As I keep trying to tell you, it is too soon!” Helena said.

“And as I keep trying to tell you, nobody cares about his fucking family!” Allen said back. “Tell her to ask him what they know about the communications plans!”

“He clearly cares about his family! And we are trying to ascertain how Myka can ensure that he feels free to speak to his wife about what he has done for the MGB!”

Nate held up his hands. “Enough. Helena, I need some intel, or tomorrow gets rougher. All right? Myka, I’ve been watching, and Helena hasn’t said much to you in there, so I know you’ve been directing most of the conversation. If she doesn’t start pushing you harder in the right direction, Morse or I will take over, all right?”

Her glance at Helena was involuntary, but she managed to bring her gaze quickly back to Nate and say, “All right.”

“That dose won’t last forever,” Nate said. “So get something. Go on, Helena.”

Allen and Wendt nodded in satisfaction at each other. Helena’s shoulders stiffened; she jerked the door open and went into the white room. Myka leaned against the window, just for a second. She felt her stomach lurch. It had been a mistake not to eat more of her sandwich. Then she followed Helena in.

It was hard to get him to talk this time, much harder than the morning had been. “Please, Alex,” she found herself begging. “Why won’t you talk to me?”

“I can’t,” he said, and their conversation became a song, one in which she would try a new verse, but the refrain was always “please, Alex,” followed by his “I can’t.”

Helena said in her ear, finally, “Say MGB. Just to see what happens. Tell him you know.”

So Myka said, “Do you think I won’t love you? Because of MGB work, what you do for them? I know, Alex. I know. I love you.”

He started to cry. “After what I have done,” he said, his song now one of wet sorrow.

“It doesn’t matter,” she told him. “You can talk to me about anything.”
“I killed them,” he confessed, and it was a confession, delivered as if wrung from his very soul, as if on a deathbed.

“Who did you kill?” Myka asked.

He told about having assassinated five fellow agents, because he had been ordered to, because they had been passing secrets to the Americans, because they were dirty traitors, because he, Alex, could kill them so easily, so silently, with no detection and no suspicion. And now on his new mission, he was supposed to do the same, to assassinate, this time a woman, someone who was giving information to the Americans on a new plan, a new project, one that—

He stopped talking so abruptly that Myka felt it physically; she fell forward, almost into his lap, and she could barely sit up and find her balance in the chair, but Helena leapt around her and began moving Alex’s arms to bring them up, bring him out, and it took her almost no time at all to make him blink in the way that indicated he was awake—or as awake as he could have been, given his drugged state. Helena then grabbed Myka’s hand and pulled her swiftly out of the chair, out of the room. She barely waited until the door swung closed before she said, “That was unfortunate.”

“What happened?” Nate demanded.

Myka was dazed, but her head was buzzing, and Helena said, “I believe—and Myka can correct me if I am mistaken—but I concluded, from what she had told me just a moment earlier, that he was about to say something about having been captured. And he cannot have been captured, captured and not yet released, and yet be talking to his wife at home. He could not maintain the illusion, and I can assure you that the last thing we need is for him to bring himself out of trance. Myka, do I have it right, is that what happened?”

That seemed as reasonable an explanation as anything. “He said he was supposed to kill someone who was helping us, helping the Americans. That it was about a new project,” Myka said.

“Goddammit!” That was Allen.

Nate nodded. “A made asset, just what we need. And god knows what project he’s talking about. We need to find out.”

“We can’t do it tonight,” Helena said. “What time is it?”

“Eight,” Nate said. “Nine? Nine? I don’t know.” Eight, Myka thought. Nine. Part of her brain wanted to simply keep on counting, ten eleven twelve and on, and no wonder she felt like her head was a balloon; she’d been someone else for a full day. Eva, who had two children, and what would she have spent today doing? Myka closed her eyes, but she listened to Nate exhale and say, “All right. We’ll all start fresh in the morning, but Helena, you better work out how to keep this from happening again.”

“Her too,” Allen said, and he jerked his head at Myka.

“Well,” Helena said. “Morse. I think I can handle the situation.” And then she sighed. Aggrieved.

“Goddammit!” Allen said again.

Helena rolled her eyes. “Fine. Myka, perhaps we could speak tonight, after we’ve all had something to eat? Perhaps you could come to my room?”

Myka turned her head to Helena so fast she almost lost her balance again. “Right,” she said. It was too loud, so she tried it again. “Right.” Better. “If that’s what we have to do.” How she contained
the laugh that leapt to her throat, she would never know.

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She was in front of Helena’s door because she was supposed to be. She was tapping out the Fibonacci series on it because she wanted to, but she was here because she was supposed to be. She watched the doorknob, waited for it to turn, and when it began to, she wanted to shout and jump and it was a struggle not to, but Helena was there and the door was open and then it was closed, and here they were again.

Helena moved immediately into her arms, and Myka, holding her tightly, feeling every fold in her clothing under her hands, every soft smooth plane of her face as her lips moved all over forehead and cheekbones and chin, said, “I know what you meant, I know now,” and to Helena’s unvoiced confusion she said, “about needing this, to remind you. It’s being in that room, because my head, my body, nothing feels right, and I just want something to feel right, and you’re the only thing that could, and I didn’t understand, and I’m sorry, I’m sorry—”

“Don’t apologize to me,” Helena told her, or rather, told her neck, “never do that; or I can’t live with myself.”

“All right,” Myka said. “No apologizing. I won’t say I’m sorry for this, either,” for how hungry she found herself, how she was bending to Helena’s body, how she was bending Helena’s body, and she could have broken her in half, even, but Helena stopped her, said sssshhhhh, don’t make those noises… and they heard footsteps in the hallway, but yes, that was to be expected, Helena’s room was nearest the washroom, and this would happen, so they waited for the footsteps to sound in the opposite direction.

Myka’s hearing sharpened, and her vision sharpened too, as she stood very still, holding Helena against her. Myka had never been in any space of Helena’s before, other than her office, had never seen her things, her hairbrush, her cosmetics, her open suitcase, but she took it all in now, all in the soft lamplight. The violin case was there too, relaxing on the bureau like an old friend, and Myka choked out a quiet version of the laugh she had not laughed before, at the sight of it. She’d known Helena had brought it, had seen the case amongst the rest of the luggage loaded onto the plane, but to see it in here… she wanted to tell Helena to play, right now, because it seemed even more dangerous, even more transgressive than the small brushes of sound their bodies made against each other. It would be loud and beautiful and disruptive. It would wake everyone.

“I want to talk to you in a voice that isn’t a whisper,” Myka murmured, in just that whisper, later, as Helena strained against her. “I want to do that. So everyone will know.”

“Everyone,” Helena panted at her, “everyone.”

“Everyone,” Myka agreed, and the desire for that was part of a wave of shamelessness, and that wave was heightened too, her body wanting base things that it had never wanted before, her hands pushing for that, pushing for that twist, that spasm, having this effect, knowing that she had this effect, knowing that this effect was hers, that when she did this, did this and then that and then this again, Helena was hers.

Helena was hers, and she was Helena’s, and they were at least together, and nothing and no one was between them, not tonight, and if Myka could have contrived a way to make certain that never again, never again would anything or anyone come between them… somewhere deep in her, she could feel some muscle flexing, straining as if its only function were to make a deal with fate or with god, expanding and contracting to the rhythm of a prayer that said, “Let me have this, let me have this, this with her, please, please, I will do anything, anything, just show me what it is and I
will do it, anything, anything.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original Tumblr tags: I think we all know what happens when you start promising things to fate or to god, you always forget some essential part of the bargain, so there is always a loophole, because as humans I suppose we are not meant to find perfect happiness, well that ended up gloomy, so here:; once there was a Warehouse agent named Myka, and she was yanked up into the sky by H.G., and they were very much in lesbians with each other, and they eventually lived happily ever after, despite the efforts of all and sundry to turn the whole thing, into an angsty mess, the end
Please don’t hate me. (Or do hate me; maybe that’s the point.) Consequences are often unpredictable, and trying to fix a situation can easily have the opposite effect. Everybody is going to come to understand that quite viscerally, if they didn’t get it already...

And in the morning, as she looked again into that stark white room, Myka imagined that some ancient, vengeful god had awakened and listened and found merit in her entreaty. If what you want most is a woman, it deemed, then you will sacrifice to me a man.

Because Alex, Alex who had killed before and would have killed again, was drugged first thing, drugged with whatever Wendt always gave him, higher doses every day, Wendt said, with cheer that repelled Myka, but then worse: then Wendt injected him with something that put him completely out, not in any kind of trance, simply unconscious—“sodium pentothal,” Nate said brusquely in response to Myka’s uncertain question, “truth serum, so he’ll be even more inclined to talk to you two, after Wendt wakes him up”—which Wendt did, a short time later, with Benzedrine. “And the doc said he could do another round, just as insurance,” Nate remarked.

Helena touched him—that hand to the arm again, and it was like lights and screaming sirens now, every time Myka saw it happen. “Absolutely not,” she said. “If you want what he says to be at all reliable, you must leave him some sense of himself.”

“Why don’t you be softhearted on your own time,” Allen threw at Helena.

Nate, who clearly had had more than enough, said, “Morse, shut up. Helena, look. I don’t care about his sense of himself. Right now, you have got to find out which of our assets got made. I don’t know when this guy was supposed to take whoever this woman is out of the picture, but at some point they’ll figure out that we’ve got him, if they haven’t already, and they’ll send somebody else to do the job.”

“I am aware of the importance,” Helena said. “But just because what happened yesterday… happened, that has no bearing on what will happen today—or I should say, what might have happened today, if you had not just now allowed the subject to be practically lobotomized.”

“I don’t care if he is lobotomized. Get the intelligence, Helena.”

Myka looked through the window at Alex, his hair of straw, himself merely chaff around “the intelligence, Helena.”

When Helena entered the room, he asked her, again, this time, who she was. He had not done that yesterday. He asked her what she wanted, why she was here, why he was here. And where was here? He seemed thinner still, Helena’s hands huge against him, her fingers wrapping all the way around his forearms as she pulled his arms out, and this time it took three tries, three stern pulls, for him to understand, or remember, to hold them up.
“What are you doing?” he asked. “Why are you doing this?”

Helena pushed his mouth closed, but he spoke again, kept speaking, questioning why and who and where, and Helena looked toward the window.

Nate said to Myka, “Go get Wendt. Tell him he needs something else… a sedative. Something.”

The doctor had left once Helena had begun her work, and Myka had envied him the freedom to just walk away from the window, to not witness where his work led. She’d envied him, but now she thought, coward. Because she felt relief now, relief that she too could step away. She wanted to tell Nate to send Allen, because she did not have the right to avert her eyes… but Nate was already finished with her; he’d issued his order and was now tapping on the window to get Helena out.

He did not tap any recognizable sequence.

Myka had only a vague sense of where Wendt and Barbara spent their time, during the day, but one of the soldiers pointed her to the end of a hallway, and the whole house was such a strange space, with its windows and mirrors and interiors that became more interior still… that had to have been the reason that she didn’t even think about it: she just opened the indicated door.

Wendt’s back was to Myka, but Myka could see Barbara’s face, over his shoulder, and they were too close together, and Myka understood, one beat too slowly, what she was seeing, and that sight would have been farcical if it hadn’t been so very wrong, so very wrong because it was farcical, that in this room this, and in that room, the room with Alex, that. She could turn away from this so much more easily, and yet her relief in doing so was akin to what she had felt at leaving the window. She did not want to witness any of the things that happened under this roof. The things that were sanctioned under this roof.

“I’m sorry. Alex is talking too much,” she said, her eyes averted. “They need a sedative. Something to quiet him down. I’ll… go back, and you can—”

Wendt said, in that same jovial tone as earlier, “No problem. Plenty of time for this later.” Myka heard sounds she did not want to place, then a clink: a belt buckle. Wendt pushed past her, carrying his black medical bag.

Myka looked up at Barbara. She was adjusting her skirt, pulling it down.

“Are you all right?” Myka asked. “I mean, is this really what you—” But she bit off the rest of her question, which might have been: is this really what you think you should be doing? Or: Is this really what you want to be doing? But why did she think she could say anything to Barbara? About anything? Barbara’s life was her own… yet it was no more her own than Myka’s was. Or Helena’s. Barbara continued to see to her clothes, and Myka finally said, “I’m sorry. It’s your business.”

“Look,” Barbara said. “My mother wouldn’t exactly be proud, okay? But you do what you have to. Everybody does.”

You do what you have to. “I should… go back. To the room,” Myka said.

Barbara nodded. With businesslike, unconcerned fingers, she buttoned her shirt.

You do what you have to. The faces of three men swung to look at Myka as she came back to the window. “Got him to quiet down,” Wendt said. Cheery, still, as if Myka had not just seen what she had seen. As if it didn’t matter… and maybe it didn’t. Maybe that was Myka’s problem: she thought that so many things mattered. Maybe they didn’t. Maybe you just do what you have to.
“Helena’s ready for you,” Nate said.

So Myka went to the door, opened it. Saw Helena in front of her, felt the men behind her.

And she balked. She tried to enter the room, and her feet stopped. She saw Alex, and though she found it weirdly comforting to see his head slumped forward in this familiar way, as Helena made him do, she could not imagine repeating yesterday, pushing him and pushing herself, as hard as yesterday, still harder than yesterday.

They surrounded her: Helena, Nate, Allen, and Wendt. Helena in front of her; the men behind her. She could turn and run, but that was all she could do, turn and run. She would get three steps away from the room, or four. And then she would be grabbed by one of them or by a soldier, and she would do nothing else after that. She looked at Helena. Helena’s eyes were narrow, as if she were considering. Considering Myka, and was she considering everything, their days and their nights, or just this one thing, this one step into a room?

Helena tilted her head slightly, the tiniest lop to one side.

Myka stepped into the room.

In the room, Myka was Eva, looking at her Alex, and what would Eva think, if she saw her Alex like this? She would not care, not in that moment and perhaps not ever, for anything he had done to anyone else. And what would Eva do, to Myka and Helena and Nate and the rest of them, for what they had done to her Alex?

Myka’s head was pounding already, and they had not even begun. Then they began and it pounded more, constantly, and she pounded more, constantly, beating against a wall that Alex had somehow managed to construct. He wouldn’t budge: he wouldn’t say a name, he wouldn’t talk about his assignment, and it would clearly go on forever, sitting in this room, telling her cousin that she was his wife and that she loved him, doing nothing but pleading as her murdering cousin was murdered, needle by needle, drop by drop.

At least he seemed to gain some succor from her voice, her voice that was not his wife’s, this voice that lied to him about love and forgiveness. He apologized to her, over and over, and he cried; he cried so much, and Myka cried too, and she could feel her tears bringing him closer to saying words that could end all of this, closer but not close enough.

His wife would have cried with him. Myka cried for him, for him and for herself, and for Helena at her back, and for Barbara, in a room too, doing what she had to.

An even longer time elapsed, today, before they were pulled out of the room. They were met with annoyance from Nate when Myka explained what had happened, what Alex would not say. He shook his head. “Some kind of training’s kicking in. Got to be. Look, if you don’t get it today, then tomorrow we’ll do it the old-fashioned way on him. At this point I don’t care if he remembers whether he talked. You can start again on the spare.”

“Can I,” Helena said, in a voice that Myka did not understand.

“Helena… one more try here, that’s all there is.”

Myka was exhausted (not as much so as Alex), and just like yesterday, she couldn’t begin to think of eating, just drank a glass of water. Wendt handed it to her. “Fluids,” he said. “Told you yesterday, didn’t I?” After that, as she waited for Helena to put Alex into his trance again—he went not easily this time, certainly not easily, but with less trouble than he had in the morning—she did
begin to feel a bit better. And her step into the room was, strangely, more sure.

Alex was just as sure, though, just as sure that there were things he could not talk about, words he could not say. Myka found his resistance weirdly thrilling: that in the face of everything they had done to him, no matter how many times a new chemical kicked his legs out from under him, he kept his balance, kept a steady hold on the parts of himself that he intended to keep to himself. It was as if he could feel Myka pressing, feel, and resist with equal pressure, her need for him to talk about these things of importance… and then an idea roared to the front of Myka’s mind: things of importance. She would ask him as if it were not important at all, as if she were simply asking him about his day. She would start, in fact, by asking him about his day: “What was it like, where you were staying in East Germany?” she asked. She heard, and felt, Helena inhale sharply.

“What was it like, where you were staying in East Germany?” Alex said. “Tiny room. Not like here at home.”

“Our house is no palace,” she scoffed.

“Better than a palace.” He spoke very quietly.

Myka leaned forward. “So why did you stay in a tiny room?”

“Close to where I need to be.”

Myka leaned even closer, but then she felt Helena’s hand on her arm, pulling her back and away. “Stop,” Helena breathed into her ear. And Myka turned around, ready to ask why, but Helena pushed her back into position; as she did, she breathed again, this time to say, “Trust me. Please.”

“What do you want me to ask him?” Myka said quietly, instead of “What do you think you’re doing?”, but it was an unexpectedly difficult struggle to hold back, a struggle to keep from jumping up and demanding to know what was happening, why her good idea—and she knew it was good, she knew it would work—was a bad one, or a wrong one. She stayed still, but her insides writhed and complained.

“Upset him,” Helena said, but she said it so quietly that no microphone could have caught and conveyed that whisper’s content.

Myka looked back at Helena one more time. Helena blinked, and was that confusion in her eyes? Was it entreaty? Or did Myka simply wish for there to be some reason for this, some way in which they needed to conspire together to stop this from working? But what if Helena was that double agent she had denied being, all those months ago? What if it should have been a ruble that that hand, the thought of which even now made Myka’s blood stumble on tangled feet through her veins, drew from Myka’s ear? She began to ask, “Are you—”

“Turn around,” Helena said sharply—still sotto voce, but the command was clear. “Do not forget where we are.”

Breath on her ear, love in her heart. Her heart galloping like something had just jumped out of the shadows at her. Too much, all of it. Too much. “Alex,” she said. “Close to where? Close to where you need to be to kill a woman?”

His shoulders shook.

“Who is the woman?”

His head twitched.
“Tell me her name.”

“No,” he said.

“Then you don’t love me.”

A more violent twitch. Myka expected Helena to give some direction, but she was silent. Just breathing.

“If you love me, then prove it. Tell me her name.”

A dramatic flinch, a contortion of his face, and suddenly he was staring at Myka, and at Helena over her shoulder. He stood up, and Myka stood too, and she realized that she had never seen him standing: he was shorter than she, a small, thin man with a wide face, shouting, demanding to know where he was, what they thought to gain, and he grabbed Myka by the arms as she tried to talk to him, tried to soothe him, in Russian, as she had done before, but then she understood: Alex did not remember her, her or even her voice. She had spent two days with him, but he had spent no time at all with her. He had never seen her before.

It could not have lasted more than thirty seconds, and then the men were in the room, and Wendt was injecting Alex again, and Alex was slumping and lifeless. “Don’t kill him!” Myka shouted, and she knew it was too loud, but she could not find it in her to care.

“Kill him?” Nate said, as if weighing the morality of the thought could not possibly be worth his time. “Now? How does that help me?” He beckoned to a soldier in the doorway. “Get him out of here and lock him up. When he wakes up, keep him awake. I’ll start on him in the morning.”

Moments later, during the brief hum of confusion that always accompanied the distribution of passengers into cars, Myka said to Helena, “Your door this time.” She must have said that too loud too, because Helena’s eyes widened, and she looked around. Myka wrestled her voice down to add, and she hoped it was enough: “Please.”

Myka did not want to be near any of them at dinner—she knew she kept saying things, too many things and too loudly, and that was wrong, but whether it was an effect of the day in its entirety or what had just happened in the room or what she feared would happen tomorrow, she could not judge. She sat as far away as she could, and she watched them: Allen was quivering as if in triumph, although why he should be pleased by this failure, Myka had no idea. Wendt gave Myka a few close looks; was he trying to determine whether she would say something about what she had seen that morning? Barbara didn’t seem concerned. The admiral was speaking quietly to Nate, whose movements were jabs, his words clipped responses. Nate became even more brusque after Helena rose and said, “If there’s no objection, I’ll be practicing the violin for a while. Not too long.” She looked at Myka. “If my playing disturbs anyone, they need only come to my door.” She did not touch Nate as she left his side: something was changing, or something had already changed...

Moments later: of course the allemande. Myka ground her palms against her eyes, because she could not make sense of the change, if it was a change, could not process it, wasn’t thinking at all clearly now; she had been so sure in the room this last time, she had gone in sure, and though it had taken some time, she had been sure she had solved the problem. Now Alex would suffer more, and she and Helena would start again. She was not sure, now, that she could start again. She did not understand why the violinist upstairs, the violinist upstairs who was playing to her, wanted to.

She might have been sitting in her apartment, full of loneliness and longing, remembering Helena saying “I would have imagined myself irresistible.” To Myka those words might as well have been
the title of the piece of music, so often had she put the two together.

She stood; no one seemed to notice. She took the stairs, two at a time, to the second floor landing, then the next flight, again two at a time, to the third floor.

She did not even stop at her own door, but went directly to Helena’s. She knocked—one, one, two—and the music stopped, and then Helena was pulling Myka inside, pushing the door closed behind her, backing up, staring at her.

“Finish it,” Myka said.

Helena did not say anything, but she reached back, without looking, to the bed: the bow was there. She lifted the violin to her shoulder, set her chin in the rest—how warm it must have been—and picked up where she had left off. Not many notes remained; Myka would have counted them, but she was too busy watching Helena’s right hand as it wielded the frail bow, her left as it encompassed the thin violin’s neck. The music stalked up, slid down, until at last there was one higher note, then the one lower, the same on which it had begun, that sounded the end.

Still, Helena said nothing. She put the violin away, locked the bow in place.

Now, her back to Myka, she murmured, “Will you take my hair down?”

Whatever Helena asked, Myka would have done. She reached for the offered neck, loosed the hair, ran her hands through it and then across Helena’s shoulders, down her arms, and then she wanted to feel the softness of those shoulders, those arms, so she reached for the suit jacket’s buttons and undid them, sliding Helena out from under the cloth, exposing the silk of her slip and her skin.

Helena turned smoothly in her arms. She leaned up to kiss Myka, then whispered, “We have to talk.”

“I know. But wait. Wait just a minute.” She held Helena close, felt Helena’s arms close around her like a tourniquet, felt her own heart beating strongly, hugely in her own chest, against Helena’s, felt her blood warming, moving as if on its feet again, making her itch, making her want—making her want to hold nothing back. “I don’t care what you tell me,” she said, “as long as I can still have you. Can I still have you?”

Helena kissed her again, and then it was her fingers working at buttons, and then she pulled Myka’s jacket aside to rest her head against a mostly bare shoulder. She might have been ashamed, unable to look Myka in the eyes, or she might simply have been tired, as her head lay there. “I need to ask you to do something for me,” Helena whispered, and there was again at Myka’s neck that moist night, that secret place Helena could breathe into being. “And you may think it a terrible thing, for so many reasons, but the situation—we have come to a point—”

“I told you, I don’t care.” Helena’s head, on her shoulder, Helena’s body, against hers. What couldn’t she do, if she had Helena’s body against hers? Everything was possible. Everything. “Can I still have you? That’s all that matters, not whether you’re working for the MGB or—”

Helena reared back, her face all disbelief—a mask? “No, you don’t understand, my love—”

And yet “my love” were the last words Helena said that Myka did understand. Because nothing that followed made any sense at all, beginning with the door flying open, with Allen and Nate suddenly in the room, with Nate demanding “What is this?”, with Allen shouting “I told you!”, with Helena voicing an animal cry, with Myka pitching forward, the bottom dropping out of her world and the floor from under her feet as they were pulled away from each other, pulled and held,
and she stared at Helena’s dark eyes in her bloodless face, and it made no sense at all that in one moment Myka was holding the dearest thing in the world to her, and in the next she was across the gulf of a room from her, as they both strained, in horror yet in vain, against the strong hands of men.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original Tumblr tags: I know this is not the fun part, and if you wanted to quit on me I would understand, but I am committed, and this is not the end, not nearly the end, remember that although they are both weak, (and that has led them to be foolish), they are also both very strong, albeit in very different ways
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Bad things. Truth and lies and everything in between. (In what may or may not be a related story, I wrote a little S5 fixit called "Giselle" in which a certain White House press secretary named C.J. Cregg observed, pretty accurately, that Helena doesn’t think on her feet very well.) But everybody’s got an agenda… and it’s going to be very hard to sort the truth from the lies.

For one brief, chaotic moment, Myka saw Helena changing before her eyes into a savage, captured animal, one that would show claws and fangs, one that would without a single thought turn and rip out Nate’s throat. Her hair, her loosed hair, flew as the mane it was, but her pale, naked arms… those arms that that had just held Myka so tightly, that Myka had just touched with such reverence… Nate’s darker hands were cuffs of bronze around them. His hands tightened—Myka could see his knuckles whiten—and that seemed to bring Helena back to herself. She steadied her feet under her, stood solidly, and settled her shoulders. Nate dropped his hands. Helena grabbed up her suit’s top from the bed, pushed her arms into the sleeves; and, as she buttoned it up, she shook her head; her hair fell to tranquility. She backed away from Nate, backed herself against the bed, and began to survey the entire scene. No trace of ferality remained in her; she was emotionless, perfectly composed. She looked first at Allen, then moved to Myka, whose arms Allen still held. Helena’s eyes did not warm.

When her gaze reached Nate, he said, far more calmly than Myka had expected, “Honestly. What is going on?”

Myka felt Allen’s grip on her own arms constrict. He said, “I told you what was going on. I heard them.”

Helena said, with cold contempt, “Oh, you heard something.”

“Yeah, I did. And I knew it.”

“What, precisely, was it that you knew?”

“That you’re a pervert” —and with each phrase he uttered, he shook Myka, as if in emphasis —“that you’re a pervert, and so is this one, and you’re security risks! How many secrets have you given up already? You should never have been on any op, ever, much less this one!”

Helena shook her head. “Stupid little man. It might interest you to know—or it might not, given your stupidity—that this was part of the op. My op, at least.”

Involuntarily, Myka said, “Your… op?” What could she possibly mean?

Helena went on as if Myka had not spoken. “Do you think I came to this project with no brief of my own, Morse? Do you think, in fact, that you are privy to the project’s every aspect?”

“Of course I’m privy to every aspect. It’s my project. It’s been my project since 1948, and I don’t
care what you say: you are lying. You’re lying to save yourself and your... I don’t know what to call her,” and at this, he gave Myka’s arms a final, strong shake, then pushed her away such that she stumbled to the side. “Is she still a whore if she’s a pervert?”

Myka landed next to the bureau, where the violin case rested. She set her hand on its battered leather, and she imagined it still warm from Helena’s handling. The case, Myka’s body. A pervert. A whore.

Helena said, casually, “I’m lying? Really? Why don’t you be the one, then, to call General Menzies, and tell him so. I’m sure the head of MI6 has nothing better to occupy his time than talking to the likes of you. I’m sure he is anxiously awaiting your call, your call in which you will tell him that his liaison is not, in fact, working for him. That went over so well in the Philby case…”

“It’d get you out of my project!” Allen raged. “I don’t see Kim fucking Philby on E Street anymore, do I?”

“But one does see him at MI6 headquarters. Quite regularly. So I don’t believe your ideas about me would be received at all well. Particularly not since, as I just told you, you would be accusing me of carrying out my orders. A horrible charge indeed.”

She had to be lying. Of course she had to be lying. She had to be lying. It could not be the truth. Helena was not afraid of the box, and she was not afraid of lying, and any question put to her was just words, so she had to be saying whatever she thought would save her, would save her and Myka both, she had to be.

“Wait,” Nate said. “You’re saying Menzies ordered you—ordered you—to seduce a girl?”

“To seduce a girl…” Helena said, and Myka strained to hear something in those words, something to cling to, something that meant that was not what had happened. “Well. There had been discussions, you see, of security risks, and how one might, let us say, create them. The extent to which such a project might be successful. Do you truly believe that hypnosis—or rather, the idea behind it, that of ensuring that a subject is receptive to suggestion—is restricted to those performances I have given in that room? Do you believe that the art of influence requires ostentation? To impose your will on another is a process, yes, but the steps are not ones that Morse, with his—what was it, three days of training?—would recognize as such.”

“But why this girl?” Nate sounded, for once, unsure—something like the voice in Myka’s head, the one that kept repeating it isn’t true, it isn’t true, it isn’t true.

“Well, why not this girl? Why not any girl? Put names into a hat and choose one! But part of what I have tried to do with this girl is influence her not only to this,” and Helena gestured casually at Myka, so casually, back and forth, barely disturbing the air in Myka’s direction, “but also to do as she is bid in that room. Morse called me softhearted, but you can see that her compassion is certainly far greater than mine. She hesitates. She resists. ‘Don’t kill him,’ she says. You heard her.”

Allen sneered, “Why does that even matter? We already know she’s weak. She’s a woman.”

“It matters,” Helena said, with a matching contempt, “because the level of control you seek is not possible. As General Menzies, and I and others, have been trying to tell you since Bluebird, when you thought you had to rush to overtake Soviet progress on their mythical—and, I assure you, pathetically ineffective—mind-control project. The Soviets have never had anything near what you thought they had; they have been following you like lapdogs as always. Did you listen to nothing I
told you about what was said on the tapes? Every word designed to make you think they are a step ahead, when in fact—"

“As if I would listen to you,” Allen spat.

“That is your error. Mind control does not work as you wish it would. You can apply extra force—Wendt’s drugs, my own attempts to sway this girl here—but it does not matter. This girl should have done anything I asked. She should have been willing to go into that room, to do precisely as she was told… to come into this room and do precisely as she was told. But she would not.”

Myka thought of the way Helena had moved her head to the side. The way that action had eased—had compelled?—Myka’s step into that white room. She thought of the allemande, and the way it drew her to Helena. The way in which it drew her, in a rush, two steps at a time, to Helena. What had Helena been about to tell her to do?

“But you…” Nate’s calm was still shaken. “Maybe you just didn’t… I mean there have to be more effective ways to convince—”

“Really?” Helena said, and Myka knew that voice, knew it so well: it sang of charm and enchantment and, yes, control. “I managed to get her to a certain point, did I not? A normal girl, influenced into quite unnatural behavior. But when it comes to the next step… well, you’ve seen the problem with your MGB operative, and now with this girl, I assure you. There is a step they will not take, not if they are under the illusion that their behavior is voluntary. In the end, the individual is more powerful, more resistant, than you, any of you, believe.”

Allen opened his mouth as if to speak, to refute her, but “any of you,” Helena repeated, and she looked like herself, her real self, when she said it; her face had animated again. Yet for Myka, the words this girl resounded… Myka didn’t think she could stand to hear Helena say those words again. They echoed “my love,” those precious syllables, the same stresses, the same again as “Les Paul,” but empty, empty and cold.

Helena said, to Nate, “Morse won’t listen to me, but you should have. I tried to tell you that no good would come of running this again.”

Allen now did speak, a frustrated bellow, “You did it again. I cannot fucking believe it, but you did it again!”

“Did what again? What’s going on?” This was Wendt, coming in from the hallway, speaking with that out-of-place nonchalance; Barbara was following him, and Myka could see that her usually perfect hair was ever so slightly disarranged. Those loose strands assaulted Myka: Why can they… was her wild thought, why can they?

Allen said, “What’s going on? What’s going on? If you’d heard these two perverts last night, you’d know exactly what was going on.”

“Myka?” Barbara’s face showed shock, and Myka thought it was fair, that was turnabout; she herself had not kept shock and judgment from her own face when she had looked at Barbara this morning. “Oh my god. You? With her? You’re a—”

And Wendt said, in a strangely not unkind way, “No, she’s not. At least I doubt it. It’s got to be the drugs. They can do funny things to you, particularly in that kind of dose.”

Those words drew Helena as a hound to the scent of the fox: “That kind of dose? What dose? What drugs?”
Myka tried to make sense of what he had said, but… drugs? Drugs? She hadn’t taken any drugs… when could she possibly… but then: Wendt’s face, as he handed her a glass of water. Her thoughts, after she drank that water. Her certainty. Her voice. Her blood.

And Wendt shrugged, waved a hand. “You could tell just looking at her, she never would have made it through this kind of thing without help. And really, what could it hurt?”

The feral beast was back, just as an undertone in Helena’s voice, as she said, “What could it hurt?”

Wendt backpedaled. “Take it easy. It wears off. It should’ve just made her more willing to say things, more willing to go in that room and do her job. Take this morning: you saw her, she didn’t want to. But later…” He looked at Myka with something like a proud smile. “Could you tell how loud your voice was? Some people get like that… someday I’ll have to figure out why.”

Loud. Loud. Allen said he heard them, heard them last night. Last night. Had she been drugged yesterday too? She’d had water then… but Wendt hadn’t handed it to her… but what if… because last night, oh god last night, its intensity, what if in last night’s fervor, she really had forgotten herself?

“Take it easy,” Helena muttered. “Take it easy? Take it easy?” Something in her anger was hardening; Myka had seen this before, directed at her, but she could not tell, this time, what Helena was truly angry about—it could be Myka, or it could be—“You…” she was struggling, but to hold words in or get them out? “You could have compromised my operation!”

Her operation. But she would have to say that. She would have to. She would have to…

Helena was continuing to fight, or seeming to continue to fight, with herself about what to say; she calmed a bit, or acted as if she had, and said, “All right. So. If my influence was not enough, added to whatever drugs this deceitful little… well. Despite what he decided to introduce into the equation? Then it certainly doesn’t work. It won’t work. And in terms of your operation, Morse, twice now on two different agents, we’ve tried, and it doesn’t work. Twice now, with two different interpreters, and it doesn’t work.”

Allen snickered. “And how many times have you tried your supposed op? How many girls have you corrupted?”

Before Helena could answer—and thank god, because Myka doubted that she could have suffered through whatever the answer might have been—the admiral’s aide entered the room. “Sir,” he said to Nate, as if the rest of them, and the entire situation, were not there, “the admiral just got a call. It’s the subject. He’s had some kind of seizure, and now they can’t wake him up.”

“What?” Nate covered his eyes with one hand, and Myka almost, almost, almost, for one tiny second, felt sorry for him. Then she thought of Alex. And Eva. And then Nate’s tone, as he spoke, showed that Nate was not thinking at all of Alex, or Eva: “I swear to god, I am surrounded by idiots. That’s it. That’s it. I’m done; it’s over. Tell the admiral to shut it down. He’ll have to call Berlin, let them know they have to sort out this asset mess. God.”

Allen was practically leaping with vehemence, and did he think he could somehow convince Nate with the force of his continued conviction? “But there’s still the other one! Get another translator, and I’ll do the hypnosis! We don’t need either of these deviants!”

“I will not have you throw that word around,” Helena snapped.

As if he had won already, Allen said, “I’ll throw around whatever words I want to. Don’t tell me
about words. I don’t believe a single one you say.”

Helena said, “And I don’t believe that what you believe has any bearing on the situation at all.”

Swiveling his gaze between Helena and Allen, Nate told them both, “It’s what I believe that has a bearing on the situation. Every aspect of it.”

“But Morse is right,” Wendt said, in a wheedle. “If there’s another subject, we can take all these distractions out of the picture. Get a fresh start.”

Nate waved a hand. “No. There is no fresh start. I’m cutting my losses while I’ve still got some standing with Bannerman.”

Wendt’s face began to turn pink. “They’ll think the drugs don’t work!”

“They don’t,” Nate said. “The subject had a seizure, this girl wouldn’t… jesus. Wouldn’t…” He turned to Helena, and Myka saw what he wanted to ask: how far would Helena have gone. And Myka saw that Nate wanted, wanted very strongly, to believe every word she had said about this, about Myka, about this girl being part of an operation… and Myka wanted just as fervently for it all to be lies, because it had to be lies. Moments ago, she would have been certain that her side in anything Helena-related was right. Now she wavered. Now she looked at Helena looking, looking back at Nate with the greatest of conviction, and she wavered. “Anyway,” Nate said, turning back to Wendt, “the subject didn’t talk, then he had a seizure. The drugs don’t work.”

Wendt looked ready to lunge at Nate, and Myka was all of a sudden tempted to cry “but they do work,” because Alex would have talked, had been about to talk, and Myka would have done anything, had been about to do anything…

Nate said, “Now you take it easy. There’ll be other projects.” To Barbara, he said, “Get him out of here and calm him down. Give him some of his own damn drugs if you have to.”

“Listen,” Barbara started, “if you only knew.” She didn’t say anything more. She grabbed Wendt by the arm and pulled, and while his color didn’t change, he allowed himself to be led away.

“You get out,” Nate said to Myka. “Go to your room and stay there, and be ready to leave in the morning. Morse, you too.”

Allen smacked his left palm with his right fist. “I told you she was the worst kind of bad news. I told you. She says you should’ve believed her? You’d’ve been a lot better off believing me.”

“Morse, we will talk in the morning. And then there’s twelve hours on a plane,” Nate said, but while he spoke, Myka was watching Helena, trying to fidget so as to draw Helena’s eyes, so as to get some hint of my love rather than this girl, some comfort, something. But Helena did not alter her hard profile to turn toward Myka.

Myka gave up. She touched the violin case again, one time, driven by what must have been a superstitious impulse, some irrational idea that if she could impress herself upon it, that she would still somehow be in this room, that Helena would not be able to forget her presence here, or what they had done here together, not what they had done last night, not even what they had done tonight, just standing in each other’s arms. Myka imagined going to Helena right now, going to her and enfolding her in her arms again, so they could have five seconds, ten seconds, as long as it took for the men’s surprise to wax and wane. She wanted those five seconds, no matter the truth of what Helena had said. She wanted them so much that it was not until Nate snapped, “What did I tell you? Out!” that she thought to make her legs move. She didn’t look at Helena again.
Allen slammed the door as he walked out behind her, and she turned back, startled. He raised one hand at Myka, who braced herself for the blow—but it didn’t come. He lowered his arm, as if she wasn’t even worth as much effort as it would take to strike her.

She went into her room, heard Allen’s door open and, once again, slam.

At first she heard nothing but murmurs from Helena’s room. She tried to ignore them, but they escalated, and she was drawn closer and closer to the wall. Was it still the drugs that pricked her ears like this? If so, then she wanted to take more, wanted to be unconscious like Alex; she wished that Allen had hit her, hit her hard, so she could concentrate on real pain, physical pain, and not these agonizing words.

Helena’s voice: “I told you, it was part of the operation!”

Nate responded with a skeptical “Why should I believe you?”

Helena said, “Look at me,” in a way that Myka understood: look at how beautiful I am. “Do you honestly believe that I am a pervert?”

It took him a moment to answer. “Maybe I do. You’re queer in so many other ways, why not this one too? You didn’t want to get married.”

Myka lost all the blood from her limbs. She sank to the floor, and now her ear was pressed to the wall.

“Of course I didn’t want to get married! I work for MI6!” That, at least, sounded like Myka’s Helena.

But Nate said, “In fact you didn’t want much of anything. Not much. I know you’re a woman, but even for a woman.”

Helena had no audible response to that.

“Come on,” Nate said. “I’m not a complete idiot. You didn’t give me the time of day until they started following you, and you knew they were, didn’t you? And you knew why. You were pretty good friends with a pervert.”

“That was a long time ago. In the war, which you could not have won without the help of that pervert.”

“You don’t know what we could have done. What were you doing?”

“I was working for my country. I am still working for my country.”

Now Nate said, but not very strongly, “I could see to it that you don’t.”

“How?” Helena asked. “By bringing up that girl? Do you truly find it so difficult to believe that I might have been given a brief about which you—about which your agency, in fact—knew nothing?”

“Honestly, Helena? I don’t know. I’m going to be on the ropes with Bannerman as it is, so if I take this to him and it isn’t—”

“Then don’t. Don’t, Nate,” she said, and the way she said his name was terrible, terrible, terrible, because it was intimate, it was so very close to my love, and even if this was because she thought it
would help, it was wrong, it was wrong, it could never help. “I work for MI6. I do what I’m told. What I might truly want in any given circumstance is not the issue. You know that. This business…” Myka could imagine Helena shaking her head slowly, her hair moving like a curtain begging to be pushed aside by tender fingers; this business, how its demands fatigued her…

“This business…” Nate said, like he was tired of it, too. And they were in accord again, the two of them, in agreement about their profession, their profession…

“Then let’s forget it for a while,” Helena said.

Myka heard herself make a noise, an unvoiced scream of the kind that she might try to utter in a dream, a noise that had to come but couldn’t; she made it over and over and over, casting her eyes desperately around for something to stop the sounds from coming through the wall, something she could break—everything was cast iron, solid wood, huge and heavy, but then she saw the mirror, saw it and bent her right hand—“Helena,” she heard through the wall, in her tone but not her voice, and she bent her right hand—and she took that hand to the mirror, still making that impossible noise, now accompanied by the flash, the shatter, of falling glass. She hit again, and again, and someone knocked on her door and shouted, but she kept hitting, and then more people were there, and she was taken downstairs trailing glass and blood and everyone was there, everyone, everyone, but not Helena, not Helena, not Helena. Not Nate, and not Helena.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original Tumblr tags: I know I am the worst, but this is what secrecy and shame do, they make you distrust the very ground you’re standing on, and the ground Myka is standing on is incredibly shaky as it is, and saving and being saved, is an incredibly complicated business, and what one person is willing to do for another, is going to be a question of much focus, as this story eventually begins to turn upward again, as I would like to assure you one more time, it will
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

I know the last installment caused some pain. Helena is the opposite of forthright, yet Myka bravely, foolishly went all in, head-over-heels in, very early. But Myka has friends, and they are going to help her. Not necessarily in the ways she might have wanted or expected… but in this part and the next part, she is going to work on putting herself back together. As for the person who destroyed her—well, dealing with that whole situation may take a little longer. It may take a little longer, in fact, to find out the contours of that whole situation, and its consequences. If you squint, you might be able to discern a bit of what’s coming. Or you might not.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Myka’s hand, bandaged, was larger than a hand should be.

Barbara took her back upstairs to her now-mirrorless room, made her sit on the bed, and helped the quiet, elderly woman whose husband owned the inn to clean up the shards and splinters of glass. “Es tut mir leid,” Myka said; she could at least try to apologize in German. At least she could do that. The woman patted her unbandaged hand and said something Myka didn’t understand.

And Barbara snorted. “Das ist wahr,” she said. To Myka: “She said that they’re bad men, evil men.”

“You speak German?” That was awful, for her to be surprised. Because why shouldn’t Barbara speak German? She hadn’t spoken German—Myka thought back to the dining room, all the meals, and she hadn’t—but that was no reason to conclude that she couldn’t. People didn’t reveal things about themselves: a lesson Myka should have learned by now. A lesson that was now beaten into her hand.

“Not really well. Just some. But enough to agree about that.” She said to the woman, who was sweeping the last shards onto a sheet of newspaper, “Und eine Frau.” And one woman. That, Myka understood.

The woman jerked her head in the direction of Helena’s room, as if asking if that was who Barbara meant; Barbara nodded. The woman nodded back. Myka could hear no sound from that room, none at all now, and she didn’t know what to think of that… she closed her eyes, just for a moment. When she opened them, the woman was gone. Barbara was looking at Myka. “You’re not really… like that,” Barbara said. “Are you?”

“I don’t know what I’m like,” Myka said. “I don’t know at all anymore.”

“Don’t get confused. Some of those drugs really can turn you into a different person. And if she was trying to make you do things? It’s not your fault.”

“This was my fault,” Myka said. “This was all my fault.”

“You shouldn’t say that. I know you broke the mirror, but it was obviously because you were upset. And you wouldn’t have been upset if it hadn’t been for this whole… thing.”
Myka imagined trying to tell her the whole thing, the entire story, starting with a flash of a coin in a woman’s hand on a warm January day, and ending with her own hand’s flesh in shreds, soaking a white bandage with bright red blood.

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Barbara came back to Myka’s room in the morning to help her fill her suitcase. “Did you sleep at all?” she asked.

The night had been three things: constant wishing for relief from the pain pulsing in her hand, constant straining for sound from the next room, and constant searching of her memory for anything that could prove, completely and without doubt, that Helena had lied about her op. Myka found none of what she sought, not relief, not sound, nor any evidence that she had truly been more to Helena than an experiment… when Helena was so much more to her… but not even that could be trusted, not even the certainty of her own love. If Helena had led her to this, pulled and pushed Myka’s arms so that she had no choice, then what was she but Alex, mistaking something counterfeit for something real?

“I didn’t sleep,” she said.

“There’s the plane,” Barbara told her as she folded the skirt of Myka’s sherry suit. “You’ll have lots of time then.”

“I don’t think my mother would be proud of me, either,” Myka said.

Barbara looked a question at her.

“Like you said, yesterday. About doing what you have to.”

Now Barbara gave a grim laugh. “What I have to do seems easier than what you had to. Questioning that guy, for starters, and then this other business. I guess she really does hate everybody, doesn’t she?”

“I have no idea,” Myka said.

“I don’t guess you do,” Barbara said.

“But I’m sorry she was awful to you.”

“I’m sorry she was awful to you, too.” Barbara sighed. “Men, women. I think we’re all pretty awful to each other. Maybe most of the time.”

A year ago, a month ago, a week ago, Myka might have tried to disagree. Now, she nodded.

Barbara left to finish her own packing, and Myka was able to carry her suitcase down the stairs in her left hand, with her handbag over her right arm. She felt in her right hand the fresh push of blood from every heartbeat.

Helena was standing near the bottom of the last flight of stairs. Myka realized she had expected Helena to look different, though why or how or what form that difference would take… it made no sense, but she had expected something. Yet there Helena stood, in her gray suit, just herself. Her suitcase sat beside her, and in her right hand she held her violin case by its handle.

Incongruously, they were alone. Helena looked up and saw Myka, looked down and saw Myka’s hand. She said, “That’s what I heard, isn’t it.”
“Yes,” Myka said.

“I won’t ask why you did it.”

“Good.”

“I tried,” Helena said.

“Tried what?”

“To do everything at once.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know.”

“Just please tell me it wasn’t all a lie,” Myka said in a rush, because she had to have something, even if it was yet another lie.

“Myka,” Helena said. Anguished. Love? Or just some momentary qualm, a stray scruple? “Of course it w—”

Then the admiral and his aide clattered down the stairs, so their words had to stop, and Myka had nothing.

She did not realize how very much of nothing it was, how much it would be, until they were distributed into cars, driven the seemingly interminable distance back to Frankfurt—the peaceful greenery of the landscape taunted Myka: yes, now you may look at this foreign country, and have you enjoyed your stay?—to the airport. She hadn’t thought she would be put in a car with Helena, of course, and she was not. But she had somehow not understood what would happen at the military airfield: Myka and the rest of the Americans went one way, and Helena went another, escorted by an airman, who carried her suitcase. As she went, violin in hand, she looked over her shoulder. First, she put her gaze to Nate, and Myka yearned again for something to damage. Then Helena turned her eyes to Myka. And whatever Myka had thought, about lies and love and what might or might not be there, what had or had not mattered… Helena’s eyes held all of it and more. That too might have been a lie, but if there had been some way for Myka to run to her, to hold her and be overthrown by whatever lies she wanted to tell… she would have done it. Instead, she watched Helena turn and walk away, walk to another car, or a plane or a train, some thing that would take her away again.

And it came to Myka in a crash: that was why she had her violin.

She had never intended to come back, whatever happened. Just like before. It was “be careful” all over again, “be careful” in lieu of “goodbye,” but not even “be careful” this time; this time there was only “I tried.”

And Myka still had no idea what Helena had tried to do. What “everything at once” could possibly have meant.

She watched Helena’s shoulders, the square of her back, as she walked away. Her eyes had sought those same slender shoulders, bare and elegant, at the symphony… her mouth had tasted them, bare and animal, in the innermost dark of night. She knew, now, that she should have been content with the vision at the symphony.

The plane was its own torture. Myka held her Turgenev in her left hand, tried to grip it as tightly as
she had before, but one hand was not enough. She had hoped that the noise would be so much that no other thoughts could survive it… yet how such sound could become nothing but a background, she did not understand, as through the hours and hours, she leaned her head back and let it hurt, let it throb in time with the pain in her hand. She cried, too, no matter whether her eyes were open or closed, and whether that was from her hand, her head, her heart… she kept trying not to think of Helena, but she had to, she had to, that last glance from those eyes that once loved her, they had to have, had to have.

You don’t understand fear, Helena had said. You don’t understand love. And: no. No, Myka didn’t understand either of those things, not if they had made Helena say and do all of this.

At the end of journey, back on that same tarmac at Andrews, Nate approached Myka. “You’ve been through a lot,” he said, not unkindly. Consoling her about the situation. Consoling her over having been influenced, duped, doped. “Helena says that you’re a decent girl, that you aren’t to blame for any of it. Morse is an idiot, of course, and what Wendt did to you was unacceptable—I’ll make sure he knows that. I don’t need to bring anything up with anybody about what happened with you and Helena, all right?”

What happened with Myka and Helena… what happened. What happened. “Thank you,” she choked out, because she had to, but she coughed through it, coughed after it, coughed to rid her mouth of having to thank him for anything, to rid her ears of his voice saying Helena’s name.

“You’ll be all right,” he said. “Once we put this behind us, we’ll all be all right.”

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Myka got up and went to work the next morning, Friday morning, because what else would she do? It was a workday. She wouldn’t be able to transcribe much of anything with her hand like this, but surely she could listen, for now, and write things down later. She had to do something to keep herself from thinking, and the pain in her hand wasn’t having much of an effect on that. She considered taking aspirin but decided that was pointless: it would most likely just sit there atop the pain, as the pills she had taken the night before had done.

Trying to walk smoothly along the sidewalks, so as to not to jostle her hand, meant walking slowly; she got to E Street later than she usually did, making it just in time into the Translation room with stragglers rather than with the first arrivals. And there sat Miss Calder, as if nothing had happened, as if nothing was different. Abigail was already there, too; she looked up and saw that it was Myka, and her mouth dropped open. “When did you get back?” she asked. Then she saw the bandage. “And what happened?”

“Yesterday afternoon,” Myka said.

Miss Calder had leapt from her desk upon seeing Myka. “Myka, what happened to you?” she asked.

“That’s what I want to know,” Abigail said.

“I had an accident,” Myka told them.

“Oh really,” Miss Calder said. She looked Myka up and down. “Come with me. You too,” she told Abigail. She stalked out of the room.

Myka realized very quickly where they were headed: Helena’s office. “No,” she said. “Not there. Please.”

Miss Calder said, “I’m sorry, but it’s the only place that I’m sure is still clean. And I am fairly
certain I need to hear exactly what happened.” They entered the office. “For example, to your hand.” She sat down at Helena’s desk.

Myka and Abigail sat opposite her, and Myka said, “I told you. I had an accident. I broke a mirror, and I cut myself.”

“Seven years of bad luck…” Abigail murmured.

“That already started.”

Miss Calder jumped on that. “What do you mean?”


“I doubt that. Did Helena tell you that?”

“No,” Myka said. “But you were right, Miss Calder. Things that are dead shouldn’t come back. They should stay dead.” Myka felt the blood in her hand thump, in vivid paradox, with agreement: dead, dead, dead, dead. All her blood was gathering there; her head felt light, as if she were disappearing.

Abigail’s voice brought her back. “What’s wrong, Myka? And what happened to Miss Wells?”

“She’s gone. Because it’s dead. She’s gone, back to MI6. I… think.”

“You don’t know?” Abigail asked.

“We weren’t really… talking. To each other.”

“Because it was dangerous?”

“Because…” Well, that wasn’t wrong. “Yes,” Myka said. “I guess it was. Dangerous.”

Miss Calder sat back and crossed her arms. “Myka,” she said, “I would very much appreciate it if you would tell me what really happened.”

Myka had not understood how much she had needed to say it, to say at least this part of it, but she responded to something in the tone of Miss Calder’s voice, or maybe it was just the right moment at last, for it poured out: “Allen said he heard us. Heard me and Helena, at night, and I think it was because Wendt drugged me, I’m not sure, but I must have been too loud, because the next day I was too loud too, after I drank the water, and then the next night, it happened… he and Nate. Caught us. Not doing anything, we weren’t even really doing anything, but we were there together, in her room… and then Helena. Said.” Myka was breathing through her nose now, trying to keep herself under control, because if she started crying again she would not stop, and she had already done that once, over Helena, in front of Miss Calder, and she couldn’t let it happen again. Not again, not like this. “She said.”

“What did Helena say,” Miss Calder asked flatly. “I will leave the rest of it alone for now, but what idiotic thing did Helena say.”

“She said it was an op.”

Abigail’s confusion would have been funny in any other context. “What was an op?”

Myka shuddered. “Me. Us.” And in saying it, she opened the wound in her heart again. And her
right hand: she wanted to slam her right hand against the desk, just like Helena used to, she wanted to open up all the cuts, just in case she had begun to forget the length and breadth and depth of the pain.

“What?” Miss Calder seemed genuinely taken aback, but… “She said what?”

“That it was an assignment from MI6, that nobody else on the project knew anything about it. To see if she could make someone into a security risk.”

Miss Calder said a short “ha.” Then she said, “I did not think Helena Wells could truly surprise me. Not anymore.”

“Please tell me you aren’t lying,” Myka begged. “You could be, and I wouldn’t be… shocked.” She huffed a small huff, almost a laugh. “Not anymore. But if you would just say you aren’t. If you would just say you had no idea. You too, Abigail. That you just didn’t know. That even if it’s true that she had this… plan, you just didn’t know.”

Abigail said, with an eagerness that Myka did not imagine could be fake, “I for one had no idea, so if it is true, I will make her come back and teach me how to play absolutely everything that cool, because that’s… I mean, I can’t believe it. And if it isn’t true, I will make her come back and teach me how to tell a story. Because I’ll bet they bought it, didn’t they?”

“Nate did,” Myka said, with difficulty. “Because she… because I guess to prove… that she isn’t really… she…” and she tried to put more words to it, but she couldn’t say it. In so many moments, she could do nothing but think it, imagine it, but now, she couldn’t say it out loud.

Abigail didn’t seem to grasp what she was saying, but Miss Calder did. “Oh, my god. And you somehow… Myka, what really happened to your hand?”

“I broke a mirror. It’s the truth. But it wasn’t an accident.”

Abigail was still confused. “But why?”

“Because I couldn’t find anything else to break.”

“I understand,” Miss Calder said, and her tone and her eyes mixed anger and memory and… she really did understand, Myka thought. Then, sounding much more businesslike, she said, “What about Allen?”

“What about him?” Myka asked.

“Did he believe her?”

Myka shook her head. “He never believes her.”

“Then this is going to be trouble,” Miss Calder said. “Because if the project’s dead again…”

“You were right. It should have stayed dead. It should have stayed dead, and it’s my fault that it came back.”

This startled Miss Calder. “Your fault? It’s Nate’s fault if it’s anybody’s. How could it be your fault?”

“I went looking for Nate. After Helena disappeared, when it died the first time, I went looking for him. If I hadn’t done that…” If she hadn’t done that, she would have gone on believing, forever
after, that Helena had truly wanted her, that she had genuinely meant that last “be careful.” She would have remembered, would have clung to, her dreams of Helena in the springtime, of the flowers and how they would soften the austere beauty of her face, how they would blush against the dark shine of her hair. But now she had only a chasm of doubt, over which she could stretch a bandaged hand. She had this doubt, this hand, and she knew more than she ever wanted to know she could know about the middle of the night, about her body against another, about what she had come to believe she was made for. Myka said, “Is it true? Do you think it’s true? Is that all I was to her?” Someone would have to know the answer to that question. Someday, someone would tell her the truth, and she would know.

“Myka,” Miss Calder sighed. “Oh, Myka, I have no idea. Where Helena’s involved, anything could be true. But I can try to find out. In the meantime, come on. We’ll put headphones on you and let you listen to your Soviet Martin and Lewis.”

That was the most comforting thing Myka had heard anyone say in days.

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That afternoon, two large and impassive men came to the Translation room. The two men talked to Miss Calder first. Then they came to Myka’s desk. Myka saw Abigail stand up, start to move, but she couldn’t see anything else because the men were in the way.

“Come with us, miss,” one said.

“Come with you where?” Myka asked.

In answer, one of the men pulled Myka by her right arm, up and out of her chair. Her hand, which had calmed slightly, began to throb again.

Suddenly Abigail was pulling on the other man, pulling on his arm, saying “Hey! Where are you taking my friend? You better ask our supervisor about this!”

“We did. But this isn’t her concern,” said the one Abigail had her hands on. He said it as if Abigail were a particularly annoying gnat.

“Well you better ask her again!” Abigail maintained. “Nobody here did anything wrong!”

The men both sighed. But the one holding Myka dropped her arm, and they both went to the front of the room, to Miss Calder’s desk, for a second time.

Abigail said, swiftly, to Myka, “Have no comment. This isn’t the box. Miss Calder says, anything they ask, have no comment, because talking won’t help. Got it?”

“No comment,” Myka repeated.

“Everything, Myka.”

Then the two men came back, and they took Myka away.

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Inside a tiny, stuffy, hot office occupied by three men and one woman, a tape machine whirred, recording questions asked by one of the men and answers provided by the woman.
OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT
Civil Service Commission, Case no. CI-724, Sept. 5, 1952, interrogation of [redacted]

CSC investigator: Information has come to the attention of the Civil Service Commission that you are a homosexual. What comment do you care to make?

[redacted]: No comment.

CSC investigator: Information has come to the attention of the Civil Service Commission that your homosexuality has made you susceptible to manipulation by interests working against the United States. What comment do you care to make?

[redacted]: No comment.

CSC investigator: Information has come to the attention of the Civil Service Commission that you assisted a known degenerate to undermine a Central Intelligence Agency operation. What comment do you care to make?

[redacted]: (sharp intake of breath) No comment.

CSC investigator: Because you have failed to defend yourself adequately against these accusations, your employment at the Central Intelligence Agency is hereby terminated. You will be taken to retrieve your belongings, then you will be escorted from the premises.

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Myka was taken to pick up her purse from beside her desk.

“Diner, eight tonight!” Abigail said, seemingly to someone across the room. But then she looked at Myka. She wanted nothing less than to go to the diner. She wanted to hide and cry and try to remember who she really was. Instead, she nodded.

****

The first thing Myka said when she walked into the diner, when she saw Abigail and Joshua in a booth together, was, “You shouldn’t be talking to me. Either of you. You’ll get in trouble too.” She had been thinking about this: no one else needed to suffer. The consequences had to stop here, with her.

Abigail maintained, as only she could, “No one tells me what to do.”

But Myka now knew things that Abigail did not know. “They will tell you what to do. They will. You think you’re safe, but you’re not. You think you understand what things are all about, but you don’t.”

“I’ll be fine, Myka. I’ll be fine, and I’ll find out what things are all about. That’s the difference between you and me: I want to find out.” Abigail sounded hard, just for that moment, sounded some echo of Nate, and even of Helena. What would Abigail have done, in that room in Germany?

Myka told her, “I would rather you didn’t find out like I have.” She meant it. And then she realized. “Where’s Steve?”
“He couldn’t come,” Abigail said hurriedly. “Listen, Myka, Miss Calder wants you to go to her house tomorrow, okay? In the afternoon, like three, she said. Will you do that?”

“I’ll do that,” Myka said. “Why couldn’t Steve come?”

Joshua shot a terrified glance at Abigail, who said, “Joshua, do you not remember what we talked about?”

“It’s okay if Steve doesn’t want to be seen with me,” Myka said, though it hurt her to acknowledge it. “I understand. Not now, and probably not ever.”

“It’s not that he doesn’t want to be seen with you,” Joshua said. “It’s that he doesn’t want to be seen at all.”

Now Myka was worried. “Why not?”

Abigail said to Joshua, “Quit being cryptic. Now we have to tell her. It’s a bad situation, Myka. I mean, yours is just as bad, if not worse, so that’s why I didn’t want to tell you.”

“Tell me,” Myka said, because although she did not want to know, she knew what it had to be.

Abigail nodded. “He was with a guy, and some punks caught them and beat them both up. The other guy got away, but the punks who did the beatdown called the cops and told them that Steve was… you know. So he got arrested. Not the punks, right? Steve got arrested. The Agency fired him the next morning, and somehow his landlord heard about the charges too, so he got kicked out.”

“When did it happen?” Myka asked.

Joshua said, “Late Wednesday night. He stayed with me last night, but my roommate’s getting weird about it, keeps saying we’ll both get fired if they find out.”

Myka sighed, but when Abigail said to Joshua, “I told you not to—”, she interrupted, “Of course Steve can stay with me. Of course he can. You still have a job, Joshua, but they can’t fire me twice.”

When Steve arrived at her apartment later that night, she took one look at his face—his handsome face, now swollen and cut, his injuries so much more open and visible than those on her hand—and she said, “Tell me what happened.” He did… and then he took her right hand very gently in his, just let it rest on top of his own hand, and said the same thing to her. So she told him everything.

“I’m so sorry I couldn’t protect you,” he said. “From any of it.”

“I couldn’t protect you either.”

“This was my own fault. I wasn’t careful.”

And at that, Myka laughed. It wasn’t funny, but she laughed. “Those exact words should be coming out of my mouth. Because you were right. I never should have gone to Germany.”

Steve touched a cut above his left cheekbone, right under his eye. A butterfly bandage held it nearly closed, but its edges strained against the adhesive. “I would have gone. I know I told you not to go, but I understand. You loved her.”
Myka began to cry, as she had on the plane, as if crying were something that her eyes could not help but do, all the time. “I did. Or she made me think I did. Does it even matter?”

Steve shook his head. “No,” he said, and she believed him.

“What if I still do? What if she made me think I did, and now I still do?”

Steve shook his head again. “I don’t know,” he said this time.

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In the night, while Steve slept on the floor of Myka’s living room, Myka stood before the sink in her tiny bathroom. Under the room’s bare, glaring lightbulb, she unwrapped the bandages from her hand, peeled back the tape, removed the gauze. Too many hues of red stared back at her: darkest dried blood stood in ridged hills around sliced-crimson valleys, surrounded by flushed and angry skin, with tiny cherry drops of new blood welling where she had disturbed the cuts’ not-yet-knit edges.

She was lucky not to have sliced into anything essential, Wendt had told her. Very lucky. The cuts were superficial, mostly, though the bone of one knuckle had seemed that night to shine whitely at her, vivid and baleful through the blood. She couldn’t see it now; it had probably been an illusion, some hallucination of how bad things might have been, how much worse she could have made them. This was bad, but at least she knew now. She knew the length and breadth and depth, the consequences and the costs, of what she had done.

She did not own much in the way of bandages, so she and Steve would need to buy more gauze and tape tomorrow. Then they would bind each other’s wounds and figure out where to go from here.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

bering and jinks, my sweet little gay babies, these things could have happened just like this, (though the Germany operation is a little unusual,) but what happens to Myka and Steve at the Agency?, exactly that way, someone could have started a rumor about Myka, and they would not have even bothered with the lie detector, if they said they had information about you, (and that was the first thing they always said, then asked if you cared to comment), no matter what you said to try to explain or defend yourself, that was it, for example I have seen one stat saying that between 1950 and 1953, sixty people per month were fired from government jobs, simply because they were suspected of being gay
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

So here is the thing: this part was supposed to show the passage of time quite elliptically, but when it seemed to want to expand, I said fine. If I had all the time in the world, I might still be trying to force it to become a more elegant vehicle for the information, but the end result is a two-part part. In fact this begins a stretch of two-part parts, which I have tried mightily to figure out how to post effectively here. I think they're going to be stand-alone chapters, but my goal is to post them in more rapid succession than I've been managing thus far.

Myka went to the drugstore in the morning for an assortment of wound dressings. The clerk looked at her pile of supplies, then glanced at her hand. She hadn’t had enough clean gauze to make a mitten of it again; damage showed on her fingers, at her wrist, around the fleshy part of the palm. “Must hurt,” the clerk said.

“It looks worse than it feels,” Myka lied.

“What happened?” he asked.

Myka told him, “Let’s just say I’m counting down seven years.”

She left Steve, freshly Band-Aided and butterfried, in her apartment that afternoon and went to Miss Calder’s house. The scene of the crime, was her bitter thought, and when Miss Calder let her in, all she could see was her last time in this space, only two weeks removed. The scenes in her head a litany: This is where she stood and kissed my cheek. This is where she held my hand. That is where I said “I love you.” There is where we sat like lovers. Up those stairs is where… where what? Where my life ended, and where it began. And here, here is where I cried as if my heart would break. As if I knew a thing, any single thing, about a breaking heart.

But: this was where Miss Calder was now standing and watching her. Myka said, “I’m sorry. I just realized how short a time it’s been.”

“It’s all right,” Miss Calder said. “Come sit down.”

And so they sat as they had two weeks ago.

“How’s your hand?” Miss Calder asked eventually.

“It hurts,” Myka admitted. “It was a stupid thing to do.”

“Betrayal hurts, no matter what form it takes. And everyone’s got their own response to that. I’m just sorry you have to look at yours.”

Myka shrugged. “It’s my fault.”

Miss Calder shook her head. “None of this is your fault, and what happened to you yesterday was simply horrible. I don’t have to understand why in the world you would want Helena Wells in the first place to know that. Or to know that when Helena Wells tries to ad lib, somebody’s world is
going to be sent very quickly to hell in a handbasket. I don’t know what her assignment was. I wouldn’t be surprised if she did have one, but I would be extremely surprised if it involved making a girl—making *you*—fall in love with her and then falling in love with you herself.”

“I wish that’s what had happened,” Myka said.

“Myka. I have to agree with Abigail on this one: if she turns out to have been faking all of that? I am going to get her to give *me* lessons. I have no business in the field anymore, but that would be a useful skill to have. I don’t think she’s that good, though. I think she’s very good when she wants to be, but I don’t think she’s that much of a monster.”

“But that would mean she *was* that much of a monster. To Nate.” Myka didn’t want to acknowledge that, but… Nate hadn’t done anything wrong. Not with Helena, anyway. He hadn’t knowingly stolen her from Myka; he hadn’t forced her into anything. Helena could have been using both of them in exactly the same way, and what he’d said at the airport? That seemed to suggest that he was not untroubled by the situation. That made Myka want to be a better person, want to find some sympathy for him, but…

Miss Calder, Myka thought with a nasty feeling of vindication, didn’t seem to care about Nate at all, because she said, “That makes it ironic, doesn’t it, that he bought her whole story, because everything I was told indicates that CSC’s interrogating you was completely Morse Allen’s doing. If I could, I would see to it that that man suddenly found himself posted to Central America as a junior case officer’s *typist*. I don’t have much fondness for Nate and his approach, but I really believe he was surprised to hear that you’d been reported.”

“That’s almost worse. That Helena… convinced him.” Myka took a deep breath, and Miss Calder nodded sympathetically. “Do you think that she thought it would save me? Save her, and save me too?”

“I have no idea what she thought. It’s going to take me some time to find out what her orders were, but maybe she did think that. And all right, she did… persuade Nate. But she knows how much Morse Allen hates her. She should have seen that he could be just as big a problem.”

Myka tried, halfheartedly, “Maybe she didn’t know about the CSC. About what they could do. I mean, she told me, here at your house, what to say in the box, and if she thought that was the worst that could happen…”

“I tried to warn her about what they could do. How bad it was.” Miss Calder shook her head. “For heaven’s sake, I had to go with all the rest of the supervisors to a two-day seminar in New York last year, all about how we were supposed to recognize and weed out these security risks. As if I can’t assess talent—and risk!—on my own!” She smiled an apology at Myka. “But you don’t need to hear me complain. And what’s done is done. I’ll keep trying to find out what the real truth is, whether she was working an op of her own, but I really think this sounds like classic Helena, trying to lie her way out of a bad situation and just making it worse. Alan—Alan Turing, that is, not Morse Allen—had to clean the slate for her during the war, and so did I, once. And I suppose this time you and I will do the cleanup.”

“What kind of cleanup?”

“Well, of you, primarily. I need you to tell me one thing: do you want to stay in D.C.? I can’t get you your job back at the Agency—”

“I don’t *want* my job back at the Agency,” Myka interrupted. “Not after yesterday. And not after Germany.”
“You don’t have to want it back,” Miss Calder told her. “I’m not… looking at you differently.”

“You are,” Myka said. “You must be. Because I am, because I thought I knew, but I didn’t. And now I don’t know anything.” But she had already imagined going back to Colorado, coming up with some story to tell her parents, trying to find work there—maybe working in her father’s bookstore, but he hadn’t ever wanted that—and probably ending up married to someone. Married to someone. “That’s not true. I know that I want to live like I’m not somebody else. I think staying here is my best bet for doing that, but I don’t know what to do here.”

“I have an idea, if you’re willing, but you’ll have to make a decision very quickly.”

“What is it?”

Miss Calder raised her voice. “Artie!” she called. “Come tell Myka your idea!”

From the kitchen emerged Miss Calder’s… gentleman friend? That was what she had thought, ages ago, but now… companion? That seemed wrong too. Professor Nielsen, anyway, and he always looked like he would rather be somewhere other than wherever he was. Now, he complained, “It’s not really my idea. It’s your idea.”

“It’s our idea,” Miss Calder said.

“It’s an idea,” he harrumphed.

Myka thought they might go on like that forever, so she said, “Um… what’s the idea?”

Professor Nielsen sat down next to Miss Calder. “You know I’m on the faculty at Capitol, don’t you?” At Myka’s nod, he went on, “I chair Slavic and Eastern European Studies. We don’t say ‘Russian’ anymore because it makes people nervous. Which is the problem, because these days it’s getting harder and harder to fill the graduate program. Nobody wants to be a commie… but I think that’s the least of your worries, isn’t it? Anyway, somebody’s idea is that you might want to give the academic world a try. If you do, come see me Monday and we’ll work it out. I know your language skills are fine—”

“Understatement of the year,” Miss Calder murmured.

Artie glanced at her. “Better than fine.” Then he said to Myka, in Russian, “I trust her, but why don’t you tell me something I don’t expect to hear.”

“My friend Steve Jinks just lost his job for the same reason I did,” Myka said, also in Russian. “He’s in my apartment right now, with his face looking worse than my hand.”

“Really?” Artie asked, in English.

“Really,” Myka said.

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you. So am I.”

“Okay,” Artie said. “Anyway, come in on Monday. Classes started this past week, so you’ll be a little behind, but I’m guessing you can catch up. I should be able to get you a research assistantship for this semester. Doesn’t pay much, but it’s enough. And then next term or next year, we can get you up in front of a bunch of kids who are slavering to learn Russian!”
“Slavering to learn Russian?” Myka said.

“Taking a language because they have to,” he amended.

“But what about… what happened? At the Agency, I mean. I don’t want to get anyone else in trouble.”

“Please. Unless you’re actually a card-carrying Communist, and you wave your card around, nobody’s going to say, or think, a thing. I wouldn’t talk about the Agency if I were you, but—”

“I don’t want to talk about the Agency.”

“Then I think you should come see me on Monday.”

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When Myka got back to her apartment, Steve was sitting in her single armchair. He wasn’t bulky at all, but he was tall, taller than Myka, and the way he did not fit a chair that held her perfectly made her see his height more clearly than usual. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“What for?”

“Somebody knocked on the door, and I thought it was you, so I answered it… and it was your landlady. Mrs. Forrest? She took one look at me, and at the room—I still hadn’t cleaned up the blankets from last night, so it was a terrible mess on the floor—and she said, ‘where is Miss Bering?’ and when I said you weren’t here, she said, ‘tell that hussy to see me at once when she returns,’ and high-tailed it away.” He touched the cut on his cheekbone again. It was pulling apart. Myka was starting to doubt the effectiveness of butterfly bandages. “Anyway, I just keep making everybody’s lives worse.”

“You really don’t,” she told him. Then she smiled. “If only because I’ve managed to make my life plenty bad on my own.”

Steve smiled too. He winced at the extra pull that put on his bandage.

Later, to Mrs. Forrest—who was extremely proper and kept her own apartment in the building as clean and tidy as a hospital suite—Myka said, “He’s my cousin. From Colorado. He’s thinking of moving out here.”

“What happened to his face?” Her voice was unsympathetic. She was disinclined to belief, and Myka certainly understood why; she’d heard the story from one of her neighbors right after she moved in, that Mrs. Forrest’s husband was killed early in the war, that she’d had to fight to hang onto the building, that tenants thought they could push her around. They were wrong, but they often tried.

“That’s why he wants to live here. There are some things going on… going on back home, things that he didn’t want to get involved in. He wants a fresh start.” Myka listened to the lies roll off her tongue… felt their ease. Thought, as a reflex, of Helena.

“If he wants his fresh start here, I’ll need extra rent from you. And he can’t sleep on the floor. I’m not running a flophouse.”

Myka had no idea whether Steve would stay with her. Whether he wanted to, or whether she wanted him to. But she said, “All right. If he stays, we’ll buy him a bed, and we’ll work out the extra rent.”
On Monday, Myka went to see Artie Nielsen. The campus buildings of Capitol University were spread over several downtown blocks, and finding the one that housed Slavic and Eastern European Studies was a challenge.

Once she found it and found the correct office, Professor Nielsen did not bother with pleasantries. “Here’s your schedule,” he said, pulling off what were presumably reading glasses and handing her a typewritten note. “Come see me during my office hours tomorrow, and we’ll start on that research. How do you think you’d do with literary translation?” Before Myka could answer, he said, “Never mind! Plenty of time to find out! In the meantime, you’ve got a linguistics class to get to.” He looked at her right hand. “You can borrow notes from somebody in the class, I’ll bet.”

Myka looked at the sheet of paper he’d handed her. Sure enough, it indicated that she did have a class in fifteen minutes. “How did you do this so quickly?” She looked up at him. She’d met him exactly five times in her life before Saturday. “And why?”

“Interesting you should ask. Do you know what the difference is between defectors from Communist countries and people the Agency puts through the wringer?”

“No…”

“Me neither. Look, Myka. Vanessa said you’ve been through a lot. Try to put it behind you for now. You may decide that this isn’t for you, but for now? For now, get to class.” He slipped his glasses on and glanced down at his desk, and Myka made to leave. “Oh!” he said. “I forgot. Your friend’s case is a little different, given the arrest—” and he waved his hand at her sound of objection, “—the arrest, which Vanessa was able to find out about pretty easily. So I can’t do much for him. But if he wants a job, I can tell you that the janitorial company that cleans this place doesn’t ask questions when they hire.”

“He’s a scientist,” Myka said.

“He was a scientist. And he might be again, but for now? I’m just making conversation.”

Two weeks later, with his face substantially healed, Steve got the janitorial job, and by then both he and Myka found it a relief. They had determined that he would stay in her apartment for the time being, so they bought him a foldup cot that passed Mrs. Forrest’s muster, and they began paying an extra five dollars per week in rent. They could not have found another place: no one would have bought their “cousins” story, and the record of Steve’s arrest was still there for anyone to find. “It’s funny,” Myka said, “that we can’t move both because they’d think we’re a couple and because they’d see we would never be a couple.”

Steve apologized at least once a day, usually more, and Myka told him, every time, that she didn’t mind—because mostly, she didn’t. Steve was a considerate roommate all the time, and then once he got the janitorial job, he worked nights. They saw each other on the weekends, but other than that… sometimes Steve would eat his dinner as Myka ate her breakfast, or vice versa. They worked hard, both of them, and they did not talk about the past.

Halfway through the term, Miss Calder, through Artie—“Call me Artie!” he’d exclaimed as Myka was trying to tell him that she’d tracked down an article he’d been looking for, “because life is
short, and ‘Professor Nielsen’ takes too long to say!”—asked to see Myka. And so it was that on another Saturday, this one in November, Miss Calder sat Myka down on that same sofa in that same music room and said, “I have something to tell you.”

Myka braced herself. Linguistics, she thought. I am learning linguistics and the history of Russian and also Old Church Slavonic. I am learning all of these things. I can handle a little more information.

“Here’s what I know: Helena did have an assignment of some sort, one that came directly from Menzies. That’s the bad news. The good news—well, the other news—is that I haven’t been able to find out what it was.”

“So it could have been… she could have been telling the truth,” Myka said. She had days when she believed it, days when she didn’t. Days when she didn’t care at all, but instead just wanted Helena to be standing next to her, breathing.

“Or it honestly could have been her ham-fisted way of trying to save you, save the both of you,” Miss Calder said.

“Am I ever going to know?” She didn’t know whether she wanted to know, but if there was a chance that she could know…

“The other thing I’ve been trying to do is get a bead on that ham-fisted idiot, so I can talk to her myself. And that’s been just as challenging. She’s in England, then she’s not; now it’s France, now it’s not; now it’s Asia, or maybe not.” She sighed. “But don’t worry, Myka. I’ll keep trying.”

“At least it worked for her,” Myka said.

“What worked?”

“If it was a lie. About me, about the op. She still has her job, so at least it worked for her.” Myka drew a shuddering breath. “That’s good, isn’t it? I should feel good.”

“You should feel terrible,” Miss Calder said. “And I would recommend that, if you ever see her again, you… actually, I don’t know what you should do.”

“Slug her as hard as I can,” Myka said. And she wanted not to want to add what could not help but come next: “And then I wouldn’t slug her. If she’d let me, I know I wouldn’t slug her.”

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In late April of 1953, near the end of her first year in graduate school, Myka turned 28 years old. Her parents sent her a birthday card, in which they wrote, “We hope your schoolwork is going well. Love, Mom and Dad.” Myka had written to tell them about her “decision” to go back to school, and she tried to send a bright monthly update. She felt she wrote not one true word… even the facts, down to the names of her courses, felt like lies. Everything she did all day, every day, felt like lies… disguises for what she really did: wait and hope.

Steve baked her a cake and gave her a Les Paul and Mary Ford single titled “Bye Bye Blues.” Myka, upon listening to it, started to cry. “Don’t tell me how to feel,” she said around her tears.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Steve said, helplessly. “I just thought… look, you don’t have to stop being sad if you don’t want to. But I thought you might want to. I thought it might give you a push. It was stupid. I’m sorry.”
Myka sniffled. “I do want to. Sometimes. But I don’t, either. What does it mean if I stop?”

“Well, then, don’t stop. Not completely. Here’s a deal,” Steve said. “How about this? I’ll ruin your birthday, every year. I’ll give you a present that’ll make you sad, that’ll ruin the day, and okay, it’s ruined, and you can be as sad as sad can be. Then the rest of the days…”

“What about those days?”

Steve smiled. “Less. Just less sad. Not perfect, not floating on air, just less sad.”

“I don’t know if I can make that deal.”

“Why not give it a try? You didn’t know if you could do graduate school, either, but look at you now.”

****

For the fall semester, Artie found Myka a place in student housing. “A dorm?” Myka asked.

“A residence hall. Graduate students only,” he told her. “Much more adult.”

In fact, the grandly named Alexander Hamilton Graduate Student Residency Apartments were loud and chaotic—but Myka’s room was cheap, and even these cramped quarters gave her more space to herself than she had in the apartment with Steve, so Myka and Steve’s apartment became Steve’s alone. He could afford it by himself now; he’d been promoted to a better, daytime position in the janitorial company, selling the service to new clients. He was still Steve, after all, still handsome and athletic, still a very good listener.

Myka started teaching Russian to undergraduates who were required to take language classes. Teaching was… fine. It was something she did, just like studying was now something she did. She put her head down and she did it. Nouns with their cases and gender; verbs with their tenses, moods, and aspects. Vocabulary. She thought in Russian sometimes now, as she had when she was small. Steve laughed at her when she would answer the telephone that way.

So did Abigail. Myka saw Abigail sometimes—or rather, Abigail pushed her way into Myka’s days sometimes. Abigail was difficult: she was a reminder of everything, Helena and the Agency and all the disasters, but she was still Abigail, and she made Myka smile and laugh and even remember in ways that were less painful than when Myka was alone.

The day in late 1953 when Abigail was moved out of Translation and into Operations, she took Myka out to dinner. “Congratulations,” Myka told her. “I know it’s what you wanted.”

“We’ll see,” Abigail said. “Those men are impossible. Did you hear about the Petticoat Panel?”

“There’s something called a Petticoat Panel?”

“It sounds ridiculous, I know, but when Dulles started as Director this year, there was a big deal about how women can’t get promoted past GS-14, and he said okay let’s study that, and what it basically boiled down to was, guess what, men don’t like it when women are in a position to boss them around.”

“I guess they don’t. That’s true even in class. Turns out that even eighteen-year-old boys think they should be the ones in charge.”

“I just want to get high enough that they can’t pat me on the head and call me pretty anymore.”
“Lifetimes aren’t long enough,” Myka said.

“Huh?”

“That’s what Miss Calder said to me once. About… well, honestly, it was about you becoming Director.”

“I will show all of them. I will live to be… how long do you think it’ll take, fifty years? Seventy-five? Anyway, I will live to be a hundred and I will be the Director of this stupid agency.”

“You got promoted, Abigail,” Myka reminded her. “That’s a big deal.”

“I’m surprised you’re even happy for me, you hate the Agency so much these days.”

“I don’t hate it. I mean… okay, I hate it. I don’t want to have anything to do with it. But I don’t hate you.”

“Miss Calder still can’t find anything out about Miss Wells.”

“I figured she’d tell me if she did.”

“Right. But now it’s like she’s dropped off the face of the earth.”

“Maybe that’s good,” Myka said. She wanted to believe it.

TBC
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Next part sooner rather than later, as promised.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As 1954’s spring term was beginning, Myka discovered that one of her Introductory Russian students was on the university wrestling team. She discovered this when a man clothed in the school’s athletic colors came to her office hours a few weeks into the term. From a woven lanyard, also in team colors, around his neck, a silver whistle dangled.

“Hey, so you’re Myka Bering?” he asked.

“That’s right,” she said cautiously.

“Pete Lattimer, wrestling coach,” he said, and reached a beefy hand across the desk at her. She took it in her left hand, and he gave her a quizzical look.

“Old injury on my right hand,” she said. “I try not to use it when I don’t have to.” She didn’t add her further thought, which was that he didn’t look like the kind of guy who knew how to modulate his grip strength.

“Sounds like my left shoulder. I dislocated it when I was wrestling in college, and it pops out every now and then. It wants to be freeeee.” He plopped down in the chair next to her desk, as if he expected her to know exactly why he was there.

“Can I help you at all?” Myka asked.

“I hope so. One of the kids on my team is in love with you.”

“What?”

“He’s in your class. Joey, that guy from Ohio.”

“I don’t think I have a student named Joey, and I wouldn’t know who’s from Ohio—”

“Yeah, you do, he’s in some intro class, probably goes by Joseph? But I call him Joey, because that’s what I do.” Joseph… she did have a Joseph. “Aha, you do know. Anyway, he’s out of his mind for you. Talks about you all the time.”

“I don’t know what to do about that,” Myka admitted.

“Do about it? No, no, please, I’m here to beg you, don’t do anything about it! Kid’s never wrestled so well in his life. It’s like he wants to prove his love to you or something by winning more matches than anybody else.”

“I don’t see how that could be true; I didn’t even know he was a wrestler.”

“I don’t think that matters. I think he’s just giving everything his all. What I’m saying is, if he
looks at you and little hearts jump out of his eyes, don’t have a fit or anything.”

“I’ll… try?” Myka thought Pete Lattimer might be the strangest man she’d ever met.

“So hey,” said the strangest man she’d ever met, “do you want to get some dinner or something?”

“I’m… seeing someone.”

“Okay. That must be nice. Anyway, you want to get some dinner?”

“I just said—”

“C’mon, you can’t have a friend like me? It’s because I’m a jock, isn’t it.”

“What? No, I just don’t really…”

He let her trail off; then he cracked his knuckles. “Really what?”

“Get out much. Without the person I’m seeing.”

“Then it’s time to start. Unless he’s some big jealous type who’ll beat me up for just shaking your hand. I’ve got that trick shoulder, you know.”

“I don’t think he would beat you up. He’s very nice.”

“Okay then. Did you know that the pie at Linda’s Buffeteria, over on M, is the best thing you will ever eat in your life?”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Except for the hotdogs at, I swear, every single Kresge’s. Those are great, too. Or, hey, you know what might beat those hotdogs? The China Cafe, which is mid city, so it’s kind of a hike, but oh so worth it…”

Pete Lattimer was strangely mesmerizing, Myka discovered. She discovered that when she was listening to him talk about food, or movies, or comic books, she didn’t think much about anything else.

****

In April 1954, Myka turned twenty-nine. Steve gave her Nat King Cole’s “Answer Me, My Love,” and she cried again. She cried hard, her head against Steve’s muscled shoulder, and she did feel a weird sense of permission, a freedom to get it out that she did not have when she cried alone.

“I thought that one would get you,” he said as she slowly calmed, blew her nose, and got her breathing back. “I considered ‘Secret Love,’ because of… well, secrets, but it’s really too happy. And of course the secret love’s not a secret anymore.”

“It’s a little bit amazing,” Myka said, “how many people know. I guess it isn’t that much of a secret, anyway.”

“Your friend Pete doesn’t know,” Steve said.

“The funny thing is, if I told him, I really don’t think he’d even look up from his pie.”

She turned out to be right. Pete wanted to take Myka out to dinner as her birthday present—“You
just want an excuse to eat a steak dinner,” she accused, and he agreed wholeheartedly—and Steve came too. Myka had always thought Steve was a pretty healthy eater, as they had had a hard time keeping enough food in the apartment for both of them, but Steve took one look at Pete’s order at the steakhouse and said, “It’s a good thing he was never your roommate.”

Myka didn’t even think, didn’t even think at all as she said, “I like Pete a lot, but I think you were the better choice.”

Pete didn’t look up from his steak as he said, “Okay, I know you haven’t been married, not to each other. And you’re both pretty… I dunno, wholesome. So roommates how?”

Steve turned red, and Myka wanted to crawl under the table.

Pete kept eating. “These potatoes are delicious. I wonder if that cute waitress would put an extra order in a doggie bag for me… I think she likes me.” He looked up at them. “If you don’t want to tell me, it’s okay. But I’ve noticed that for two people who supposedly are sweethearts, you don’t seem very sweet on each other.”

“We are completely sweet on each other,” Myka said.

“We are,” Steve agreed.

“Oh, okay,” Pete said. “Be sweet on each other. Don’t be sweet on each other. Doesn’t matter to me. I was in the war, though. Met lotsa nice guys like you, Steve. Met lotsa girls like Myka, too, lotsa WACs who were fun and could dance and at the end of the night really did not want a kiss. From me, that is.”

Myka said, very tentatively, “It’s true that I don’t want a kiss from you.”

“Like I said, it’s okay. I feel like people can do what they want. It is okay by me.” He looked back down at his plate. “Just so nobody tries to get between me and this steak. Then we could have trouble.”

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” Myka asked.

“If you think I’m saying that during the war I would have tried to set you up with a WAC, then yes. If you think I’m kidding about me and the steak, then no.” He cut a huge hunk of steak and put it in his mouth. Around it, he said, “Woo-n’t seh Stee hup wa WAC.”

“That’s… comforting,” Steve said. “I think.”

“Thanks, Pete,” Myka said.

“No problem. I want Joey to keep wrestling his heart out, though, so don’t you dare tell him.”

****

In the fall of 1954, Myka took a literary translation seminar taught by Artie.

Back at the beginning of her academic career, Artie had taken one look at her Russian-to-English translations and said, “Vanessa told me you were good at this!”

“At technical manuals, I am!” And it was true; she was faster, and better, than she’d been when she started at the Agency.

Now, he was shocked by how far she had come. She knew, because he called her into his office
and shook the typewritten pages of her first translation for the seminar at her. “This is Chekhov!” he shouted.

“I know,” Myka said. “That was the assignment.”

“No! I mean, this is Chekhov! If he were writing in English, this is how he would write!”

“It is?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You can’t possibly not know how good you are.”

And, all right, she had to admit it had gradually begun to feel better, more natural, to move between the two languages, to hold a sense in her head of one at a time, then both at once… to be precise but not exact… to negotiate. To balance. If she used this word she would lose this but gain that. This verb used this way would be unnatural in a way that was not the same but was. “I know I liked doing it,” she said.

“Well, that’s good. Because you’re going to be doing a lot more of it from now on. I’ve got the next Constance Garnett on my hands!” He was looking around as if the ghost of the translator were about to appear.

Myka still had Constance Garnett’s translations of Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Tolstoy on her bookshelf. She laughed and shook her head at Artie. Then she went to get ready to face fifteen students slavering to learn Russian.

****

For Myka’s birthday in 1955—her thirtieth birthday—Steve gave her Al Hibbler’s “Unchained Melody,” but Myka shook her head. “I’ve heard it,” she said, “and I see why that’s your choice, but I don’t want to cry this year. I can’t keep living like this, can I?”

“You can if you want to, I guess,” Steve said. “That’s how it is. You can do what you want to.”

But Myka still cried too much, too often, on days that weren’t her birthday. Her new idea was that maybe if she changed what happened on her birthday, she could change the rest of the days too. Probably not the nights, but, just maybe, some parts of the days. “I can. So I got you a record instead.”

“Okay…”

“It’s a little old, but I think you’ll like it.”

It was the Chordettes’ “Mr. Sandman.”

“Really?” Steve asked after they’d listened, with him rolling his eyes at her throughout, at practically every line. “You really think I need Mr. Sandman to send me a dream? Are you making fun of me?”

“I’m making fun of both of us. Besides, don’t you want to meet a guy who’s the cutest that you’ve ever seen? With lots of wavy hair? I don’t think his hair necessary has to be like Liberace, like they say, but I think the Chordettes know what they’re talking about when it comes to a guy you might go for.”

He sighed. Then he laughed.
Myka said, “That’s what I want next year. Make fun of both of us.”

****

Late in 1955, Steve met a man he was interested in, a man who did in fact have wavy hair. Liam had a good job as an organizer at a labor union, and he had an arrangement, very similar to Steve’s with Myka, with a girl named Leena. Liam and Leena’s arrangement was itself somewhat difficult, Steve told Myka, because Leena was black. Myka knew that Washington was awful, with its segregated neighborhoods, its restaurants that wouldn’t serve, its schools, its public transportation, even its glances on the street. She had witnessed a version of that with Abigail and Joshua, and she could barely imagine what Liam and Leena faced.

“Liam says it’s bad, worse for her than for him of course, but it works as a distraction,” Steve said. “If people are paying attention to that, they don’t look beyond it.”

Liam proposed that they all get together—because first, it was safer, and second, Myka might want to meet Leena, who herself had been saying she hadn’t met any nice girls lately. Steve told Myka all this, told her shyly, worriedly, asked her if she would keep an open mind. Myka tried to play it cool, said it was fine. Certainly it couldn’t hurt to meet Liam’s friend, because as Steve said, who really knew anyway, how they were going to feel about something?

Myka tried to keep an open mind. She did try. Leena was extremely sweet, and funny, and very beautiful. She was calm, too, calm like windless water, and Myka did like simply to be in her presence. She could see Leena and Steve as a couple, in fact, in aspect if not romantically, and she herself liked Liam enormously too. Liam was casual, ready for just about anything but not easy to rattle. He reminded Myka a little of Pete. Pete, who had complained when she told him he wasn’t allowed to come with the four of them to Linda’s Buffeteria—one of the places they could all go together, because Linda’s served—one chilly Friday in January. “But the pie,” he whined.

“A fifth person does not go on a double date, Pete.”

“They sometimes do. Where do you think ‘fifth wheel’ came from, huh?”

“That isn’t where it came from,” Myka said. “And if you don’t make me explain it, then I promise I’ll go with you next week, but for now will you please shut up.” Because Myka was nervous. Because she had been telling herself that if she was trying to like Leena, then it was time to really try. They had very, very tentatively held hands at the movies twice. Myka had walked her home three times, and they had parted with strange handshake-hug hybrids each time.

That night, after dinner and pie and the walk home, Leena said, “I like you, Myka, but I don’t know how to find out how much. Are you ever going to tell me that you like me too?”

“Of course I like you too,” Myka said. But she heard Leena’s words filtered through a roaring in her ears; she felt Leena’s hand in hers through the pounding of the scars that still marked it.

Leena’s lips against hers were soft, were as sweet as Leena herself.

But Myka was her high school self again: now I know what it feels like to kiss someone and I guess that is a good thing to know. She tried to tell herself that it was unreasonable to have expected a revelation of any sort. Only one time could she kiss a woman for the first time, and she had done that already. She tried to tell herself, but she failed to convince herself. She pulled away.

Leena said, “It’s because I’m black, isn’t it.”

Myka shook her head. “It’s because you aren’t her.”
“Aren’t who?”

“It turns out,” Myka said, “sometimes you do know.”

She felt guilty. But she also felt relieved.

****

April 1956: the record was Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers’ “Why Do Fools Fall In Love.”

Myka did laugh, mostly because Steve tried to sing along with the record in a truly awful high voice, but also because he called her “fool,” and she called him “fool,” and they agreed that they were very, very foolish people, and then they told the story to Liam and Leena—to whom Myka had told an abbreviated version of another story—and they all four started using “fool” as shorthand for who they were, for what they were, and it was silly, but it made them feel less foolish somehow, to be calling each other fools.

****

A few months later, Myka met Abigail for lunch. They sat together on a bench on the Mall, as they used to. “They’re sending me to Taiwan,” Abigail said.

Myka felt her heart drop, but she said, “That’s what you wanted, right? To get into the field.”

“I have to learn to work on HUMINT and SIGINT, they said. They’re trying to train Taiwanese agents to infiltrate China, so HUMINT, but apparently they’re terrible at that. Their SIGINT decryption isn’t great, either, but they said it was better that I learn all of it in a low-stakes environment. And obviously there’s my face.”

Abigail sounded more upset than usual about that, but Myka did not press. Eventually, Abigail said, “Joshua asked me to marry him. I said no.”


“Because I don’t want to marry him.”

“You’ve been dating for four years. Almost five.”

“Right,” Abigail said, and now she threw her sandwich, out of which she’d taken two bites, back in her lunchbag.

Myka couldn’t quite get at the problem. “So you don’t love him?”

“They’d never send me to Taiwan if I got married, so I couldn’t marry him even if I wanted to.”

“You would have to love him more than you want to learn to work on HUMINT and SIGINT,” Myka ventured.

“Which I guess answers that question.” Abigail sighed. “And I didn’t want to face the fight with my mother. Which I guess answers it again.”

Myka said, “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too. I’ll try to write you a letter.”

At that, Myka smiled. “That’s really not something you’re going to do.”
Abigail smiled too. “Probably not. That’s why I said I’d try. They’ll have to redact all of it anyway, so you’d get Dear Myka, huge square of black ink, Sincerely, Abigail.”

“Maybe they wouldn’t redact if you told me about things like music,” Myka suggested. “Do they even have jazz in Taiwan?”

“Guess I’ll find out.” She paused. “I’m glad you didn’t drop me. After. Even though you hate the Agency.”

They had had this conversation before, but Myka understood why Abigail needed to have it again, now. “I thought I saw what it was about, but I didn’t know, and it turns out that I’m the kind of person who… doesn’t want to be that kind of person. I guess I’m happy for other people to do the dirty work and just not tell me.”

“I’ll do the dirty work.” Abigail always said some version of this. Today, she said it with a little less conviction than usual.

Myka responded, also somewhat customarily, “That makes you better and worse than I am.”

“That’s always been true.” They both laughed. “Don’t drive yourself too crazy,” Abigail advised, and Myka knew immediately what she was talking about. “We’re still trying to find her, me and Miss Calder. I’ll just have to help out long-distance now.”

“I know, and I appreciate it. But I’m trying to tell myself it isn’t that important anymore.”

Abigail brought her sandwich back out of her bag and took an exaggeratedly casual bite. “How’s that going?”

“About as well as your lengthy campaign to get Miss Calder to play bebop cello.”

“Someday, Myka. Someday. Both those things.”

“It’s been such a long time. I can barely remember what she looks like.” Myka couldn’t decide, having heard herself say that, whether she said it as a confession or as a request for pity.

Abigail decided for her: “You’re a liar.”

“So are you,” Myka told her, “but at least you get paid for it.”

Abigail chuckled. “Maybe not for long. We’ll see how I do in Taiwan.”

****

In April of 1957, Steve said, “Happy birthday, fool,” and gave Myka “Searchin’,” by the Coasters. Myka laughed immediately, because she had confessed to Steve only a few weeks prior that she’d been writing to MI6, writing to as many addresses of as many people named “Wells” in England that she could find, reading copies of British newspapers in the university library, when they finally arrived, weeks and sometimes months after being published, seeing if there were advertisements for performances by anyone named Wells, by a male magician named Wells, or by some miracle, by a female magician of that name. She also, with her heart in her throat the whole time, read every obituary section, every listing of deaths, that she could find. She had yet to locate any real information, but she understood that just crying was a waste of time.

****
Myka had decided, in consultation with Artie, to write her dissertation on Constance Garnett and how she dealt with the challenges of Russian translation. Artie said, “You have to know where the giants of the field have been before you know where you’re going. And you are going places, Myka.”

Myka was perfectly happy to read, and to think about, all the Garnett translations she could get her hands on, but she did say to Artie, “They’re definitive. Why do we need new ones anyway, from me or anyone else?”

Artie took his glasses off. “Really,” he said. “There’s nothing at all you’d do differently?”

“Well, of course there are a few words, but who am I to—”

“Who are you?” Artie asked. “You’re Myka Bering, that’s who. You know, years ago, I didn’t doubt that Vanessa was right about you being her best. But I had no idea you’d end up being my best too. I guess you must be everybody’s best.”

Artie did not understand why, at such praise, Myka began to cry.

****

April, 1958: the Everly Brothers’ “All I Have to Do Is Dream.”

“This isn’t actually funny,” Myka told Steve. “Except the ‘gee whiz’ line, maybe.”

“It isn’t funny,” Steve agreed.

“Then I don’t get it.”

“I think we should stop this. You’re going to be finished with graduate school soon. You’ll be Dr. Myka Bering, and you’ll be some famous professor or translator or whatever you’re going to be. I can’t give jokey records about somebody who’s been gone for almost six years to a famous professor.”

“You can,” Myka said. She was crying, just as she was not supposed to do on her birthday anymore.

“I shouldn’t. And I don’t think you should want me to.”

It didn’t feel like almost six years… but it felt like every day of those six years. Myka had taught herself to separate the space in her heart from the way she lived those days, and she could slide through hours and hours of those days without seeing the space, without falling into it. Sometimes she could even sleep her way around it, wake up, drink coffee, boil an egg, teach class, eat lunch with Pete, read scholarly articles about translation, even trade taunts of “fool” with Leena, with Liam, with Steve. For days’ worth of hours, she could do these things. But always, on an eventual hour in an eventual day, she would have to sit down, or lie down, or just not move from the bed on which she already lay, and she would remember, and she would flex her right hand, and she would cry or not cry, and think or not think about the perfect fit of one body, just one body, against hers, but every time, she would picture the sure movements of hands as they did magic and played the violin. And she would hear a voice that called her “my love.”

****

“I love you,” says a woman’s voice. The woman might be speaking Russian. She might be speaking English.
“Not if you knew what I have done,” says another voice, a broken voice, and this voice is a man’s voice. Or it is a woman’s. “You could not.”

“It doesn’t matter what you’ve done,” says the first voice. “I love you.”

Myka dreams this dream less often now than she once did. She knows that when the woman speaks Russian, when a man responds, it is a dream about something that happened in a white room in a farmhouse in Germany, and she wakes up sweating but safe, because that is a part of the past. She knows that when it is two women, when they speak English, it is something that never happened, that will never happen… and she wakes up keening, calling out for someone who is not there, because it does not matter whether it is her voice or Helena’s that speaks of love, whose voice begins to confess. It never happened, and it will never happen.

****

In the summer of 1958, Abigail returns to Washington from Taiwan. Myka knows that she is back because Abigail calls her and says, “We need to talk.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original Tumblr tags: sorry about the relative lack of somebody throughout, but Myka needed to get some kind of life for herself, even if she's still not happy, and you'll see why we had to jump forward, when we reach the next part, I am feeling quite anticipatory, because while you may have already guessed at some of it, you might not see the rest, (though of course I hope it still makes sense), also I have one line for Abigail that I wrote months ago, and I will at last get to use it, maybe not quite yet depending on how long a certain conversation runs, PS why yes Steve did basically take six years to make Myka a short mixtape
This was originally the first part of another two-part part, and I will strive to get the next bit up pretty quickly, because where it ends? Well... I realize most people reading here have read this thing already, but it's still perhaps a bit overly cliffhangery.

They meet on the Mall. Myka is so happy to see Abigail that even the crazily high temperature cannot stop her: she hugs Abigail, nearly crushes her, before they even say hello.

Then Abigail pulls away and says, slowly and carefully, “Zdravstvuyte, Myka. Ya izuchayu russkiy yazyk. Ugadayte, potomu chto!” Hello, Myka. I learn Russian. Guess because!

Myka grins and says, “I think you want me to guess ‘pochemu.’”

Abigail collapses onto the nearest bench, possibly from impending heatstroke. “You’d think I could get that right. Yeah, guess pochemu.”

“You decided Chinese was boring,” Myka tries.

“ Weirdly, that is not too far wrong. You know what the trouble with Taiwan is?”

“The weather?” Myka hazards.

“The weather is awful,” Abigail agrees. “I’m just glad I got out before typhoon season really got going this year. Though coming back to this swamp is really not that much better. Why’d you make it so hot, anyway?”

“So are you going to tell me what the real trouble with Taiwan is?”

“The real trouble is, it really is boring. Mostly. Did you know that Asia gets barely ten percent of the Agency’s resources?” Myka shakes her head, and Abigail says, with vehemence, “It is not a priority. It is not where any of the action is.”

“Oh. And you want to be where the action is.”

Abigail chuckles. “I know that’s a surprise.”

“It is,” Myka laughs back. “I’ve always known you to like a quiet life. Staying in the background.”

“Talk about background. There wasn’t much to do in Taiwan, so I got one of the guys to start teaching me some Russian, because talk about committed resources! I thought that would show I was serious about it. And then I applied and applied and applied to come back here and do some real work. And here I finally am.”

“So what’s the real work?”

“Funny you should ask.”

“Not all that funny,” Myka points out, “since we’re talking about it.”
“Anyway, you have some fancy fellowship to translate stuff, don’t you?” Abigail asks, in what seems like a non sequitur.

“Yes. Exactly. I am translating stuff.”

“You get very focused on words, Myka.”

“I’m a translator. You used to be one too, or have you forgotten how all this started?”

“Right. Okay. Anyway, so you have this fancy fellowship. Here’s the thing: I want to propose a deal.”

Myka laughs. “What deal? I give you Russian lessons, and you…?”

“That is not your part of the deal. I can get Russian lessons anywhere.”

“Apparently not good ones,” Myka says, still laughing.

“Don’t be funny!” Abigail commands. “What I really can’t get anywhere is somebody who has some fancy fellowship to translate stuff. Russian stuff. Who could for example, I don’t know, talk to another person, someone who also translates Russian stuff, without raising anybody’s suspicions. You know, hypothetically.”

Myka sits back and crosses her arms. “Would this talking be done in the service of the Agency?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Then no,” Myka says.

“You haven’t heard what you’d get in the deal.”

“I don’t care.” Myka shakes her head. Abigail should know this; they have almost-fought about it enough times.

“I think you will.”

Abigail says that in such a way that Myka can tell that she is not kidding, that she really does think Myka will care. And Myka suddenly snaps to, because she knows that Abigail knows that there is, still, only one thing that Myka could possibly care about that much. Only one thing… only one person. “Is she dead?” Myka chokes out. “Don’t make me do something for you and then tell me she’s dead. Don’t do that to me, Abigail, please don’t do—”

“Stop it,” Abigail declares. “I am actually not a terrible person, in spite of my job. If she were dead, I would tell you, and that would be the end of it. That would be the end of a lot of things. But she isn’t dead. So now my question is, how much more do you want to know, and how bad do you want to know it?”

Dark spots are crowding Myka’s field of vision; there is no Washington Monument, no green grass of the Mall, no tourists, not even Abigail. All she sees are dark spots, but she says, “Everything. Everything. I want to know everything.”

“Right. I don’t want to be mean, so I’ll say up front I don’t actually know everything. But I have a piece of information that I’ll give you, if you do this thing I’m asking you to do.”

“Abigail, please,” Myka says.
“No.” There is more metal in Abigail’s voice than there used to be. Myka wonders exactly what went on in Taiwan.

“Is it worth it?” she asks.

“‘Yes.’

“And this is a square deal? You aren’t going to make me talk to the person I’m supposed to talk to and then turn around and make me do something else, are you?”

“It is a square deal. You deliver this message, and I will deliver this information.”

Myka is fairly sure that it would not work to knock Abigail off the bench and try to force her to produce “this information” right this second. She is fairly sure she is going to have to do exactly what Abigail wants her to do. The one thing she does not understand, though, is why Abigail wants her to do it. So she asks: “Why me?”

Abigail says, and the metallic edge retracts, “The fact of the matter is, I can trust you. I know I can trust you.”

“That’s ridiculous. I’m a security risk.”

“Which is exactly why no one would ever believe that anything’s been entrusted to you.”

“What? You’re making my head hurt.”

Abigail sounds like her old self, her “I just read you into my op!” self, as she says, “That is good news! If it makes your head hurt, then it’s a sure bet that nobody else will be able to think their way through it. Look, they’re testing me. I’m sure they’ve got some backup idea, but this is a test, to see if I can get a job done. Say you’ll do it, and we both win.”

“Or you could just tell me,” Myka tries, but it is halfhearted, for she knows she has lost this fight.

“They need to see that I have assets, Myka. In this case, you are my asset. Miss Calder said I could try Professor Nielsen, but there really are too many people who know what he does. Or what he used to do; he can’t do it as much now, because they know.”

And Myka acknowledges that it’s true that in recent years, fewer native speakers of Russian and other Slavic languages have passed through the graduate program, however briefly, on their way to heaven only knew where. She says, “Just tell me it isn’t going to lead to anybody being hurt. Please, just say that that isn’t what’s going to happen.” She is trying not to be selfish. Because she would do almost anything for news of Helena… but she can’t offer up another Alex for Helena.

“If it all goes like it’s supposed to, we’re going to be saving somebody from being hurt, okay? Somebody’s going to defect, but it’s an extremely elaborate setup; he’s a big deal, and communicating’s hard. Always takes at least two or three steps.”

“This sounds strangely like a game of telephone.”

“It pretty much is a game of telephone.”

“But the message comes out wrong at the end!”

“It’s like you forgot everything you ever knew about the Agency. The important part, at a lot of stages in this game, is that there’s a message in the first place.”
It’s certainly like she wanted to forget everything she ever knew about the Agency. But she says, “Okay.”

“Okay you understand my explanation, or okay you’ll do it?”

“Okay, I’ll do it. I honestly don’t care about your explanation.”

“Thank you,” Abigail says.

“I don’t know yet if you’re welcome.”

“That’s fair. But look, here’s the fun part: you get to go to London!”

“I do?” London. Where there is a reasonable chance Helena might be. London. Helena. “Is she there? Is that the information?”

“I’m not telling you. What’s there is some translation conference, or symposium, or whatever you people call your things, in August. And you are going to get on a plane and go to it, because you have this fancy fellowship and you want to rub elbows with other fancy citizens of Translationland. And after you rub elbows with a particular one of those fancy citizens—he’s almost as fancy as you but not quite—I’ll see to it that you get the information. What you do with it at that point is up to you.”

“Who is this fancy citizen of Translationland?”

“Some guy who used to work at the British Embassy in Moscow. He translated for the Ambassador in meetings with Stalin, or so the story goes. Anyway, now he’s all literary. Oxford. His name’s Max Hayward, and he—”

“Max Hayward! I know Max Hayward!” Abigail’s jaw drops, and Myka hurries to clarify: “Okay, I know of him. Artie told me about him a couple of years ago. And now he’s got a manuscript of Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*. He’s working on the first English translation.”


Suspiciously, Myka says, “Abigail… what do you know about Russian literature?”

And Abigail, deadpan: “Nothing.”

“Then how do you know Pasternak might win a Nobel Prize?”

“Oh, you know.” Abigail waves her hand. “Just talk. At… cocktail parties?”

“The Agency wants Pasternak to win a Nobel Prize?”

Abigail exaggeratedly lifts her palms upward. “How should I know? Like I said, it’d certainly embarrass the Soviets. They didn’t even want to print this Zhivago book; that’s why your pal Pasternak took it to that Italian publisher. But I bet you know that already.”

“I do know that. Does this message I’m taking have something to do with Boris Pasternak?”

“Actually, no. Still, that Nobel Prize thing would be pretty interesting, if it did happen to be going on. That is exactly the kind of op I want to run one of these days.”
Myka sighs. “Is there anything the Agency isn’t involved in?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Liar,” Myka accuses.

“As we’ve established,” Abigail agrees.

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Myka is traveling to Europe, traveling there to meet, and ideally impress, people in her field, so she buys new clothes. Among her purchases: a high-waisted pencil-skirt suit in a gray tweed; the jacket has a tiny peplum and large buttons. And of course, she notes as she makes a noise that is a combination of a laugh and a sneer, bracelet-length sleeves have come back into fashion.

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Steve is the only person to whom she tells what is really happening. To Artie, to Pete, to anyone else who asks, she says she has simply decided to take this opportunity, at this gathering of scholars, to meet people, to begin making a name for herself. She says an unexpected grant came through to help her pay for it. Artie raises his substantial eyebrows at that, but he doesn’t ask any more questions.

Steve asks, “And you don’t know what this intel Abigail has could be?”

“It’s Abigail. I have no idea. It could be the name of Helena’s favorite record store in London, for all I know. But I have to believe she wouldn’t put me through all this for something like that. Would she?”

“If you want insight into Abigail, you’re asking the wrong guy. Has she seen Joshua?”

“I don’t know. Have you seen Joshua?” she asks.

They had tried to remain friends, Steve and Joshua, but Joshua always looked over his shoulder, in a way that Abigail never did with Myka. And once Liam began taking up more of Steve’s time…

“I haven’t seen him in months,” Steve says. “He was heartbroken when she turned him down, but he’d started resigning himself to the situation after a while, I think.”

“It’s Abigail,” Myka says again. “I wonder what he really expected.”

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It’s funny, Myka thinks, that before now, she has never been issued a civilian passport. Now, when she has been deemed a security risk and the CIA is certain she would betray her country, now she has that little booklet that declares she should be able to travel as safely as any citizen does.

She gets the passport just in time for her trip (she wonders whether Abigail had to grease the wheels at State), and she gets on the airplane that will take her to London. This flight leaves from a civilian airport, of course, and now the journey across the Atlantic is nonstop. She prays that it will also be less loud… but she has brought her Turgenev, just in case.

It is far more quiet. The engine noise is there, but it is, comparatively, a soothing background rumble. An older gentleman sits next to Myka; he is traveling to London on business and is very happy to be seated next to a lovely lady. Then Myka gets out the Turgenev, and he decides he is very tired and really should get some shut-eye. Some things, she realizes, do not change at all.
The conference is truly interesting, and Myka is sure that if she were able to focus on it, she would be learning useful things, all sorts of insights she could apply to the work she is supposed to be doing. But all she can concentrate on is her appointment with Max Hayward, and while she should be looking forward to meeting Max Hayward simply to meet him... well, she would never be meeting him at all, would she, if not for Abigail and her deal-making. So it’s a surprise when she introduces herself to him, and this man with his long face, arresting light eyes, and thick dark hair says to her, eagerly, first thing, “I tried to set up a meeting with you when I was in the States two years ago!”

“You what?”

He’d been looking for a translation partner, he says, and he’d read an article Myka had written on Garnett’s work, and he’d thought they might have similar philosophies. He likes working with a partner—he knows he’s good but doesn’t trust himself fully, he says with a self-deprecating smile—and he prefers working with women because another man would be just another man, wouldn’t he, and men and women think and talk differently, don’t they? But Myka’s advisor had dragged his feet, and Max had had to return to Britain, and he’d been lucky enough to find Manya—Manya Harari, with whom he is now working on Zhivago—and they clicked. But perhaps Myka would be willing to consider some future project? He notes her fellowship, says he’s looking forward to reading what she’ll produce. He was in Moscow not too long ago, he says, and the writers there want, and need, so much more of their work brought to the West’s attention.

This is Myka’s opening. “You were in Moscow,” she says, and he gives her a look that says he knows what’s coming. “I’ve never been to Moscow,” she goes on, “but someone there might want to know that Finland is lovely.” She says other words, all the ones Abigail told her to say.

At the end of it, Max nods. “I’ll pass that along,” he says.

“Would you be willing to pass along that manuscript of Zhivago? Just so I can read a little of it?” She’s joking, mostly, but not entirely; it’s an enormous novel by Pasternak, and she doesn’t want to wait until a Russian publisher finally decides it isn’t anti-Soviet propaganda, or until Max and Manya are finished with their translation. “I can’t get my hands on the Italian translation, and I couldn’t understand it even if I did.”

Max laughs. “Pasternak himself would probably kill me if I let you touch it,” he says, “but you could try asking whoever told you about Finland. He might know, in not too long, where to get a copy. In Russian.”

“She, actually,” Myka corrects. She feels she owes it to Abigail.

“My apologies,” Max says. “I should know better. I do know better.”

Myka likes him. She likes him a lot, and if circumstances were different, she would have liked to keep talking to him. But now she has kept her part of the bargain. It is time for Abigail to keep hers.

Two long-distance calls later, Myka has a London address written on a piece of paper. “That’s all I have,” Abigail had said, tinnily, over the transatlantic telephone line. “And now you have it too.”
“This is right?” Myka asks the cab driver, who grunts what must be an affirmative. She pays—probably overpays, but her mind is not moving correctly, and she could not process any more of a transaction than simply handing over some bills.

“You want the interior, not the mansion block,” he tells her. “Through that gate, down the alleyway, see?”

Myka sees. She sees and is unnerved, but she says, “Okay. Thank you.”

She looks around. Everything, every last brick of the buildings, is black—did they start that way, or is that dirt, soot, grime? She has a feeling, simply standing here, that she is being coated in a layer of something… it is like walking through a D.C. alleyway in the early morning hours of a humid summer day, before the trash is collected, when vaporized particles of that trash seem to fill the air, catch in the nose, ripen in the throat. But this is the afternoon, and there is no hope that the rising of the sun will burn away any of the thickness.

Myka pushes the wooden gate, as she was told. She sees the alley, sees a courtyard space, sees two buildings flanking the alley. There are people everywhere: children milling in the courtyard, adults walking purposefully through the space, or sitting idly above it, out on balconies. “Excuse me,” she says to a boy who looks young enough not to be forbidding, “but do you know where I can find this apartment?” He looks at her like she’s not speaking his language at all, and she says, “Sorry, I’m a silly American. It’s a flat here, not an apartment, isn’t it?” He laughs and points her toward the building on the right.

She goes in, into a dark hallway, and the number suggests she should stay on the first floor, so she does. And there it is, there is the door on which she is meant to knock. She does, once, tentatively, but there is no answer. She tries again… still nothing.

It had been too much to hope for, anyway, that she would knock on a door and suddenly find answers. Too much to hope for. Abigail had said that this was the most concrete information she had, this address. Myka decides that she’ll try again tomorrow, before she has to go to the airport; maybe Sunday will be better. At the very least, Myka can try writing to this address. It won’t be everything, but it would be something to do. It’s not as if she hasn’t written letters to Helena over the years… if MI6 had answered her about Helena’s whereabouts, or if she had happened to find the right Wells family, she had letters upon letters, letters written down on paper, still more letters composed in her head, ready to go, ready to send, ready to make any contact at all.

She is preparing to knock one last time when she hears, from behind her, a woman’s voice: “Excuse me.” And she thinks, as she’s turning around, no, that’s not Helena, that doesn’t sound like Helena…

… and it isn’t Helena. It’s a woman about Myka’s age; her hair is dark (but not so dark as Helena’s), her complexion light (but not so light as Helena’s), and she is holding by the hand a little girl, a girl who also has dark hair and a pale face. “I’m sorry,” Myka says. “I was looking for… a Miss Wells.”

The woman laughs. “I have one right here,” she says, looking down affectionately at the girl, who is four? Five? Myka can’t tell; it’s been years since she spent any time around children. The girl offers Myka a shy hint of a smile.

“Really?” Myka says, thinking that someone must have got their Wellses mixed up, and that is why she has found herself here. So: a dead end. Not even an address that she might write to, once she’s back home. Nothing, still. Nothing. She sighs. To the little girl—whose smile, Myka has to admit, is charming, as it widens ever so slowly—she says, “So is your first name Helena? Because that’s
the one I’m looking for.”

The girl shakes her head. “No,” she says quietly. But the smile remains.

Myka looks back up at the woman, who is now looking at Myka with… not recognition, but something. She says, “You’re looking for Helena Wells?”

“Yes,” Myka says. She tells herself that she is not hoping. She is not hoping. She is not, she is not, she is not…

“Did you knock? She should have been home by now.”

Myka tells herself now not to faint. “I… did knock.”

“Well, we’ll just have to go in then. Do you know Helena, or did someone send you? About a show, or a session?”


“Did you hear that, Christina?” the woman says to the girl. “She met your mum in America!”

Now Myka thinks that she really will faint, for her vision is graying over again, just as it did on the Mall with Abigail, when she thought this—but not this, for what is this?—might be possible.

The woman is unlocking the door, gesturing for Myka to go inside, so she does. The room is stuffy and dark, and though it seems slightly more clean than the outdoors around it, it is still nothing like a place Myka could have imagined Helena living. With her… daughter? With her daughter and… no, Helena can’t be married; the girl’s last name is Wells… but wait. Wait. What if this woman lives here too? What if…

She is standing very still, trying not to say anything, wanting to find out everything. She feels a tug on her sleeve, and the little girl, Christina, says, in that same quiet voice, “What’s your name?”

“My name’s Myka.”

“Myka, how far away from here is America?”

Myka takes a breath. “It’s really far away. Across the whole ocean.”

Christina blinks. “I think I want to go there. If it’s really far away.” She looks at the other woman. “Do you think I could go there, Aunt Jane?”

Aunt Jane. Jane. Charles’s wife. Charles’s wife Jane. That is who this has to be. Myka’s relief is so great that she again feels that she cannot remain standing… and she laughs, actually laughs out loud, at the thought that this is familiar, that it is Helena’s fault that her body might just give up on supporting its own weight. She says, “You must be Mrs. Wells, then. Mrs. Charles Wells.”

“That’s right. Christina’s my niece, and I take care of her when Helena has work. My own boys are nearly grown now, so it’s nice to have this little one around.”

Myka feels the tug on her sleeve again, and this time she crouches down. Christina says, “Uncle Charles doesn’t think it’s nice.”

Jane says firmly, “Your uncle has simply decided to hold particular uninformed opinions. One day, both he and your grandparents will focus on understanding what a lovely young lady you are, and then we’ll see what’s nice.”
Myka can’t imagine anyone not understanding Christina as lovely, unless she periodically turns into a werewolf or some other monster, as tends to happen in the movies Pete favors these days. Not often to kids who are four, though… “How old are you, Christina?” Myka asks her.

“I’m five. But also one quarter, almost.”

“I’m impressed that you know what a quarter is,” Myka says.

“Doesn’t everybody?” And she really does look confused.

“Most of the people who do are older than five and a quarter,” says Myka. “You’re way ahead.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

“It’s very good.”

“Then thank you,” Christina says.

“You’re welcome.” Christina is five. Five and almost a quarter. And if there is one thing Myka can do, it is count. “When’s your birthday?” she asks.

“May twenty-eighth.”

Jane says, “And we had a lovely tea when you turned five, didn’t we?”

Christina begins that slow smile again. “With strawberry jam,” she confides to Myka. “At a shop.”

Try as she might, Myka can see only Helena in this sweet, precocious girl. Of course this is the kind of child Helena would have, would raise. No matter who the father had been, this is the kind of child. No matter that the father now had moved even higher up in the Agency, was married, had children—other children. Children younger than this, his daughter. Myka coughs, because she does not know what she can say now, because this, this too, is her fault.

Jane says, “So you know Helena from America? That’s… well, that’s directly before this little one, wasn’t it? What’s your name again?”

“It’s Myka,” Christina supplies.

“Bering,” Myka adds. “I don’t know if Helena would have mentioned me.”

“She may have done, but it’s a long time ago, isn’t it.”

“It is. I apologize for appearing out of nowhere like this, but I was here and someone gave me her address, so I just thought I would see. How she’s doing. We used to be… close. And then she left, and I didn’t hear from her.”

“Must be a surprise, then. All this.” Her gesture encompasses the room they are standing in, and Christina too. “Christina, sweet, why don’t you go change out of your nice dress.”

Myka waits until Christina—whose threadbare dress she would not have thought to describe as “nice”—has disappeared into the other room of the apartment. Then she admits, “Kind of a surprise. I guess this wasn’t what I would have… when I knew her, she was… well, doing government work. Pretty high up.”

“She was. But circumstances change. You see she doesn’t have a husband.” Myka nods. “If she did, they could get on a waiting list and might have a prayer for council housing, but as it is,
there’s no way at all. So she makes do. She tried her hand at office jobs, for a while, but once they found out… now it’s mostly the violin she pays her way with. I think it must matter less among performers.”

“But not Charles,” Myka says.

“I find that odd myself. It’s because she’s his sister, I suppose. And their parents are the same way. I would make Charles help more, but he has enough trouble finding work for himself, and we’ve the boys to consider.”

“Does he play the violin too? She never told me.”

“No, piano, like their mother. And they all do magic and other silly things like hypnosis, things no one wants to go out to see anymore, now there’s television. So Helena gives the odd lesson, fills in at the odd performance. And she plays on records.”

“Records?”

“Embassy Records; it’s a studio in Mayfair. Above a shop that sells ladies’ fashions, if you can imagine that. They do fast knockoffs of the big pop songs. Helena plays in their little orchestra… it doesn’t pay enough, not to get her out of here, but at least it’s regular. And at least records aren’t going away anytime soon. That’s where she is now; they record on Saturdays, and sometimes Tuesdays. And so we have our nice afternoons together, don’t we, Christina?” she asks, because the little girl has come back in and has sidled up to Myka once more.

Christina nods in response to her aunt. She pulls on Myka’s sleeve again, and Myka crouches back down.

“Which magic tricks can you do, Myka?” Christina asks.

Myka is saved the trouble of answering—though she might have preferred that trouble—when the door opens, and at last, at last, a woman holding a violin case steps in. “Oh, Jane, I’m sorry to be so late,” Myka hears her say. “I tried to hurry out, but you know how demanding Levy can be, ‘just once more through’”— Myka looks up, stands up.

And then there is no sound, because Myka is staring at Helena, and Helena is staring back.

TBC
"Oh god," Helena finally says, not fully out loud. "Oh god."

"Helena," Myka says, because it is all she can say, looking at her, absorbing her, this sight that she had feared was gone for good. It can’t be real, this sight, and yet it must be, because this is Helena as she would look now, not as she did then; her eyes, even wide open as they are, show age at the corners and underneath, and her hair, her blackest-night hair, is not quite so all-black as before. She is even more beautiful now, and Myka could not have imagined that would be possible. "Oh, Helena," she says. The words feel pulled from her mouth, as if in prayer.

"What are you doing here?" Helena breathes, and for a moment it is just like that last look in Frankfurt, that last time, with all that Myka had loved about Helena, about Helena’s love for her, right there on her face, right there to be seen.

Christina says, "She came from America."

Helena looks at the child, looks at Myka, and Myka knows this expression too: this expression is Helena calculating what she should say. Most likely, the extent to which she should lie. Myka thinks she should probably be bothered by this, angered somehow, but she isn’t. Instead she feels even more tender. "It’s all right," she says gently. "I know. Don’t try to tell me anything."

Helena had been standing up straighter, but now she slumps. She sets down the violin case, which she had unaccountably kept clutched in her hand. "Well," she says. "If you know, then what are you doing here?"

"I…” Myka is acutely aware that Christina is there, that Jane is too. "I wanted to see you."

"All right, so you’ve seen me." Her voice is outwardly just sour, but Myka hears a great deal more behind, inside. A trap has snapped closed, and the animal wants out.

"Helena!" Jane reproves. She steps forward and grabs Christina’s hand, saying, “Come along, Miss Wells. You and I will have a bit of a constitutional while your mum tries to be more polite to her guest.”

As she marches Christina past her mother, the girl pulls away and wraps thin arms around Helena’s legs. "I don’t want to have a constitutional," she says. "I want to stay. I’ll be polite to Myka, I promise."

Helena looks down. Her voice is something that echoes the past as she says with tenderness, “I know you would, darling, but go with Jane for just a bit. Please.”

"Be nice," Christina cautions.

"I’ll try," Helena tells her.
Once they have left, however, Helena’s tone hardens again. “Once more: what are you doing here?”

“You said you’d try to be nice,” Myka attempts, mildly.

“I don’t want to be nice. Just like I don’t—didn’t—want to be found. How did you?”

“It’s a long story. The short version is, Abigail got the address from somebody.”

There are two chairs in the room, two chairs at a dilapidated table. Helena sits in one chair. She puts her elbows on the table and drops her forehead into her hands. “How is Abigail?” she asks of the tabletop.

Myka sits down in the other chair. She smiles, because what else can she do? “She’s Abigail.”

“That’s… good to hear.” Helena looks up, and all her edge is gone. “Why are you here, Myka?”

“I told you. I wanted to see you. I’ve wanted to see you ever since… ever since that last day.”

“Why? After what I did, why?”

“I can’t believe you have to ask me.”

“Of course I have to ask you.” She drops a palm to the table—not hard, not in a slap, but it is another echo of the past. “I did a terrible thing. No, I did several terrible things.”

“All right,” Myka says. “That’s another reason I’m here. To ask you why.”

“I told you, back then. I was trying to do everything at once. Save you. Save myself. Carry out my mission.”

Myka is sure, at last, of what her mission was not. “What was it that you were supposed to be doing? Can you tell me now?”

Helena sighs. “I don’t see what it could possibly hurt, not now.” She sighs again. “I was to scuttle Artichoke.”

“Scuttle it?” Whatever Myka had expected to hear, it was certainly not that.

“Ensure that, in the end, it did not work.” Myka simply shakes her head, and Helena goes on, “Menzies was opposed. He was vehemently opposed. So I was meant to play along up to a point, to make it work up to a point. And then scuttle it.” She pauses. “I thought I’d done it, that first time; there were congratulations all round at the idea that the Americans had finally given up. But then of course Nate for whatever reason decided to try again. And so there we were.”

For whatever reason. Myka says, “But it did work. Or it was about to.”

At this, Helena smiles. “I know. In no small part because you were so… intuitive.” Her smile widens. “You really were astonishing. It was all I could do not to simply sit back and watch your performance; if I’d left you alone, you would have had all the information that first day. I have no doubt.”

And this answers another question that has plagued Myka. “That’s what you were going to ask me to do, wasn’t it. Help you… scuttle it.”

“Yes.”
“But then we were caught.”

“Yes.” Helena isn’t smiling anymore.

“And you really did come up with that, the idea that seducing me, seducing some girl, was your assignment, right there on the spot.”

“Yes. I thought it was my best hope for doing everything at once—and particularly, that if anyone were to be blamed for our… situation, it would be me and not you. I told you I would do everything I could to keep you safe. But I had to be convincing, and I know I hurt you so…” She stops, swallows. Myka slides her right hand, with its still-visible scars, into her lap, under the table. “I’m sorry. For all of it. All of it happened, all of it, because I let what I wanted take precedence over what I knew was right. No good could ever have come of it. No good comes of anything I do.”

“You know that isn’t true.”

“Isn’t it?” She says it with a heaviness.

“I loved you,” Myka protests. “That was good. That was so good. Didn’t you love me?”

“What difference does it make now?”

“It makes all the difference.”

Helena doesn’t answer Myka’s question. Instead, she says, “Even after that disaster in Germany, I had the absurd idea that I might be able to see you again, that if I showed myself willing to go anywhere, everywhere, they might send me back to America one day. But then… well, you see what happened.”

“Why didn’t you say anything to me? Just so I wouldn’t think… so I could at least be sure that you hadn’t lied about all of it.”

“I thought it would be too risky to try to contact you, at first, even indirectly. And I was quite honestly incommunicado a great deal of that time. I suppose I also thought that you would most likely say you hated me for what I’d done, and I… was a coward. I didn’t want to hear you say that. And then, well, I revert to, you see what happened.”

“But I don’t understand. If there was no MI6 at stake anymore, no danger, why couldn’t you just… write to me?”

Helena spreads her arms, shakes her head. “Write to you and say what, precisely?”

This makes Myka angry. She has not been angry, not up to this point; she has been trying to process everything, but she thinks this, now, is Helena being ridiculous in the way that only she can be. “How about ‘Hello, Myka, I’m not dead and you were not just an op’? How about that for starters?”

“Exactly.” Helena nods. “‘For starters.’ Would you have left it there, even if I’d said ‘don’t contact me again’?”

Myka has to admit it: “No.”

Helena says, “How about this: ‘Hullo, Myka, it’s Helena, the person who did terrible things to you, betrayed you in the worst way possible. By the way, as a result of that betrayal, I have borne a”
child.’ I did not want to tell you that. I did not want you to know that.”

“But why?” It’s a wail, it’s a plea, it’s a demand.

“Myka, listen to me.” It is the same tone she used years ago, trying to explain to Myka, to persuade the both of them, that everything they were doing was wrong. “I have a child but no husband. Do you not understand what that means?”

“No,” Myka says. She is crying tears of frustration now, because she knows she is pushing Helena to say things that she does not want to say; she doesn’t want to hurt her more, but she doesn’t understand.

“It means, Myka, that I am of no moral character whatsoever, and that the same is true of my daughter. It means that I am not worthy of holding a job. It means that I am lucky when someone is willing to pay me to give a violin lesson, to play a part in a recording session, to sit in for a sick musician to accompany a music hall program.” She exhales through her nose, loudly. “It means that my parents will never speak to me again. It means that I must accept the grudging charity of my brother, and the pitying charity of my sister-in-law.”

Myka seizes on this last statement. “But Jane likes you. And she loves Christina.”

“She does love Christina—I hope you won’t think me too boastful when I say that my daughter is intelligent and charming and all the things I once pretended to be. But Jane pities me. I know it. I once thought myself better than she. And now that I have shown myself to be worse, she is kind enough to show not contempt but mercy. Were it not for Christina, however, I would prefer contempt.” She heaves an enormous sigh, and Myka wants to hit her, just to make her stop these stupid self-flagellating words. “So forgive me for not wanting to share the news. I would have preferred to share this news with no one from my former life.”

“No even me.”

“Especially not you. Why would I want you to see me, to imagine me, like this?”

“I just want to see you. The rest of it doesn’t matter.”

Helena smacks the table again, with both hands, and she says, with her old intensity, “It matters to me. I can accept that these are the consequences of what I did. But they are not your consequences. I would much prefer that you had gone on with your life and never known about this. At least I could have entertained some idea that you might remember me as I was—even as the betrayer I was—instead of as I am now.” She takes a deep breath and says, as if she were suddenly trying to talk about the weather, “I trust you are faring better than I am. Are you still translating? Or did the Agency finally find a better use for your talents?”

Myka sees that she can’t possibly tell Helena what really happened. She can’t let her think it didn’t work, that she failed to save Myka. She can’t. So she says, “I’m still translating, but I… left the Agency. After Germany, it didn’t seem like something I wanted to do.”

“Vanessa was right of course. It was sordid. I should have found some way to keep you out of it.”

“I didn’t want to be kept out of it.”

“I know. I should have insisted, but I was so very selfish. I wanted you with me, for as long as I could have you.”

The words warm Myka. She says, with equal warmth, “Helena, if you had just told me, I would
have helped you from the beginning. If you had just told me.”

And Helena responds to the warmth. “Oh, Les Paul,” she says. Myka barely quells an impulse to reach for her hands, to touch them as they rest, flat and long, on the table. “I didn’t think I could. There too, I was trying to do everything at once. Manage everything. Keep every secret in its appropriate place.” She looks like her old self now, just like she once did, raising an eyebrow in cutting commentary, this time directed at herself. “It’s been driven home to me several times, over these last years, just how little control one actually has over events. Just how low one can be brought by circumstance.” That brow lifts again. “It’s a fair punishment, I suppose. I thought myself so far above so many things, and so many people. And then there were no more things, and no more people.”

“Wasn’t there anyone who would… help?” Myka is thinking of Miss Calder, and Artie, and Steve, and Abigail, and later Pete, Liam, and Leena, all these friends who saw her through, who are still seeing her through. Even if fate had seen fit to give her a Christina, she imagines they would have been there.

Helena shrugs, smiles a little. “For a time, Alan was still here. And he was a rock, albeit one on unstable ground… the things that were done to him… but then… well. He didn’t have a Christina, did he? To show him that he had to stay. It was 1954. He could not in the end see a way forward. I miss him horribly, to this day. All the days. I will always miss him horribly.”

What could Myka have done, what could she possibly have done, without Steve? Without knowing that there was one other person, at the very least… and the answer was, she could have done nothing at all. “Helena,” she says, tears in her voice if not yet in her eyes, “Helena, Helena.” She rises from the table, and Helena rises too, and in an instant they are in each other’s arms, and Myka is putting her lips to Helena’s, not because of passion or even love, not in this one moment, but because their wounds are similar enough that they might for this one moment be able to comfort each other.

But after that one moment it changes; after that one moment they both begin to remember everything. Myka holds Helena closer, and Helena’s body rises against her; her hands move from Myka’s arms to her back, to her neck. And it feels like everything, the entire world, might be beginning again, but just as Myka lets herself think that, Helena pulls away. And when Helena speaks, Myka understands: that was the goodbye kiss they did not have, six years ago.

“Go away from here, Myka. Any part of my life that might have included you, included this, is over. Surely you can see that.”

Myka sees a lot of things. In particular, she sees details of this place to which her actions have consigned Helena: there is a sink with only one tap. There are no electrical outlets. There is a coal stove and no other means of heating or cooking. She sees that Helena sees that she is looking; Helena probably thinks Myka is feeling some version of that contempt she says Jane feels. But Myka is simply trying to fix this in her mind, every detail, all of it, so that she will feel the full weight of it and remember exactly why she is doing what she is now certain she will have to do.

She says, “I’m sorry, Helena. All the things you’re sorry for? I’ve got so many more.”

“Then I’m sorry for that, too,” Helena tells her.

Myka makes it out of the building, up the alley, out through the wooden gate. All the way across the street and onto the next block before she gives in, leans her undeservedly clean shoulder against the filthy brick of a building, and weeps.
It is her turn, this time, once she gets home, to call Abigail and say, “We need to talk.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

Some historical notes: Max Hayward was a real person; he and Manya Harari did produce the first English translation of Doctor Zhivago. I have no idea if Hayward helped the CIA out in any way, but the Agency was indeed involved in a campaign to get Pasternak the Nobel Prize, precisely to embarrass the Soviets. Single mothers in Britain in the 1950s had it worse than I personally could have imagined; Helena would have received some public assistance, but not nearly enough to really live on, particularly if she had minimal help from her family. The stigma alone was insane, so their rejection of her would not have been unusual. Embassy Records was real, and they did produce knockoff versions of pop songs. (I am unsure as to whether they employed union musicians; part of me thinks Helena wouldn’t have been able to get into the Musicians’ Union, thus further limiting her opportunities. Charles was doubtless Union.) Finally, I don’t think the head of MI6 really sent someone to undo Artichoke from within, but heaven knows it isn’t completely out of the realm of possibility.

original tumblr tags: look out, because if Myka feels like she has to make amends, you can bet there are some big-time amends on the way, Helena of course is martyring herself, as she does, and if you think she is a little too much, I guess I would say, class, and falling from one that was not all that high to begin with to a much lower one, can really mess a person up, particularly if that person is already stigmatized in other ways
Abigail is no dummy, Myka has to give her that: the first words out of her mouth, once Myka joins her on their customary bench, are, “The look on your face suggests that I probably shouldn’t ask how your trip went.”

Myka sighs. “There are far too many people in my life who I have to decide whether to slug or not slug.”

“Do I need to start running? It isn’t too hot today, but I’m not very fast, so a head start—”

“I am not going to slug you,” Myka says.

Abigail exaggerates a sweep of her hand across her brow. “Well, that’s a relief.”

“I am not going to not slug you, either, in case you were worried.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, so I’ll just say that that’s probably also a relief.”

Myka feels a weirdly wild relief herself, if only because she is at last moving the situation forward. “What I am going to do is tell you things that I think you might already know: Helena doesn’t work for MI6 anymore. She doesn’t really even have a job. She lives in a slum. She lives there with her five-year-old daughter. This is a disaster.”

“Her five-year-old daughter is a disaster?”

“No. Her five-year-old daughter is adorable. That is part of the disaster, and I am going to ask you one time: did you know?”

Abigail looks away. “Define ‘know.’”

“Fine,” Myka tells her. “I will slug you, and then we can get down to business.”

“Oh, okay. Here’s what happened: I was in Hong Kong for a little while, and while I was there I made friends with a girl from MI6. She worked in their equivalent of SIGINT. And can you guess who trained her, when she started at MI6 in the early ’50s?”

Of course Myka can guess who trained her. SIGINT. Of course. Codes, decryptions. She had said she was good at that kind of thing. Of course she did SIGINT too. And of course she did SIGINT too, because, also, as Miss Calder had said, she’s everyone’s best, so what didn’t she do?

Abigail goes on, “So my friend had heard a rumor. And then I got in touch with one of Miss Calder’s contacts at MI6, who wouldn’t confirm the rumor but had heard something from somebody else. And so on. And eventually I got to that address—but I still didn’t have anyone who would confirm the rumor, even though it was the thing that kept getting me from one step to the next. So I honestly thought I shouldn’t tell you, because I honestly didn’t know if it was true. Do you see?”

“We’ll just say I do.” Myka takes a deep breath. “Because here’s what’s going to happen: you get her out of there. I don’t care how, but get her out of there. Because it is my fault, so I am going to
fix it, but I can’t fix it by myself, because I don’t have the resources. If I had enough money, I
would just give her money, but I don’t have any real money, and she wouldn’t take it anyway. I
thought about Max, that maybe she could work for him, but I don’t know him that well; I thought
about Nate, trying to make him pay, but that would probably look like blackmail, and she doesn’t
need that kind of trouble either. You are the best I have. You told me to use resources, and I got her
into this mess. Now I am going to use them—use you—to get her out.”

Abigail is staring at her. “You’re not making any sense at all.”

“Oh yes I am. This is my fault, and I will do whatever I have to do to fix it. Get her out of there,
and bring her over here.”

Enunciating each word carefully, as if talking to a child, Abigail says, “I can’t import her, Myka.”

“I bet you can.”

“First, there has to be something she can do here. And, oh yeah, she has to want to come.”

Myka wants to shake Abigail for suddenly turning into someone practical, someone normal. “Then
figure out something that she’ll want to do here. Give her a realistic opportunity, and I bet she’ll
jump at it.”

“I don’t have any idea what she’d do!”

Now Myka plays her card. It is the only card she has, and she hopes it will be the trump. “Well, let
me give you some incentive to come up with an idea. Let’s make another deal. Try this: if you do
this for me, I will do whatever you want me to do, carry messages, talk to people, convince people
to do things, I don’t care.”

Abigail is staring again. “That could be dirty work. You don’t want to have anything to do with the
dirty work.”

“If that’s the price for what I did, then I’ll pay it. If you do this for me, I will pay that price and
more.” She has thought this through. She has thought it through and through and through, since she
first thought it, standing there looking at Helena, and she thinks that it is a fair price for what she
has done. Helena has paid for five years; it is Myka’s turn now.

Abigail sits back, crosses her arms, sets her chin on her chest. She frowns. “What if we tell her that
you—”

“No,” Myka says quickly. “That’s the other thing: leave me out of it. Ideally, leave you out of it
too. Leave anything Agency-related out of it.”

“What? I can see leaving the Agency out of it, but why you?”

“She doesn’t want to have anything to do with me, so she won’t do it if she thinks it’s me behind it.
Or she might do it for Christina’s sake anyway, but I will not have her feeling like she’s indebted to
me. Or to anyone. Are we clear?”

“You’ll do this even if she doesn’t want you?”

“That doesn’t matter at all.” Myka has never really been able to pull off this kind of stoicism. She
will start crying any second, and even if she doesn’t, Abigail will laugh at her.

But Abigail doesn’t laugh. Instead, she says, “You’re a liar.”
“You of all people should know that that doesn’t matter either.”

“What does matter,” Abigail says, “is that this is crazy. You want me to figure out a way for us to import this person, such that she doesn’t even know we’re importing her, such that she can just go on about her merry way, doing whatever she—what’s she doing now, anyway?”

“Playing the violin.”

This is clearly new information for Abigail. “ Seriously? She’s a pro? Playing for money?” She sounds envious.

“Not enough money. And that’s the problem. Well, that and apparently being so awful as to raise a child who is the sweetest thing, and do that all by herself. Mostly. Except for Jane.”

“Who’s Jane?”

Either Abigail’s own ability to lie has improved by leaps and bounds, or Myka really does know some things that Abigail does not. Myka is relieved that she and the Agency do not seem to have been sitting on a dossier of Helena-related information. “Her brother’s wife. She seems nice.”

“Did she take you home to meet the family?”

“Stop it. Just stop it. It was awful, and you have to get her out of there, and I know that you can. This is exactly the kind of op you should be able to run in your sleep.”

Abigail crosses her arms again. “Yeah, except for the part where I’m going to have to figure out how to fund and run an op that’s not actually an op!”

“That is your problem, not mine.”

“Oh, all right,” Abigail says, “Let me work on it. But I’m going to ask you what you asked me: is this a square deal? If I figure out some way to do this, you’ll be my no-questions-asked asset?”

“Yes. This is a square deal.”

“Okay then.” Abigail holds out her right hand, and Myka clasps it with her left. “It’s a deal. Operation Import This Person is… going to somehow be a go. It’s also going to have a better name by the time I’m done with it.”

Myka looks at the back of her right hand. “You can call it Operation Make Myka My Puppet, for all I care. You can call it anything you want. Just do it.”

“You’re getting pretty pushy when it comes to this person,” Abigail remarks. “In fact, you’ve always been pretty pushy when it comes to this person.”

“That’s because I feel pretty strongly about her.” She had known it when she saw Helena, saw the changes in her, saw that those changes had not changed a thing: she wanted more days with her, more nights, more everything. She has no idea how long that want will last, how long it would have lasted, if there had been any way for them to try to have those days and those nights. It might have been forever, and it might still be forever; she won’t know until it goes away. But the force with which she feels it is undeniable. “I feel pretty strongly about her,” she repeats. “Don’t forget that.”

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Steve groans when Myka tells him. “What do you think you’re doing?” he demands.

“I think I’m righting a wrong,” she says.

He counters with, “You did one thing, and you didn’t even know it was wrong. Why should you pay for it the rest of your life?”

Myka shrugs. “Better I pay than she does.”

“Why?”

“How do you think?”

“I think you can’t keep feeling this way about someone who doesn’t love you.”

“Don’t tell me how to feel.”

“This is not about giving you records on your birthday!” He sounds like he did when he was begging her not to go to Germany. “I am not telling you how to feel! I’m telling you that I’m worried about you! I thought you were getting better, I thought both our lives were getting better.”

“They are better. You’ve got a good job, you’ve got Liam…”

“And you’d got yourself an actual life’s work, as far as I could tell. But then Abigail comes along with her intel, and off you go, and suddenly nothing’s changed at all!”

“Of course things have changed. Everything’s different now.”

“Except one thing.”

“That’s different too,” Myka says.

“How? How is it different?”

“I finally know,” she says.

He doesn’t ask what she knows. He just shakes his head and says “fool” very softly.

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A week later, Abigail calls Myka. She says, “My idem k simfonii.”

“Your accent is terrible,” Myka says, because she does not want to get her hopes up.

“I’d like to hear how you do with Mandarin sometime.”

“Abigail, why are we going to the symphony?”

“Because I can’t get a date, and you’re the only other person I know.”

“What?”

“Because I feel like hearing some Sibelius, and you need to further your education.”

“What?”

“Because somebody we know is going, and she got us tickets too.”
“What?”

“Get with the program, Myka: it’s because I’ve made progress. Or at least, I might be about to. Miss Calder’s helping.” Neither Abigail nor Myka has ever been able to call her anything but “Miss Calder,” despite what is now years of her saying “call me Vanessa.” Myka can’t even think of her as Vanessa.

“What does the symphony have to do with it?” Myka asks.

“Technically the symphony doesn’t have anything to do with it. I mean that was obviously my first idea, to get this person into an orchestra somewhere, but I don’t think that can be done; she doesn’t have the training or the experience. No, it’s the conductor, Howard Mitchell. We’re going to talk to him.”

“But if you know you can’t get her into the orchestra, then I don’t see what he—”

“Do you remember I told you, years ago, that how Miss Calder knew him was hilarious?”

“Yes, but—”

“She taught him to play the cello.”

“She what?”

“They’re from the same town in Nebraska. She used to babysit him, and she taught him to play her cello. Is that not the funniest thing you ever heard?”

“Not really funny so much as… I don’t know what it is. But I don’t understand what it has to do with Helena.”

“Miss Calder says he knows everybody in the music world. He’ll have leads that I can’t even dream about.”

“But why do we have to go the symphony? Why can’t we just meet with him?”

“First, I really do want to hear the Sibelius. But second, Miss Calder says that after a performance, he feels expansive. And that means more ideas.”

This time for the symphony, Myka wears a black cocktail dress—her green taffeta is long gone, and she is far too old for it now anyway. Abigail, who picks her up in a cab, is similarly in short-skirted black. She’s wearing a long strand of black pearls that she says cost next to nothing in Taiwan. “We look like we’re going to a funeral,” Abigail says. “Some fancy evening funeral.”

In the lobby at Constitution Hall, they find Miss Calder. Her dress is long and velvet and dark blue. She does not look at all like she is going to a funeral. She hugs Myka and says, “Abigail told me everything. This is just a first try, all right? If it comes to it, I’ll give her money—it isn’t a solution, but it would be a start.”

“She wouldn’t take it,” Myka says. “Or she would because she had to, and I… I just don’t want her to have to.”

Miss Calder smiles. “That same look on your face,” she says.

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All the music is by Sibelius, the program says. The opening piece is the Overture from The
Tempest. Myka doesn’t know what to expect, but after a few minutes, Abigail leans over and asks, in a whisper, what she thinks.

“Does it ever really start?” Myka whispers back.

Abigail chuckles. “Welcome to Sibelius. At least it isn’t Schoenberg, right?”

Myka shakes her head.

“You’ll like Symphony no. 7 better, I promise.”

Abigail isn’t wrong… but Myka wonders if she will ever come to the symphony and not be distracted by Helena somehow.

Afterwards, Miss Calder leads them to Howard Mitchell’s dressing room. “I’m actually pretty excited to meet him,” Abigail had confided to Myka in the cab. “I’m sure Miss Calder would have introduced me before, but he’s kind of her property, you know?”

“No, I don’t know,” Myka said. “I honestly don’t want to know. All I care about is if he has whatever ideas you two think he might.”

Howard Mitchell is smaller than Myka expected him to be—onstage he seemed a huge presence, completely commanding—but he is incredibly charming, flirty, practically flighty, until Miss Calder says, “Howard, calm down and listen.” He does so immediately, in effect folding his hands in his lap.

Abigail tells him the story, or some of it: their friend, England, poverty, music—as much of it as she can.

Mitchell listens. Then he smiles at Miss Calder and says, “And this is why you’ve come to me: immediately, I have an idea. Violin, and she plays sessions? Well, Harry’s going to England pretty soon.”

“Harry?” Miss Calder asks. “Which Harry?”

“Lookofsky. Remember him? He was with Toscanini at NBC forever. You have to remember, Vanessa: you never liked him, because of the jazz!”

Abigail perks up immediately: “The jazz?”

Mitchell nods. “That’s why he’s going to England: he’s about to make some crazy jazz record where he plays all kinds of different strings, and he’s borrowing a viola from Arthur Richardson himself. I’ll tell him there’s somebody he should audition while he’s there, and if he likes her… it’s Harry. He knows everybody, and he can find work for anybody if they’re good enough. Is your friend good enough?”

Myka says, “Of course she is.”

Mitchell blinks at Myka. He smiles and says, “I think you must be a very sweet person.” Then he turns to Miss Calder. “Vanessa?”

“She is good enough. If she’s kept it up, she’s good enough. But she shares Harry’s unfortunate fondness for jazz.”

“Likes bebop too,” Abigail volunteers.
This makes Mitchell laugh. “Harry might leave his wife for her, then.”

Abigail says, “I really don’t think that would work out so well.”

Mitchell says, “Good, because Harry loves his wife. And his son.”

“They can rest easy,” Abigail assures him.

“And you can work out visas and all that, if Harry thinks she’s all right?”

Abigail nods vigorously. “Absolutely. I’m also working on some funding, but that’s going to take a little more shuffling.”

Mitchell declares, “Harry’s going to love it, the idea that he’s on some mission. He’s already convinced that I’m a spy.”

“Howard,” Miss Calder says sternly. “You are a spy.”

Unperturbed, he counters, “But I’m just the kind who talks to people and tells you about it. Harry thinks I’m the kind who has an exploding briefcase.”

“If this works out,” Miss Calder says, “I will see that you’re issued an exploding briefcase. How’s that?”

Mitchell is clearly transported. “Oh, Vanessa. You lovely ladies have a deal. I’ll call Harry tomorrow morning.”

Myka clears her throat at Abigail, who nods and says, “But listen, part of the deal is that he can’t tell Miss Wells that he’s a spy, or you’re a spy, or anybody’s a spy. Okay? She has to think that he heard about her somehow.”

“He might have,” Mitchell tells her. “He hears about everybody.”

Now Miss Calder laughs. “No, that’s you, Howard.”

“Trust me, it’s Harry too. I bet you would’ve tried to get him on your team ages ago, Vanessa, if you’d been able to see through the jazz.”

She is still smiling as she says, “And yet I seem to have survived.”

“You have. I’m glad.” He goes on, impishly: “And I know Artie is too. Tell him I’m still working on how to steal you from him!”

“Oh, you are impossible,” she says. “Since you were five years old, you character.”

“Don’t forget about the briefcase!” he chirps.

Later, back in the lobby, Abigail says, “See, Myka. Everybody’s got assets.”

Myka sighs. “I guess so. Miss Calder, maybe I’m behind the times, but I wasn’t aware that the Agency had exploding briefcases.”

“We don’t,” says Miss Calder. “I’ll just give him a briefcase and tell him that it explodes. He’ll be so scared of it he’ll never touch it, but he’ll tell everybody that it’s an exploding briefcase from the CIA.”
Myka squints. “That seems… not really secret.”

“It’s a funny thing about secrets,” Miss Calder says. “When I recruited him, after the war, he constantly made me nervous, because he just could not keep his mouth shut; it was CIA this, CIA that. He still talks about it all the time. But that’s the beauty of it: nobody even hears him say it anymore. He’s the most marvelous source of information you can imagine. He goes everywhere—I mean, even just here in D.C., he goes to every party, every event—and he talks to everyone. Politicians think he’s a scream.” She laughs lightly. “He won’t be here much longer, I’m afraid, because he’s quite honestly a terrible conductor. He’ll run the symphony into the ground. But he’s turned out to be a very good cellist, and I couldn’t have found anyone better for giving me information if I’d designed him myself.”

Myka asks, “Can you honestly trust that Helena isn’t going to figure out—isn’t going to be told—that this is my doing, or your doing, or the conductor of the symphony’s doing?”

Miss Calder shrugs. “I have no idea. But since nobody could possibly run off at the mouth as much as Howard does, I think it’s a good bet that Harry will do a better job of keeping quiet.”

“I think I need to talk to this Harry Lookofsky,” Abigail says. “I think he sounds like a very useful guy to know.”

Myka recognizes Abigail’s plotting voice. “Could you please wait until… maybe always? Or at least until we see what happens?”

“Oh, fine. I’ll wait. But not forever, Myka. Particularly if he makes this thing work. If he makes this thing work, I am getting his number.”

“Can he make this thing work?” Myka asks them both. “This sounds absolutely crazy. Could it possibly work?”

Miss Calder shakes her head. “Earlier this evening, I would have said I should just write Helena a check and force her to take it. But Howard has a weird knack for putting the right people in the right places, so… I think this actually has an inappropriately good chance of working. It may take a while, mind you.”

“A good long-term fix for any problem takes a while,” Abigail says sagely.

Myka hopes they are both right.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original tumblr tags: anyway i am very happy to have gotten to howard and harry at last, not to mention the impending importation of one very significant nonfungible commodity, and her similarly nonfungible daughter
Myka tends to her days. Her nights are sometimes beyond her control, but she tends to her days. Several weeks pass strangely quickly, as she is not teaching and has no classes, no lectures, no quizzes or exams with which to mark her time, no regular office hours to occupy. She still has an office on campus, though, and she goes to it and works; it’s easier to be there, to feel focused and driven there, than it is in her apartment. She wants that division. She wants lots of divisions: between work and home, between her daily life and what might or might not be happening elsewhere… between her carefully contained conscious thoughts and her unruly dreams.

Myka thinks she is getting some purchase on the whole situation, some equilibrium. She does normal things. Pete regularly drags her out to eat food, and that’s completely normal. They talk about how he thinks the wrestling team’s working out this year. They talk about the fact that Lois Lane has her own comic book now. Pete thinks this is great; Myka wants to know why she has to be billed as “Superman’s girlfriend.” Pete says it’s because she is Superman’s girlfriend. Myka sighs and says that this is why she doesn’t like comic books.

Late one night, between bites of pie—though it wasn’t really accurate to say that Pete was ever between bites of pie—he says, “So are you gonna tell me what’s going on?”

“What’s going on with what?”

“You.”

“What about me?”

He says, a little sloppily because his latest bite of pie also included ice cream, “That’s my question. Ever since you went to London you’ve been all weird. Jumpy.”

“It’s… the conference was interesting. I… learned things.” She has gone into the whole thing with Abigail. She has gone into it with Miss Calder. She has gone into it with Steve. She has even gone a short way into it with Liam and Leena, because Steve started to say something to Liam—because Steve does not censor himself around Liam, and usually that is sweet, but this time—well, this time, Myka had to try to explain what Steve meant when he said that the past was coming back to haunt Myka. She has gone into it with all these people, and she had hoped that Pete could just… that he could just be Pete. That she would not need to go into anything with him.

“Once when I was fifteen, I told my mom I was going fishing with my pals.”

“Okay,” Myka says.

“We actually just sat by the river and drank a lot of beer.”

“Okay. That’s a great story, Pete.” Maybe he has decided to drop it. She crosses her fingers.

“I’m not finished yet. So afterward, me and my pals, we went to the store and bought some fish so we could take it home and really sell the story.”

“Okay.”
“The problem was, we bought salmon.” He looks expectantly at her.

“I don’t get it.”

“We lived in Ohio.”

“So why did you buy salmon?”

Pete shrugs. “I thought it was pretty. Also, it was expensive, so I thought that’d mean my mom would be impressed that I caught it.”

Myka looks down at her pie. It’s rhubarb—practically as pink as salmon. “I admit that part does make it a better story.”

“I think you’re missing the point.”

“What exactly is the point?”

“I mean, technically I did catch the salmon. Except it was with my hands, at the store.” He takes another bite of pie. He is on his second piece; the first had been peach, and this one is apple. “I’m not saying you didn’t technically go to some conference and learn things. But it seems kind of fishy.”

“Salmon-y, huh?” Myka says, and Pete nods. She sighs. “It’s a really long story.”

Pete says, “I am willing to sit here and eat pie all night if I have to.”

Since London, when Myka has tried to sleep, she has closed her eyes and seen Helena and Christina in the room where they live, heard the constant babble from outside, smelled the overlay of dirt. (She has felt Helena’s hands against her neck, over and over again. She has tasted the rightness of their mouths together.) Sitting here with Pete, she might as well have traveled through time and space and as many other dimensions as could be: the tabletop is clean, Myka’s clothes are clean, her hair is clean. She has money in her pocketbook. She and Pete can order more pie without a single thought; they can do this every day if they want to. What would Christina make of this? Could she even imagine it?

“Are you gonna tell me what you’re thinking about?” Pete eventually asks.

“A little girl named Christina,” Myka chokes out. “She’s five and a quarter, and she… well, the thing is, her mother is someone I… anyway, I saw her when I was in London.”

“The little girl or the mother?”

“Both.” She is ignoring her tears. Just ignoring them, and maybe that will make them stop. Pete puts his fork down. “You know, I don’t mean to brag, but I get around.”

Myka takes a paper napkin from the dispenser on the table and pushes at her eyes. “Is this another story?”

“Not really. But I’ve spent time with a lot of girls.”

“Yes, you have. Why does it make you so happy to tell me about your dates?” she asks, because maybe she can just make a joke out of the whole thing.

Pete acknowledges that she’s spoken, but only with a wave of his hand. “And girls like a shoulder
to cry on. Particularly if it’s the muscular shoulder of a beefy wrestling coach, so I’ve got some experience with recognizing what a broken heart looks like. And what I need to know is, are we shouting ‘good riddance’ at her, or are we dreaming up ways to get her back?’

Myka coughs around a piece of rhubarb. The cough is followed by some kind of involuntary laugh-sob.

He pulls another napkin out of the dispenser and hands it to her. “You’ve got rhubarb on your front. Also, you may not know this, but I’m pretty good with kids. I mean, if I’m right, and if it turns out we’re dreaming up ways, instead of shouting. If that helps at all. I make a really great kid-sitter.”

“I don’t think it’s going to matter. I wish it would, but I don’t think it will.”

They eat pie in silence.

After a while, Myka says, “For the record, you’re right about my heart.”

He nods. “Just remember, my shoulders are pretty muscular.”

“But tricky,” Myka points out. “The left one, anyway.”

“I’ll save that one for the other girls,” he says. “You can have the reliable one.”

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Myka goes to Colorado for Christmas, because she has the time—she can translate anywhere—and because her mother wrote to say that her grandfather’s health is... not failing, exactly, but declining. She has not been home in years, because it is so far away, because she has felt so ashamed of what happened—even if they have no idea of the real details—and because she does not know how she will look to them. Her life is a series of befores and afters, and so many of those befores and afters have to do with Helena that Myka thinks some of it must show on her face. It certainly shows on her hand, but that is easily explained away as an accident.

She goes to her grandparents’ house as quickly as she can get away from her parents, and they greet her as if no time at all has passed: her grandfather nods and continues to smoke his pipe, and her grandmother begins making cups of instant coffee. Myka is sure that her grandmother, if she were being honest, would say that the best thing about being in America now, today, is not freedom of any sort, or even any miraculous invention such as indoor plumbing, but rather the ready availability of coffee. In an instant.

“You are thin like a twig,” her grandfather pronounces, in Russian.

“I fit in my clothes,” she tells him, in the same language.

“Such clothes,” says her grandmother.

“Is there something wrong with them? You don’t like them?” Myka’s still wearing the suit she traveled in, and she supposes she must indeed look strange and different. Certainly different than she did when she left, years ago. She was so young then; she dressed like a girl, acted like a girl, almost exactly like all those pretty girls who seemed to care about their prettiness above all other things.

“Nothing is wrong with them,” her grandmother says. “They are beautiful, and so are you.”

Myka suddenly wants to be able to show Helena to them, to have them say that she is beautiful too,
that Myka and Helena are both beautiful. Myka never wanted to be a boy, but if she were a man, she could have brought Helena to them, stood in this very room, this kitchen with its low ceiling and small table, and she could have watched her grandmother hand Helena a cup and welcome her to the family.

Myka sits down next to her grandfather. She says, “I’m translating Turgenev. It would probably go faster if you’d taught me Cyrillic when you should have.”

He puffs his pipe at her. “Always so impatient.”

He isn’t wrong.

Her sister, Tracy, is recently married (recently quickly married) with a child, an infant who is not terribly happy, later that day, to be meeting his Aunt Myka for the first time. “You should get married, Myka,” Tracy tells her.

“I don’t want to,” Myka says.

“But don’t you want a family?”

“I have friends.”

Tracy shakes her head. “It’s not the same.”

Of course she’s right; it’s not the same. But it’s close enough. Steve is the brother she never had; Pete is some combination of rude cousin and toddler nephew; and Abigail is… well, “fairy godmother,” if Myka is feeling charitable, and “crazy relation who should be kept in the attic” if she isn’t.

Myka’s parents, like her grandparents, think that Myka is overly thin. She explains that she is working hard, to justify her fellowship. Her mother says no more about it, but there is a different kind of pie every day that Myka is home. She can’t help laughing; Pete would think he’d died and gone to heaven.

Her father says he is proud of her. For knowing herself well enough to make a change. Also there has never been a professor in this family, he says, despite the fact that everyone loves books. So, he says, he has mentioned Myka to his fellow Shriners. And he might have said a few words at the Rotary. Myka has to fight back a surprising rush of tears, at both his evident pride, and the way in which her own pleasure is tempered with shame. This, she sees, is why she has not come home. When she is in Washington, she knows who she is, and while she may not always like that person, she knows her well. Here, no one is looking at the person Myka knows well. They are all looking at someone they used to know well, whose changes they have only read about, and Myka wants to tell them they are wrong about who she is—but she knows that telling them would mean no Shriners, no Rotary. So she feels a distance that she can understand only as deception… and she does not want to deceive her family.

She is relieved when she boards the train that will take her away.

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She had hoped that she would return to find Abigail with news of Operation Violinist and Child, or whatever the next new name was. It had never been the same twice, the name. But Abigail says, “It’s still Operation We Might As Well Be Playing Pinochle At This Point.”

What is waiting for her, however, is a letter from Max Hayward; she had written him a
congratulatory note when the translation of *Doctor Zhivago* was published in September. In the letter, he apologizes for taking so long to respond, but it’s only over Christmas that he’s had a minute to sit and think about anything other than Pasternak. He says he is happy to hear that Myka has decided to work on Turgenev. He himself has started on what he hopes will be a very important translation, a new work of criticism by a writer named Abram Tertz; Tertz has written an accompanying novel, *The Trial Begins*, and Max hopes to finish translating the criticism fairly quickly and move directly on to the novel. Very exciting! A major new voice! In any case, Max might find himself in the States this year, for some Pasternak-related lectures, and he will certainly try to contact Myka in that case. She should write back to him immediately if she has any interest in the Tertz; he has no partner at the moment and would love insight. Turgenev is Turgenev of course, but new voices, Myka!

She can practically hear him saying all of this, and she wishes, not for the first time, that she had not been so preoccupied in London—although she cannot find it in herself, even her scholarly self, to regret the preoccupation itself. She writes back and says she would be delighted to see whatever he would like her to take a look at, and that she would love to see him if he makes it to the States.

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Time passes. Days, weeks, the same: Cyrillic to English, back, checking (Max sends a copy of the Tertz novel, and Myka reads it quickly; it is interesting, somewhat fantastical, but it seems like nothing next to Turgenev); she reads passages out loud, first in one language, then the other. Sometimes she goes to Artie’s office and reads paragraphs to him, first one language, then the other. “I get that this helps you,” he says, “but I don’t think the same way you do. I’d rather see it written down.” It’s true, Myka admits, that she needs her eyes and her ears.

On a Friday evening in March, Steve calls Myka and asks if it will disturb the focused scholar too much if he comes over. “I have a present for you,” he says.

When he arrives, Abigail is with him. “I wanted to tag along,” she says. “Haven’t seen you in days and days and days. All you do anymore is translate.”

Steve hands Myka a 45 rpm record. She reads the label out loud: “‘There Goes My Baby’ by the Drifters.” She looks up at Steve. “First, it’s not my birthday.”

“I know,” Steve says, “but we figured you might like to have this one.”

“I don’t know it,” Myka says.

Abigail takes it from her, goes to the record player, and slips it onto the fat spindle. “That’s because this is an advance pressing,” she says. Then she places the needle down.

It’s only about two minutes long, the song, a simple doo-wop tune in which the singer wonders where his baby has gone… did she ever really love him… it is the kind of thing that Steve might have given her to cry over, years ago. “I don’t get it,” Myka tells them.

Abigail rolls her eyes. She picks up the needle, commands “listen!”, and drops it halfway through the song.

Myka listens. She hears the singer ask if his baby really loved him…

…and then she hears what she’s supposed to be hearing.

“Right,” Abigail says. “You get it now.”
Myka nods.

“Mission accomplished,” Abigail says.

For a moment, all Myka can do is listen to the sound of strings. When the song ends, she doesn’t ask whether Abigail and Steve will mind: she starts it again, and listens all the way through. Listens to Helena playing her violin.

She doesn’t cry, which surprises her. There is no heaviness at all in her eyes, in her nose, in her throat. “How long has she been here?” she asks.

“About six weeks,” Abigail says. “So I think we’re solid. Took me a little longer to get the work visa than I thought it would, because of the single-mother thing. Some nonsense about how could she be a musician if she also was a woman with a kid and no husband. Anyway, Howard says that Harry says that the timing turned out to be perfect: apparently this bunch of producers wants to make R&B records more appealing to you white people, and they figure that how they’ll do that is replace horns with strings. Because horns make white people nervous, I guess, and you find strings soothing? Anyway, there’s lots of string session work, and Howard also said that Harry said he was so happy to find another jazz violinist, he wanted to scream. I think Howard’s paraphrasing there.”

Myka tries to take all this in. Visas, white people, strings, and screaming. It is a nonsense prayer, but all that matters is that it is true. “Thank you,” Myka says to Abigail. Then she says to Steve, “And thank you too. I know you don’t like this at all.”

“As pop tunes go, it’s no ‘How High the Moon,’” Steve agrees. It takes Myka a minute to get it, and when she does, she smiles, and he grins back. “But I see that even Les Paul himself couldn’t improve on it, as far as you’re concerned.” He pulls her into a hug. “I don’t want you to be unhappy. If this is what it takes to make you happy, then all right. It’s the Drifters from now on, the Drifters or whoever. Abigail’s going to get the right records for you, okay?”

“Okay,” Myka says.

“And besides, Abigail and I have had a little talk. Haven’t we, Abigail?”

Abigail says, “I’m going to keep the work as clean as possible. Which,” she adds, with a glare at Steve, “I was going to do anyway, because I am not a terrible person.”

“A terrible person wouldn’t have tried to make this crazy thing work in the first place,” Myka assures her.

“It’s pretty crazy,” Abigail agrees. “But it’s good practice. Hey, why am I always practicing on you and this person?”

“I would rather you didn’t have to,” Myka says.

“I think if you’d just go sweep her off her feet, I might never have to run an op for you two again.”

“That isn’t a good idea,” Myka says. “And the fact of the matter is, I’m going to want to know where she is, exactly where she is, because I’m going to want to see her. Don’t tell me.”

Abigail looks at Steve and shrugs. “Okay, I guess.”

“Even if I ask,” Myka presses.

“Okay, even if you ask. Although I think that’s pretty silly. Because this person is here, and she’s
okay. She isn’t an ocean away, right?”

“What matters is that she’s okay,” Myka says. “That is enough. That has to be enough.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

Historical notes: Howard Mitchell: real. Also really a cellist from Nebraska. Also really did know everybody; he was a famous schmoozer. He was fabulous with outreach, particularly to schools, but he nearly did run the NSO into the ground—the musicians hated him because he kept trying to job them on pay and working conditions. Harry Lookofsky: totally real! And totally awesome! (You’ll hear some more about him as the story continues.) The idea of replacing horns with strings to make R&B groups less threatening to white listeners? Also totally real. The session during which “There Goes My Baby” was recorded in 1959 was one of the first examples of this. The interesting thing for me is that there’s some historical question as to whether there were four or five violinists at that session. My feeling for the purposes of this story is obviously that there were five, and I can postulate some (fictional) reasons as to why that mysterious fifth might have been erased from some versions of history…

Original tumblr tags: is it kind of farfetched?, yeah probably, but I wanted her in that session so. damn. bad., because the violin in pop music is a thing about which I have ridiculously strong feelings, and if I can get a fictional gay woman onto a bunch of records, even if only in my imagination, you can bet your Skittles I am going to do that, because I am wiggly with happiness at the idea of from now on listening to ‘There Goes My Baby’, and hearing Helena, and thinking of Myka hearing Helena, (don't judge me), (well okay judge me if you want), (I'll still be happy about it)
“There Goes My Baby” marks the beginning of what Myka has to admit is a quite positive, even relaxing, span of time. A major component of that relaxation is that she is relieved of the burden of worrying about Helena and Christina, because Abigail hands records to her at regular intervals and says “Howard says Harry says they’re both fine.”

At a certain point, Abigail begins saying “Harry says” instead of “Howard says Harry says.” Myka sighs and accepts that this is the way of the world—certainly the world of anyone who is connected to Abigail’s world.

At a later point, Abigail sometimes hands the records to Steve to hand to Myka, because Steve and Liam have very quietly moved together into a house that is near Abigail’s. Abigail finds Liam absolutely perfect and tries to recruit him immediately. Liam finds Abigail absolutely baffling and tries to explain that he is actually opposed to the government spying on people, particularly on people who work for labor unions. Abigail says she is not the FBI! It is not like that! She keeps no files on people! She just wants information! Liam says oh so mildly that he doesn’t believe her. Abigail says she will keep trying, Liam wishes her luck, and Steve complains to Myka that now they get together just to have this argument over and over again.

At a subsequent point, Abigail drafts Pete to ferry records to Myka. That is because Abigail throws a birthday party for Myka in 1960, and this party brings together several elements of Myka’s life in one place for the first time. She introduces Pete to Abigail and is witness to an exchange that makes her own jaw drop, just as Abigail’s so often does.

Pete asks Abigail, as the first words he says after “nice to meet you”: “How do you feel about pie?”

Abigail says, “I feel fine about it. I can’t cook it, though, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“That is not what I’m asking.”

“Okay. I don’t have a lot of free time, so I’ll just ask you: how do you feel about tiny older ladies from Shanghai who hate the shape of your eyes?”

Pete takes a second. Then he says, “How do they feel about pie?”

“I have honestly never asked.” Abigail admits.

“Then that’s what I’d open with, and go from there.”

“I kind of like you. It feels weird.”

“Ditto,” Pete says.

The day after, Pete says to Myka, “Your friend Abigail seems nice. Well, maybe not nice exactly, more like interesting. No, that sounds like I don’t like her, and I do like her. Maybe I should say she’s good-looking, but kind of scary at the same time? That’s not quite right either. You know all the words. What’re the right words?”
Myka says, “I’m pretty sure that the right words to describe my friend Abigail don’t exist. In English, at least. Or Russian. Or even Old Church Slavonic. Maybe Mandarin, but I bet not.”

During the party, Abigail had taken Myka to the backyard—she joked about her house being bugged, but Myka knew it was not a joke—and said, “Okay, two items of business. One, obviously I know what you’re planning to do this summer, because I know who’s going to be in the States.”

“I know you know. I told you about it a month ago.” Max Hayward had made plans to spend the summer teaching in New York, and Myka was consequently planning to take the train up for the weekend, every other week, so they could translate several short stories together.

“Yeah, but the new information on that point is, you can’t do it.”

“What do you mean, I can’t do it? Of course I can do it! I worked out the costs of the train tickets and hotel rooms and everything. Or are you saying I won’t be able to hold my own?”

“Don’t be silly. I’ve said from the beginning you’re fancier than he is. No, the problem is that your good friend Max is getting too chummy with dissidents, such that he can’t… you know. Carry messages, that kind of thing, without raising suspicion. And I can’t afford to have your name associated with his, certainly not associated, as in, your name on a book cover with his.”

“You are joking,” Myka said. She wished she were actually accusing, but she knew she wasn’t, because Abigail wasn’t joking. “What if I say I’m going to do it anyway?”

“Then I will say, we had a square deal.”

Now Myka didn’t know what to do. She wanted to work with Max, wanted to find out how that would go, wanted to know what it would be like to translate works for the first time instead of treading ground others had already worn paths through. “What if… okay, how’s this: what if I keep my name out of it?” To Abigail’s look of incomprehension, Myka said, “My name stays off anything that gets published. Max will understand. I’m pretty sure that of all people, Max will understand.”

“You would do that?”

“If I do, the deal is still square, right?”

Abigail shook her head. “I guess it is. Look, you see what the problem is, right?”

One of the things Myka had done for Abigail, as part of their deal, was to go to Moscow in late 1959, ostensibly to talk to Alexander Tvardovsky, editor of the literary magazine *Novy Mir*, about translating some of its essays supportive of socialist realism. Their conversation actually involved the tacit conveying of Agency support for the dissident direction that rumors suggested the magazine might be about to take.

So now she sighed. “I understand why I can’t be associated with dissidents—or associated by association—in print. I do. But Max and I are friends now, and that part of it I’m not inclined to hide. I don’t like hiding.”

Abigail nodded. “I can work with that. Probably. I’ll manage it. Okay, good. Square on that. Second thing: You’re going to start teaching again in the fall.”

“You knew that already too. Because I told you that too.”

“Right. Here’s what you need to start thinking about: sending smart kids my way.”
“You are joking,” Myka said again. This time she thought—hoped?—that Abigail might actually have been trying to be funny.

“Square deal,” Abigail said solidly.

“Really?”

“Strangely, there aren’t a bunch of kids showing up at the Agency these days who learned Russian from their grandparents in Colorado. Look, you’ll know who’s got potential. You’ll see which kids get it. Those are the ones we’ll eventually need on the desks. We’ve got to staff the entire world, because the Russians are doing it too.”

“What if I like the smart kids? What if I think they shouldn’t do dirty work?”

“I think people should make up their own minds about what kind of work they will and won’t do. Don’t you think that? You certainly used to think that.”

Myka wanted to say that she used to think a lot of things… instead she said, “Steve doesn’t think that.”

“Steve is not my asset,” Abigail said.

Myka thought Abigail must have begun rubbing off on her, because she said what she had been considering for some time. “He could be. That company’s going to end up cleaning every building in this city, and Steve’s going to run it all eventually.”

Abigail laughed. “Yeah, but Steve doesn’t need to make a deal with me, because he doesn’t have anybody he needs to import. He and Liam are just fine.”

“They are just fine. And I am pretty sure we’re both happy for them, aren’t we?”

“Of course we are. So are you and Leena ever going to date for real, or what?”

Myka knew why Abigail had brought this up: Leena was at the party, and Leena had not brought a date. Leena had not brought a date to the party, and she and Myka had talked quietly together for a while. It had been about the girl who’d just broken up with Leena—“She told me it was wrong, that she wanted to be normal,” Leena had said, sounding completely defeated—but Abigail didn’t need to know that. “Of course not. That wouldn’t be fair to her, and you know why.”

“What if this person finds someone?” Abigail asked.

“What if she does?” This was one of the reasons Myka did not want to know anything more than “she is safe and Christina is safe.” Because if Helena was safe and working and living a life, then she was very likely to try to… live a life. And Myka herself had tried—it hadn’t worked, but she had tried. Helena would probably try too, now that she was safe. And it would probably work, because why not? Just because Myka was a particular kind of fool did not mean Helena was the same kind.

“Well that wouldn’t be very cool at all, would it? After everything you’ve done for her?”

“Do you think I want her gratitude? Do you think I want her to want me because she’s grateful? She shouldn’t be grateful, anyway. She should hate me. If she knows everything, she’ll hate me; if she knows part of it, she’ll… feel like she owes me something. And if by some miracle she doesn’t know I was involved in getting her here, and we could somehow start again? Then I’d have to lie to her, and I know how I felt when I thought she’d lied to me. So there’s just no way. I’m learning to
live with that.” She was learning to live with it. She had wild ideas sometimes about what might happen if they accidentally—or “accidentally”—ran into each other… but she was on the whole a rational person, and she understood where the boundaries needed to be placed, and she was learning to live within them.

Abigail for some reason decided to press. “Are you ever going to see anybody ever again?”

“Are you?” Myka countered.

“I don’t have to answer that question,” Abigail said. She crossed her arms and dropped her chin. Myka thought that Abigail’s mother probably saw this expression a lot when Abigail was younger… Myka certainly had seen it enough in the… nine years? ten? since they met.

But Abigail’s scowl changed the day back to good, somehow. “Okay,” Myka said to that sullen face over the crossed arms. “Have we covered everything on your agenda? I can’t put my name on translations I do with Max. I have to send kids who speak Russian into your greedy paws. We’ve reaffirmed that I’m single. Plus I kind of get the feeling you and my good friend Pete might be seeing more of each other. Is there some area of my life you feel like you’ve neglected? Something else we might need to make sure you get a hand in?”

“I’m pretty sure I have no interest in how you cook food. But you need to eat some of it.”

Myka rolled her eyes. “You are worse than all my relatives. And Pete. I’m naturally thin, okay?”

Abigail blinked innocently. “I was referring to the birthday cake that’s right now sitting on my dining room table, but if you want to flip out about other stuff, be my guest.”

But Myka knew, and Abigail knew that Myka knew, that she was not flipping out, not anymore. She was among friends, and she was exasperated, and she was, to the extent she could be, happy.

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*I am playing with fire,* Myka thinks.

She is in New York. It is a weekend in early June, and she and Max have spent most of their Saturday translating two pages of an Isaac Babel short story. This is their second weekend together.

Max likes to stay at the Hotel Chelsea when he is in New York, and the first weekend, Myka stayed at a different hotel nearby. They both agreed that the situation would be vastly improved if Myka were at the Chelsea too, so this time, she is. It’s a bit… artsy for her taste, but it’s fine. She doesn’t mind it. In fact, she doesn’t mind much of anything: she and Max work well together.

He is the most enthusiastic person she has ever met. When she told him that because of certain reasons, she couldn’t have her name on the translations, he exclaimed, “Then we’ll wait to publish until you can!”

Later, he’d given her a shrewd look and a smile. “I know the reasons. I can’t go to Russia anymore; they’re denouncing me in the press: ‘neky Hayward’ they call me, or ‘nebezyzvestny Hayward.’” A certain Hayward; the not unknown Hayward. “And anti-sovetchik.” He grinned hugely. “Which I am, of course… I always think the bottom’s going to fall out of that place, and yet it never quite does.”

“You really should publish them, though,” Myka said. “The world needs more Isaac Babel, regardless of whose name happens to follow ‘translated by.’”

“I certainly can’t deny that. I’ve always loved Babel so very much.”
Max loves everything so very much: he loves to eat, he loves to drink, he loves to talk to anyone and everyone, and he loves music. Specifically, he loves jazz. Max loves, after a long day of work, to visit a jazz club, in fact a particular jazz club called the Five Spot Café. It is in the Bowery, so he and Myka make a practice of walking to it from Chelsea—it’s a bit of a hike, but being outdoors is infinitely better than being down in the damp, sticky, summer subway. Myka would be perfectly happy to walk to any neighborhood at all to avoid the subway, and she tells Max so.

“As an Englishman, I believe I’m required to have a patriotic appreciation for the tube. But it is true that New York’s system has a rather unfortunate atmosphere at this time of year.”

The first time they go to the Five Spot, Max downs a scotch immediately and says, “I have an ulterior motive for coming here. I mean, it’s a delightful club, but I do have an ulterior motive.”

“Myka asks. She is drinking a martini. It tastes, as martinis have for her since 1952, like “How High the Moon.”

“Yes.” He smiles. It transforms his long face, that smile, and Myka figures that is probably one reason why he smiles so much about so many things: he doesn’t want anyone to look at him and read gloom, or even disinterest, from his resting expression. “I’ve heard that occasionally a fellow who plays the violin will drop in here for a set. Jazz violin—so unusual! I just love it! This fellow made a fascinating album in 1958, with violin, viola, tenor violin… as I understand it, he played all the strings himself on the record.”

Myka has to stop herself from saying “I know.” She takes the olive, on its toothpick strut, from her martini and regards it with something like resignation. Playing with fire. Okay, fate, she thinks. Try me.

So now every other weekend, on Friday and Saturday nights, she walks with Max to the Bowery, and they sit at a table in the Five Spot, and Myka waits.

On one weekend she does not wait, because Abigail has traveled on the train with Myka, to visit her parents, and Myka goes to have dinner with them all, both evenings. Abigail’s mother, whom Myka has not seen in years, looks exactly the same. She and Abigail yell at each other constantly, in English and Chinese; each tries to recruit Myka to her side in whatever ongoing debate they have decided to pick up at any given moment. Myka tries to maintain a veneer of neutrality, but she does say, when Abigail’s mother insists that Abigail needs to find a good Chinese man and marry him, “There has to be at least one good man who isn’t Chinese.”

Mrs. Cho allows that President Eisenhower gives every indication of being a good man. Sadly, he is already married.

“I bet there are one or two others,” Myka says. “For example, I bet you’d like Max, the man I work with. I know he’d love your cooking.” Mrs. Cho, after some thought on the matter, concedes that such an attitude might be a point in any man’s favor. “Well,” Myka goes on, “maybe Abigail and I will have to bring an appreciative guy around sometime and see what you think.”

Abigail watches this exchange with her mouth hanging open.

Abigail does not meet Max until she picks Myka up in a taxi at the Chelsea, so they can catch the train home. He is his usual exuberant, wholehearted self—he has never been so pleased to meet anyone as he is to meet Abigail!, whose fault he is fairly certain it is that he and Myka are doing this very hard work only to put it into a vault for the future!, but the future will without doubt be very pleased with it when it is unveiled!—and she tells him, “No wonder the Soviets kicked you out, Max Hayward. You are crazier than Myka and several other very crazy people I know.
Combined. And that is saying something.” On the way home, she says to Myka, “For a little while there, I actually thought this person might have something to worry about, given how you talk about Max. But you two really are just friends, aren’t you?” And Myka thinks she probably should be offended, but instead she nods. Because they are friends. “It’s like me and Pete,” she tells Abigail, “because he is almost exactly like Pete.”

Abigail snorts. “Because when I look at Pete, I think ‘Oxford.’”

Myka says, “Max is the kind of guy for whom everything is fine. Everything really is fine. I hope when you look at Pete, you see that kind of guy.”

Abigail doesn’t snort. “I guess I do,” she says. She sounds surprised. She looks… different.

Myka wonders if that is the look Miss Calder is always talking about.

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In early August, fate says to Myka, Here, fool. The fire that she has been playing with? It flares.

Myka and Max are at the Five Spot, drinks in hand. The combo playing tonight is good but unexciting; even Max is saying that they lack a certain spark.

Myka is thinking it is funny he should put it that way, when someone steps out of the audience, up to the stage, carrying a violin case.

The saxophonist steps to the microphone and declares, “Sitting in on the next couple tunes we’ve got Harry Lookofsky—that famous Hash Brown!”

Max gasps in audible thrill. Myka doesn’t gasp, because she has been bracing herself for this, or something in this genre of horror or whatever it is, since May, and now it has finally happened, so she gives her full attention to the man on the stage. It is her first real look at the person who saved Helena. He looks surprisingly normal for a savior, even a bit older than she’d imagined, with thinning gray hair and dark age around his eyes. Just a man in his... late forties? early fifties?… but then he starts to play, and Myka still doesn’t really know anything about music, but she knows that he is playing in a way that Helena, even “I play very well” Helena, can’t. Or maybe she can, now. Myka tries to remind herself that she has no idea what Helena can or can’t do, now.

“I know I’ve made you drink your martinis here all summer long,” Max says during a brief break after the first song. “But if it makes up for any of it, I am now awash in happiness.”

“You’re always awash in happiness,” Myka says. She drinks the remainder of her martini down.

“He’s so excitingly different from Stéphane Grappelli! I heard Grappelli in Paris last year, and that was such a highlight… you haven’t been to Paris yet, have you?”

And Myka has to admit that no, she has not yet been to Paris.

“That’s actually wonderful! You can go for the first time only once. If you let me know when you’re going, I’ll tell you about the most delightful out-of-the-way places to eat!”

Myka wonders, once again, if Max and Pete might be long-lost cousins. The food enthusiasms alone might be enough to prove it… though Pete doesn’t like music very much. She’s going to have to ask how he and Abigail plan to negotiate that little problem.

Harry Lookofsky plays with the combo through three more songs. Then he wipes his forehead with
a towel and lays his violin back in its case. Myka hasn’t seen anyone do that in so long…

He walks back down into the audience, among the tables. Myka’s eyes follow him. She is tempted, oh so sorely tempted, to say something to him, even if it’s only “thank you”… he’ll think it’s for his playing, of course, though she would mean so much more… but then he sits down at his table.

And at his table, along with several other men and women, is a woman with dark hair—she laughs at Lookofsky as he sits down next to her, and Myka knows that laugh like she knows Russian.

“Max,” Myka says. “Max. We have to leave. Or I have to leave. You can stay. He might play again. You can stay, but I have to leave.” She stands up, trying to get away before Helena turns around, before she moves her head to look around the club, as people do, for people look around clubs, just to see, and Myka can’t… can’t be seen. Not now, not ever, and she does not know why she did not simply say two months ago to Max “I don’t like jazz clubs” and let him come here on his own. Because you wanted to play with fire, fate says, but Myka answers back, through a haze of panic, Not anymore.

Max rises immediately, throws money on the table, and takes Myka’s arm. He leads her out, and thank god their table is nearer the door than Helena’s is, thank god at least for that.

“What’s wrong?” he says when they are out on the sidewalk, in air that is hot and humid but not close, not smoky.

Myka says, “I tell everyone. I might as well tell you too.” So as they walk back to Chelsea, she tells him—not everything, but enough. “I was a fool. I’m sorry.”

“You know in the Babel stories,” he says, “the way we are constantly trying to reproduce his detached tone?”

She nods.

“Your narration is nothing like that.”

She laughs. She’s starting to breathe normally again.

“So in that spirit, let me ask you one thing.” He cants his head to the side and smiles. “Why don’t we simply turn around and walk back there?”

The first answer she manages, and it feels true, is, “Because I’m a coward.”

“I doubt that very much.”

She tries again. “Because I’m afraid of how much I want to.”

“Closer…”

“Because I have rules. And I just remembered that I made them for a reason.”

He scratches his head, and that disarranges his hair, which he generally keeps in quite careful line, even when he is frustrated at being unable to seize immediately on the perfect word or phrase to convey an idea in the target language. His hair remains perfect at those times, but now, it is bristled up on one side. “There are no general principles,” he says. “There are feelings. Everything depends on them.”

It takes a second for Myka to see the words in the right context. “Really? You’re quoting Fathers
“Garnett’s version,” he says. “I don’t know yours well enough yet.” He quotes more: “‘Why do I like chemistry? Why do you like apples?—by virtue of our sensations. It’s all the same thing.’ I do like chemistry, and you clearly like apples. I’d venture to say that you love them. Why did you keep going to that club with me?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hmm… dissidents,” Max says.

“What?”

“Where there are rules, Madame Khrushchev, you’ll find dissidents. Of one sort or another.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original tumblr tags: historical note:, everybody loved Max Hayward, and everybody called him Max, and he knew 22 languages, and if Helena Wells were not the supremely idiotic love of Myka's life, Myka would probably find him pretty attractive, despite the fact that in this story she is as gay as a spring morning, also I have no idea whether he actually liked jazz, but it would come as no surprise to me
In late September of 1960, Miss Calder invites Abigail and Myka for a Friday evening at her house. Music and dinner, she says, like the old days. She and Abigail play Brahms, part of a cello sonata. “Didn’t we play this allegretto ages ago?” Abigail asks when they are in the thick of it, and Miss Calder decides that yes, they must have, because she remembers Abigail complaining about it.

“You say I complain about everything,” Abigail points out.

“You do. But your complaints are generally piece-specific.”

They don’t make it all the way through the piece. Miss Calder stops playing, during a particularly difficult bit of work, and says, “I have to tell you something.”

Myka looks do you know? at Abigail, who turns around from the piano and looks not a clue back at her.

“Two somethings,” Miss Calder says. “First, Artie and I are getting married.”

“I can’t believe he kept that a secret!” Myka says. She sees Artie every single day, now that she is teaching again; they generally get their morning coffee in the departmental office at the same early hour.

“Our decision was a bit sudden.”

Abigail crosses her arms. “Why?” she asks with suspicion.

Miss Calder exhales heavily. “That’s the second something. I’m… not well.”

Miss Calder’s blue eyes are not sparkling; Myka sees that they are not sparkling. She is tired and worried. “That means I… you know, I’ve been trying to get better about saying it. I of all people should be able to face a situation. I have cancer. They’re going to operate on me, two weeks from now, and—”

“Can you tell us what… what kind of cancer?” Myka asks.

“Breast cancer. I’m… older, so it isn’t an enormous surprise. The doctors do think I’ll be all right, that I won’t die of it, I mean. Of course you never know about that, which is why Artie and I—that’s not something I ever wanted to do, you see, and I don’t think Artie truly did either, but he can spend more time in the hospital with me, if we’re married. And it’s very unlike me, but I find I don’t want to do this without him. I don’t think I can do this without him.”

Abigail says, “I know what they do in that operation for breast cancer. Your chest muscles. You won’t be able to play.”

“Not for quite a while, no.” She lifts her bow again, draws it across the cello’s strings. The sound is pure. Myka would call it perfect. “But they tell me that if I work at it, most of the strength
should come back. We’ll just have to wait and see.”

Abigail swings back around and slams her hands onto the piano keys: this noise is urgent and awful. “I need to take a walk,” she says. She leaps up and runs out the front door. Myka has never seen Abigail really cry, not once, but she swears she hears a sob, just as the door closes.

“Are you all right?” Miss Calder asks Myka.

“I’m just worried about you,” Myka says. “And Artie. Now I really can’t believe he kept the secret. He doesn’t hide his feelings that well, usually.”

Miss Calder smiles. “I know. I told him to make an extra effort, particularly around you. I did want you to know, just not too soon.”

Myka smiles back. “I don’t think I can call you Mrs. Nielsen.”

“If you couldn’t manage ‘Vanessa,’ then no, I don’t suppose you can.” She smiles again, and her eyes look a bit more like they should. “Truly, I don’t think I can call myself Mrs. Nielsen.”

“I’ll do whatever I can for you,” Myka says.

“Help Artie,” is the immediate response. “He’ll let you. Probably only you.”

Myka nods, right as Abigail storms back in. She is not crying anymore; now she is at her most Abigail, pacing back and forth between Myka and Miss Calder: “Is your surgeon the best surgeon? If not, where do we get a better one? Do we know this is the best idea anyway? Is there some other way to fight this thing? Because what is the point of some huge surgery if there’s—”

“Abigail!” Miss Calder says. “Listen to me. Calm down. I didn’t tell you this to upset you; I told you so that you would know. All right?”

“Let me do something,” Abigail begs. “I have to do something.”

“We’ll figure something out to keep you busy. For now, though, how about once through the allegretto?”

For a second, Abigail looks like she will either cry again, or explode. But she contains herself. She sits down on the bench, and she furrows her brow, and she plays. Miss Calder plays too, and Myka watches them, listens to them. She misses Helena—she will always miss Helena—but her love for these two women is almost as great. She is lucky, and she knows it.

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Three weeks later, on a Saturday afternoon, Myka is standing in Abigail’s living room and shouting at her: “You what? How could you do that?”

“Guess what, Myka!” Abigail yells back. “Not everything is about you. I had to do something, and this was it. Miss Calder wants to see her friends, and I think this person actually was once a really good friend of hers, and besides, I don’t think this person is a monster, so I thought she’d appreciate knowing about the situation. So you can just… I honestly don’t care how you feel about it. It’s been almost two years since you even saw her.” Myka has not told Abigail about the Five Spot, and for this very reason. “You can just be two people who used to know each other, okay?”

“But you would have had to explain how you knew she was here. So you had to tell her. I can’t believe you told her!”
Abigail makes a face. “I’m not stupid, Myka. I told her the story backwards.”

“You did what?”

“I told her that Harry told Howard about this English jazz violinist lady, and that Howard mentioned this to Miss Calder because he knew it would get her goat. And then Miss Calder is the one who, in this version of history, said ‘wait a minute, how many ladies who play jazz violin can there really be from England?’ and asked Howard to ask Harry what her name might happen to be. And magically, guess what her name happened to be?”

_I just read you into my op_, Myka remembers, and she says, “I am always very unclear on whether you’re brilliant or something else entirely.”

“Go with brilliant. Anyway, in interesting news, she’ll be showing up here in a taxi from the station, I would say, oh, probably any minute now.”

“What?” Myka cannot have heard that correctly.

“Well, I didn’t want to give you too much time think about it. Or, you know, escape.”

Not five minutes later, Myka thinks she really should have taken advantage of that brief window of escape opportunity… because the doorbell rings. Abigail announces, with Max Hayward–level cheer, “Here we go!” She opens the door.

Myka closes her eyes, just for one last moment of peace, or something. “Abigail,” she hears a voice, that voice, the only voice, say warmly, answered by Abigail’s excited, equally warm, “This person!” Myka opens her eyes. And in the foyer of Abigail’s house, suddenly, magically, there is Helena, holding Christina—a still thin, but so much taller Christina—by the hand. Helena has a small suitcase in her other hand. Christina is clutching the violin case.

When Helena’s eyes meet Myka’s, the world stutters, then stops. Myka’s blood no longer flows, her breath no longer moves. Everything is inanimate.

Helena says, “Hello.”

Another stutter, then, sluggishly, movement. “Hello,” Myka says.

Helena seems disinclined to anything like conversation, so Myka, trying to at least figuratively move one foot, then the next, decides she’ll talk to Christina instead. “Hi,” she says. “I’m Myka. Do you remember me? I met you in London, a long time ago.”

Christina nods. “I was five and a quarter.”

“You were. Now you’re… seven. And a half?”

“Almost.”

Her voice is still so quiet, and she still has the same smile… minus a few teeth right now, but she’s already so pretty, and she’s going to grow up to be beautiful, darkly and starkly beautiful, like her mother… and her mother’s beauty is, once again, newly staggering. And Myka understands, finally, that every sight of Helena is going to be more beautiful to her than the last, that age has, in the end, nothing to do with it, that every time she sees Helena she will fall in love again, and that will be her ideal, until the next time. So all right. All right.

“Hi, Christina,” Abigail says. “As you probably guessed, I’m Abigail.”
Helena says to Christina, quickly, “She is not. She is Miss Cho.”

In the loudest stage whisper possible, Abigail says, “You can call me Abigail, but it’ll be our secret, right?”

“Right…” Christina says, but she looks up at her mother. Her mother is clearly not wavering.

“You and your mom are going to stay here at my house while you’re in Washington, if that’s okay,” Abigail tells her.

Christina says, “I think so.” But she tightens her hold on Helena’s hand.

“I see you’re kind of trepidatious about that,” Abigail says, “so let me sweeten the deal.” She whistles, and the new member of her household, a rambunctious beagle puppy, tumbles in.

“Christina, this is my dog. His name is Charlie. Charlie Barker.”

Helena’s stern expression breaks for the first time. “It is not,” she says.

Christina, obviously puzzled, tries, “Mr. Barker?”

Abigail bursts out laughing. “Oh, this person, I like your kid.”


The smile gives Myka a tiny injection of courage. She says, “We all hoped she was. But she wasn’t.”

Helena looks at Myka, and they are stuck again, staring.

“Hey, Christina,” Abigail says. “Do you want to go play in the backyard with Charlie?”

Myka can see, at the bottom of her vision, Christina nodding vigorously.

“Out through the kitchen. That is, if it’s okay with your mom.”

“Go ahead then,” Helena says, and Christina sets the violin down. Then she is off like Helena has shot her from a gun.

Helena sets down her suitcase. She takes off her coat and hangs it on the tree in the corner of the foyer. Myka watches her move.

Nobody says anything.

The telephone rings.

“Thank god,” Abigail says. She runs for the kitchen, nearly as fast as Christina had.

Myka coughs. “How was the train?” she asks.

“Fine, thank you.”

“That’s good. Did Christina enjoy it?”

“I believe so.”

Myka thanks god that she managed to get out of the Five Spot when she did. She could not have endured this kind of exchange in front of other people, in front of strangers.
Abigail comes back, and Myka thanks god again. “That was Pete,” she says. “He was supposed to be here in just a minute so he could stay with Christina while we go for visiting hours, but he’s running late, some crisis with one of his wrestling kids. So we could… I don’t know… stand here awkwardly some more? Or go sit down awkwardly?”

Helena says, “I have an idea.”

“Hooray for that,” Abigail says. “You always were pretty smart.”

“Hm. I note that you have a lovely piano… if you wished to, we could play something. Together. For old times’ sake. Also I suspect that I won’t have much chance to practice today, otherwise.”

“Wow, you really are a pro now. Practicing every day?” Abigail whistles.

Helena shrugs. “I’m fortunate. Here, it puts food on the table.”

“So what do you want to play? Some jazz? That kind of old times?”

Helena darts a glance at Myka. That certainly feels like old times. Helena says, “Let’s stick to classical. In honor of Vanessa? I don’t believe I could bear to see her for the first time in far too many years and report that I’d led you musically astray again.”

“I think that’s good thinking. She’ll like it if we tell her we played, and that we really could have used her stern hand to keep us in line. I’ve got tons of music; find what you want.” Three wooden filing cabinets sit against the wall near Abigail’s baby grand piano. Myka knows they are in fact filled to bursting with sheet music, because she helped Abigail fill them when she had bought them, transferring piles and piles of paper from cardboard boxes into their sturdy new walnut-veneer home.

Helena opens a drawer. Except for the glances, she seems to be pretending that Myka is not here. That is fine with Myka, who is still just looking, recording, thinking that this is right and wrong and impossible and perfect and that she wishes it were not happening but that she is so happy to see Helena living in front of her eyes that she will have to hug Abigail for this, right after she slugs her. Right after she slugs them both.

“You don’t seem to have much for violin,” Helena remarks.

“I don’t seem to have a violin,” Abigail says. “Or a violinist.”

They decide on something by Dvořák, something they refer to as “romance for piano and violin.” Myka wishes things were different; if they were, she could tease them about that. She thinks she might try to tease Abigail about it, later. Maybe someday when she is speaking to Abigail again.

“If we make it through, I’ll be amazed,” Abigail says as she sits down at the piano.

“How late is your friend Pete likely to be?” Helena asks.

The piece is long. Myka watches them play, listens to them, and it does come to feel like a romance: Abigail’s piano begins, Helena’s violin joins her, the instruments speak to each other, speak over each other, spend long passages simply together… and the end, which they reach after much “sorry” and swearing and repetition, is as beautiful as they both are, and Myka isn’t angry with either one of them in that moment, for they have made something not perfect, but real.

What is perfect is Pete’s timing: he arrives as they are trying to decide whether to start something else. He walks up to Helena, who is still holding the violin. He looks at her closely, looks at Myka,
raises his eyebrows. But he doesn’t say anything other than, “Hi, Helena, nice to meet you finally.”

With Christina, who rumbles in with Charlie, he is much more voluble. “Hi, Christina. I heard about you a long time ago, way back when you were five. You’re sixteen now, right?”

Christina says, so shyly, “No.”

“What?” Pete bugs his eyes out. “You look like you’re all grown up!”

“I’m seven.” Her smile is growing.

“Plus any quarters?”

“Two.”

“I’m no good at math, but I still say that makes you sixteen. You’re ready to drive a car.”

Abigail shakes her head and says, “Speaking of the car. If we’re going to make visiting hours, we’d better get moving.” Helena goes to get her coat, and Abigail leans over the couch and says, “Come on, Myka, move it.”

“I don’t think I can,” Myka says to her, very quietly.

“Are you serious?”

Myka nods. She is painfully serious. Being in Miss Calder’s hospital room, being there with both Helena and Abigail, will be too much for her. This romance for piano and violin was just enough; she cannot take more.


Helena takes an inordinately long time to put on her coat. Christina watches her mother for a while, then looks at Myka. Then Charlie whines at her, clearly interested once again in the backyard, and Christina seems thrilled to have an excuse to leave the room.

Moments later, as Abigail and Helena are departing, Abigail gives Myka a hugely raised eyebrow.

Myka shakes her head.

Pete says to Myka, “Thank god you’re still here; I thought you guys were actually gonna leave me alone with the kid.”

“You said you were good with kids!” Myka accuses. “You said you made a good kid-sitter!”

“I said that?”

“Yes you did!”

“I was probably trying to impress you. Or make you feel better or something. C’mon, you can’t abandon me, me or that sweet kid.”

“My god you are a pain.”

“Well, so are kids, which is the problem, right?”

Myka gives in. “All right. All right. But only to save Christina, not to save you.”
After more energetic romping in the backyard, supervised by Myka (and, theoretically, Pete), Christina and Charlie are ready to come inside. Charlie is more ready; he’s still just a baby, and he collapses into naps regularly. “He naps like a pro,” Pete tells Christina. He picks up the puppy and sets him on the sofa, next to Christina, who is next to Myka. Pete himself collapses into a facing armchair. He closes his eyes faster than Charlie does.

Christina looks at solidly snoring Pete and Charlie, then says to Myka, “You never told me your magic tricks.”

“I can’t believe you remember that. I didn’t get a chance to answer your question, did I?”

“You were gone when Aunt Jane and I came back, and then Mummy and I were very sad together.”

Myka has no idea what to make of that. She has no idea what to make of the fact that her visit was enough of an event to be remembered by Christina at all, much less in any detail. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you sad.”

“I’m not sad anymore. What magic tricks do you know?”

“I don’t know any. I’m sorry for that, too.”

“Everybody does,” Christina insists, and Myka could laugh at how she echoes Helena’s sure presumption. “Mummy says everybody does.”

“I think she’s…” But she can’t say to Helena’s daughter that Helena is wrong. “Okay, maybe I just don’t know what mine are yet. Which ones do you know?”

“I know sixpence from your ear. I almost know sixpence through the palm.”

“Do you?” Myka is human. She allows herself a moment to remember coins and palms…

…but then she stops and comes back to the present, because Christina is asking, “Do you have sixpence? Mummy has a boxful, and I practice with them at home.”

“I do not have sixpence. What’s it like? A penny? A nickel?” She grabs her purse from the table behind the sofa and digs through, trying to find coins.

“Penny,” Christina informs her.

And so Myka finds herself letting Christina pull a penny from her ear, over and over… she almost gets the penny through her palm, into Myka’s hand, after she asks for a second penny. “I think I know how this one works,” Myka says, and Christina shushes her. “We don’t tell how it works,” she says. “We just show.”

“Is that how it is?” Myka asks.

“A magician never tells.”

“Just shows?”

Christina nods.

Myka smiles. “Show me, then. Would you?”

The next while is spent with Christina showing Myka how to do a trick that Myka’s brain understands perfectly well, but that her hands cannot seem to master. It is much harder than it
appears to be when done by Wells hands.

Christina, whispering: “Hold the bottom penny more lightly.”

Myka, whispering back: “I thought you weren’t supposed to tell.”

“You need a little help,” Christina says.

Myka agrees, “More than a little.”

Pete had awakened during Myka’s magic lesson; he is now clattering around in the kitchen, most likely eating all the food Abigail owns. Fickle Charlie has decided to abandon Christina, his new crush, for food dropped by Pete, the rediscovered true love of his now nearly three-month-old life. Abigail will most likely come home and look at the state of her kitchen and sigh and say something to Myka like “at least neither of them minds cheap food” and then get that funny look on her face again, the same one that’s usually echoed on Pete’s: something like happy, warm disbelief.

Myka and Christina are still working on the trick—Christina apparently has infinite patience with Myka’s incompetent hands—when Abigail and Helena return. Myka looks up as the door opens, as Abigail comes in, as Helena trails after her… it is more than strange to have seen Helena, and now to be seeing her again, after no time at all.

Christina jumps up and runs to her mother, pulls on her hand, pulls her down and whispers in her ear. Helena listens; then she says, “Really?” One more whisper, and this time Helena responds, “No, darling, we will not be having a dog.” Christina gives the tiniest of eyerolls, but she keeps an arm around Helena’s legs as Helena stands up again.

Abigail says, in a tone that is clearly meant to be casual, “Oh, hey, Myka, you’re still here. That is a surprise.”

“I’m pretty sure it isn’t,” Myka tells her.

“Hey Pete!” Abigail shouts. “Hey Charlie! And also hey Christina!” Pete and Charlie emerge from the kitchen, and Christina perks up, loosing her hold on Helena. “We four are going to the park!” At the word “park,” Charlie Barker begins energetically living up to his name.

Myka sees Christina look once at her mother, who nods. Then the little girl is all in with Abigail and Pete, particularly when Pete hands her Charlie’s leash and says, “You’re a responsible kid, right?” Christina grips the leash so tightly that her little hand—but of course it is her big little hand, because she is a Wells—turns white. Charlie leads the parade out of the house, barking all the way, and Christina, Abigail, and Pete follow, almost as loudly. “We’ll be gone for a while!” Abigail shouts from the front yard.

Quiet descends, and Myka and Helena are alone.

“And that is why we will not be having a dog,” Helena says.

“Better a Charlie Barker than an Abigail,” Myka tries. “Or a Pete. I noticed Christina was the most quiet one out of that group, not to mention the most mature.”

“She is generally a quiet thing. Maturity we are working on. Fits and starts.”

Myka says, “She’s really wonderful.” She means it.

“Thank you,” Helena says. She seems to mean it too. They both are waiting, Myka feels, but then
Helena sighs and takes her coat off. “Abigail clearly intends that we talk to each other.”

“I know. Pete basically forced me to stay.”

Helena walks closer to Myka, who is standing by the sofa. “Why didn’t you come to the hospital? Vanessa asked after you.”

Myka shakes her head. How can she say it? “I... I think it was the music. It was... too much.” She coughs. “How’s she doing today?”

“To me, she looks terrible. But Abigail assures me she’s improving.”

“How’s Artie?”

Helena considers this for a moment. “I think his aspect supports Abigail’s interpretation. While we were there, he went to find coffee, and my understanding is that that is unusual.”

“It is,” Myka says. “He mostly won’t leave her side.”

“Abigail said you’ve been teaching his classes for him,” Helena says. There’s engagement in her voice now, not a lot, but Myka likes hearing it... she wishes she could like it less.

“Um. Yes.”

The engagement remains as Helena says, “Congratulations to you on your doctorate, by the way. And your teaching position. I had no idea. I had no idea, but of course I am not surprised.”

“Thank you. Congratulations on your… what do I call it? Recording career?”

“Thank you.”

And then they are back to awkward standing, as if, having acknowledged each other’s reality, there is nothing more that could be said.

Myka starts to say she will just leave now, now that that they’ve talked like they were supposed to, but Helena says, “I believe that I...” Her voice hardens. “I believe that I owe you thanks for something else.”

“What?” Myka does not like the tone Helena just used; she does not like it at all...

“Abigail is a great many things.”

Myka tries not to be afraid. “I’m told I’m supposed to go with brilliant.”

“But one thing she is not is a good liar.”

She keeps trying: “It’s kind of hilarious that you would say that. She wanted you to give her lessons.”

Helena nods. “She needs them. Because I do not believe for one single moment that Vanessa just happened to hear that a jazz violinist by my name is working in this country.”

Myka tries one more time: “As I understand it, she didn’t happen to hear the part about your name. She happened to hear about a woman who plays jazz violin. She had to ask about your name.”

“I see that you have been briefed in the matter,” Helena says with venom.
At this, Myka can safely scoff. “Abigail would have briefed me anyway. She didn’t want to spring you on me.”

“I am certain that seeing me would have come as no surprise to you.” The venom is still there.

*Here we go,* Myka thinks, with absolutely no Max Hayward exuberance. “Why?”

“Two reasons. First, if I work from the premise that Abigail is lying, do you know where I find myself?”

Myka sighs. “Stuck in the mud, if experience is any guide.”

“Stop joking!” Helena commands.

“Why? No matter what I do, you’re just going to get angry at me or stop talking to me. Probably both. I haven’t spent a lot of time with you lately, but I think I remember a few things. Or more than a few.”

Helena says, “Despite your attempts to derail me, I find myself concluding that everyone knew I was here. That they have known since I arrived in this country. And *that* because—and I have had my suspicions for some time—this is your doing.” She smiles. It isn’t a real smile. “I tried for a while to believe that Harry’s appearance in London, with knowledge of me and an interest in auditioning me, was a coincidence, coming so soon, as it did, after your… visit. But I don’t believe in coincidence. Not anymore.”

Yes. Here we go. “Well, good for you. What’s the second reason?”

“The second reason is that I know with absolute certainty that you knew I was here. Or in New York, at any rate.”

This, at least, is unexpected. “How do you know that?”

“You have clearly forgotten what I told you, years ago.”

“What you told me about what? I can recite our conversations verbatim if you want me to. But I don’t think you want me to.” Myka is tempted to start, just to start repeating words Helena once said, words about love or magic or anything, just so she’ll stop.

Helena says, very quietly, “About you in a green dress at the symphony.”

“Your shoulders,” Myka says. She shudders. Now she knows what is coming.

Helena grits out, “I always see you. This time, at the Five Spot. You with your gentleman friend.” The way she says it, she means it just like she had about Steve, in the Peacock Room. No matter what they do, they cannot escape that awful day in the Peacock Room.

It isn’t fair for Myka to get angry, not anymore… but it isn’t fair for Helena to be jealous, either. Not anymore. “Because I can’t have friends,” Myka says. “Because a woman can’t be friends with a man? You were with Harry Lookofsky. Are you involved with him?”

“Certainly not.”

“Okay, why not?”

“He has a lovely wife. And children.”
“See, I would think there would be another reason. And that you might already know that I would have at least a vaguely similar reason not to be involved with Max.”

Helena smiles a smile that Myka wants to slap off her face. “Well. People can change.”

“No, they really can’t.”

“I certainly have,” Helena sniffs.

“No you haven’t. You are exactly the same: you’re sure you’re right about everything. You’re sure you know exactly why people do what they do. Well, guess what, you don’t know anything.”

Helena says, “I know that when you saw me in London, you saw how powerless I was. You saw me and you pitied me.”

Myka makes a noise that she wishes were a laugh. “I will say this for you, Helena Wells. You are true to form. I told Abigail that this was how you’d react, and look! I was exactly right.” She pushes her hand against her hair; she would rather it were down, so she could drive her fingers through it, grab it and start ripping it out. “Look, you thought it was what you did that made fate take everything out of your hands. But that wasn’t it. I did. I took everything out of your hands, and then I tried to put some of it back. The rest was up to you. And you did it. And so now you’re fine. You’re fine, Christina’s fine, and that’s what matters. So you can think whatever you want to, about me. Go ahead, think I pitied you. Think that I set something in motion because I looked at you and said, well, I can feel either pity or contempt, so I guess I’ll go with pity.” She is tired now, tired of everything, tired of Helena’s beauty, tired of love that is impossible in every way—impossible to have, yet impossible not to feel. “I’m not going to explain myself to you. Abigail was right: we’re two people who used to know each other, and that’s all. I have a good life now. You have a good life now. Let’s leave it at that.” She pushes past Helena to get to her own coat, which she lurches into. “Tell Abigail and Pete I’ll see them when I see them. And tell Christina goodbye for me. I promised her I’d keep working on sixpence-through-the-palm, so I will.”

She walks out. She doesn’t look back.

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Later that night, someone knocks on the door of Myka’s apartment. She figures it will be Steve, that Pete or Abigail will have called him and sent him to offer comfort—but she doesn’t want comfort. She isn’t even sure that she needs it. She thinks she has actually, finally got what she needs: freedom from the past… or at the very least, the ability to walk away from it. She doesn’t know what she’ll do next, but she does know she won’t be waiting while she does it.

She opens the door, already preparing her “I’m fine, Steve; no, really fine” speech.

Myka doesn’t know why she hadn’t expected it, hadn’t expected it and prepared for it: Helena is standing in the hallway.

Helena says, “Abigail told me everything.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes
of course Myka was right about how Helena would react if she knew part of it, but let's see if she was right about how Helena will react, with additional knowledge, quite honestly I like the idea of Abigail as a master plotter, who can't lie her way out of a damp paper bag, (except she is in no danger in the box, because she doesn't take it seriously), sorry about the name of the dog, I couldn't help myself there
“Abigail told me everything,” Helena repeats.

Myka can’t make her mouth move, but her brain is speeding away from her, as if in compensation: it’s only fair, it’s only fair, now Helena knows, now she knows there’s no pity, only guilt and no pity, and now Helena can hate Myka for it, and if that’s what had to happen to bring this thing to its real end, then okay, okay, the past can be the past, and everything can finally be over and—wait.

“Why are you here?” Myka asks, because that is the only information lacking now.

“Why do you think I’m here?”

“I have no idea. Where’s Christina? With Abigail?”

“As if I could pry her away from Charlie Barker. She likes you a great deal, Myka, but you are no match for a beagle.” Helena gives a hint of a smile.

She’s going to be lighthearted about this? Myka sighs. “I’m sure that is in some way the story of my life.” She gets no laugh in response… in fact, she gets no response at all. Myka sighs again. “Listen, I don’t want to do this. I’ve beat myself up enough for what I did; I don’t need you to do it too.”

Helena blinks, and the slight smile is gone. She says, “May I come in?” and what can Myka possibly do but nod? She backs up, away from the threshold, and Helena steps forward. She pushes the door closed behind her.

A humorless laugh rises in Myka: twice today, they have been alone, completely alone, behind a closed door. Twice today. There could be no clearer illustration that things are not as they were, that the past is past. “Whatever Abigail told you, it doesn’t matter anymore,” she says.

Helena’s face doesn’t change; she is the Platonic ideal of calm. “As the story was told to me, it will keep on mattering. In perpetuity.”

“That doesn’t have anything to do with you.”

“Again, as told, it has everything to do with me.”

“Fine,” Myka says. “It did. It used to. Everything had everything to do with you. But not anymore.”

“And when did you decide that?” Helena asks, as if she were seeking information about the weather report.

“I’ve been trying to decide it for a long time.” It’s the truth. Helena doesn’t need to know that it’s only tonight that Myka has even begun to believe that it is possible.

Helena turns her head slowly back and forth, looking around. “I’ve never seen the space—any space—in which you live. You have a great many records.”

Myka tries to work up some concern for the fact that her surroundings are not as tidy as she would prefer… the past few weeks, she has barely had enough energy to get to and from campus, much
less make sure her books are shelved and her papers are filed and her records are racked. And if there are more records unracked than there were several hours ago, if she has been listening to some of those records tonight, telling herself—not yet successfully—that it is time to get rid of them? Helena doesn’t need to know that either. Myka shrugs. “I like records,” she says.

Helena tilts her head. “I recognize a few. Abigail may have mentioned that I would.”

“Abigail talks too much.”

“Sometimes she does.” Helena nods gently. “But in this case, I think she talked just enough… because it seems that you were never going to tell me.”

“Tell you what? That I’m the one who destroyed your life?”

Helena’s voice picks up some animation. “You didn’t destroy my life. I destroyed my own life, and I’ve also managed to destroy yours. Several times over, in fact.”

“That is not true. My life is fine.”

“No,” Helena insists. Myka wonders whether she should be offended that Helena thinks so little of her, of what she’s done… but Helena goes on, “You have to do things for Abigail that are bothersome to you at best, and at worst? I don’t want to imagine. That is how you saved me. I know it now. Were you ever going to tell me that?”

“Of course not.”

“Why not?”

Myka does not want to be having this conversation. Not now, not ever, so she tells Helena why: “Because I’m a coward. Could we just stop this? Because you thought I did it out of pity, but it was guilt.”

Helena nods again. “That’s what Abigail said you’d say.”

“Well, if you know everything I’m going to say, then I’ll ask again: why are you here?” Myka is working up to simply telling her, flat-out telling her, to go away. “Because if you—”

Helena turns her back to Myka. She contemplates the apartment’s door for a moment.

“What—” Myka begins to ask.

A length of pale hand reaches up and decisively twists the knob that throws the deadbolt. It snaps metallically home, just as it should, followed by a tiny ring of an echo.

Helena turns around again to Myka. She asks, “What did I just do?”

“You… locked the door?”

“Yes.” Helena waits, as if Myka is supposed to know the next line, the next bit of stage business, but Myka can’t imagine what that next bit might be. Helena stands up straighter, breathes in and out, tilts her head back, forth. Then she says, “What did I neglect to do, that fateful night in Germany?”

Myka has dwelled, obsessively though certainly not volitionally, on many aspects of that night. She has had nightmares about those aspects, she has relived them, she has come dangerously close to destroying other breakable things over them. But she has had trouble calling up the thicker, sweeter
moments: she got into the room, but how? Helena’s hair was down, but by whose hand? The violin was on Helena’s shoulder, at her chin… then her hair was down and her skin was against Myka’s. The door was closed. That is all Myka could ever have said with certainty. “Oh,” she says now.

“Yes.” Helena waits again, but Myka still does not know the next line. “You have persuaded yourself that my… situation was your fault. In the course of telling me many things, Abigail told me that.”

“There are plenty of things that Abigail doesn’t know.”

“Yes. Such as the fact that I was so… overcome. Entranced. Weak. So much so, that I did not lock a door. Such a simple thing. Such a disastrously simple thing.” Helena sounds like she did in London. Her voice is the same one that said “go away from here;” and Myka has worked hard, so hard, to keep her from needing to use that voice again.

“No!” Myka says, and she means no to that voice, no to any of it being Helena’s fault, no to everything that has gone so stupidly wrong. “We should never have been in the situation in the first place! I made the project come back to life! If I just hadn’t gone looking for Nate after you disappeared, then none of it! That started it all!”

Helena’s response to this outburst is to take off her coat. For a bizarre moment, Myka thinks that she will remember this as the day of watching Helena get into and out of her coat, her simple black car coat, which she now places over the back of Myka’s armchair. She says, “I think I might be here for more than a moment, if we are honestly going to have an argument about proximate and ultimate causes. Because I am not a philosopher. I play the violin.”

“Neither am I. I translate Russian.”

Helena inclines her head. “You do have an advanced degree, however. All I know is what I learned as a child. The ultimate cause…” She chuckles, desert-dry, feather-light. “There were two people living in a garden, and they ate the fruit of a tree.”

Myka agrees, “I certainly have a lot more knowledge of good and evil than I ever wanted to.”

“What has she made you do?” Helena asks, in a harder voice.

Now this voice, this protective voice, makes Myka smile a little. “Nothing particularly awful—or nothing I knew would be awful. I mean, I worry… about some of the dissidents, that they’ll take risks and get hurt because they think we’ll back them harder than we really will. Or that I’m helping to set up elaborate defections that won’t go as planned. And particularly, now, that I’ll send her my best students, and they won’t know what they’ve gotten into until it’s too late.”

“Like you.”

“In a way.” She crosses her arms. “I know now that the world isn’t very pretty.”

“No, it isn’t,” Helena agrees. “But there are rare, emergent peaks of beauty. Compensations. Consider the Dvořák piece. Abigail and I didn’t play it particularly beautifully, but even so.”

Myka can’t think of anything to say in response to that. To her ears, they did play it beautifully. Particularly beautifully.

Helena steps to Myka’s record player and begins rummaging through the 45s that surround it. She says, “I spend a great deal of time with people who make records that are intended to resonate with thousands, even millions, of listeners… there are many ways to create a popular record, although it
is by no means an exact science. Novelties can find favor, and of course there are songs intended solely to move the body. But the ones I tend to work on are a bit different.” She seems to find what she is looking for; she pulls the record out of its sleeve. “A producer, a very intelligent producer, told me that his goal is to bring the entire production together in such a way as to express an idea that most people find difficult to articulate.” She holds the record up to Myka. It is “Save the Last Dance For Me.” “The Drifters are rather close to my heart, as you might imagine, given that I was lucky enough to spend my first session in this country with them. This one was recorded in May of this year. It was the first use of a space newly made into a studio, a large, lovely, resonant space into which over thirty musicians can fit comfortably… perfect for this approach, this thought of bringing elements together precisely to engender an overall effect. Obviously this has always been essential to music, but to create it with such care in the context of popular recordings is, I believe, somewhat innovative. It certainly differs from my earlier experiences with this sort of thing, in London.” Myka winces at this, but Helena does not pause. “Let us consider, as a sample element—for I know a bit about this—the contribution of the strings.” She starts the record. “Please note that I and my fellow strings are not playing as the song begins.”

“I know that,” Myka snaps. She wants to ask the point of this lecture, but instead she says, “Abigail gave me this record. What do you think I listen for?”

Helena goes on as if she had not spoken. “Ben sings the verse—yes, you can dance every dance with the guy who gives you the eye, smile every smile… ah, but now as the chorus rises, now the strings, now to emphasize: but don’t forget who’s taking you home, and in whose arms you’re going to be. Save the last dance, he says, then the strings drop away again, and now it is their absence that emphasizes his next words: ‘for me.’ We’ll repeat this on the next verse: yes, the music is fine, Ben says, et cetera, but while we’re apart don’t give your heart to anyone; and here again we rise for ‘don’t forget,’ fall after ‘save the last dance.’ This song is a bit unusual, in that we bridge twice. The first is Ben’s, making his case vocally, ensuring that you know of his love. Then the verse again, dance, carry on, till the night is gone; chorus as before.” She smiles now, clearly delighted by what she is hearing. “And now the second bridge—this belongs to the strings. It’s in the more traditional place for a release, and the exultation of this release! It is, in a way, the musical anticipation of that last dance that has been saved, the one that will come when the night is gone and it’s time to go.” She stands and listens for a moment. “Personally, I find the backup singers at the end an error in the arrangement. I would have returned to the strings… but that’s most likely vanity on my part. Perhaps we’re being saved for the actual last dance. In any case, the record is about realizing that certain things cannot, or will not, change, but when you consider the night—or the world!—entire, there are in the end compensations.”

“Oh,” Myka says, “I thought it was about asking someone to save the last dance for you.” She’s not sure if she is trying to be funny or just keeping her interpretational distance.

Helena presses her lips together and narrows her eyes. Is that a prelude to a laugh? “Yes. Things that are difficult to articulate.”

All right, try for funny. Try, at least. Try, as Helena stands here with her lips and her eyes, looking like the past. “You know, Abigail could never decide on a name for the op that got you here.”

Helena’s eyes are still narrow, but her tone is lighter. “Could she not?”

Renaming This Operation. But I know why she kept doing it; she was trying to get me to calm down.”

“Did it work?”

“No,” Myka admits. She wants to add, and neither did your “Save the Last Dance” exegesis, but she holds her tongue.

“Perhaps this will help: I believe it has now developed a hint of Operation I Got You Here and Now You Too Owe Me.”

“Oh, no. That was not the deal. I’ll talk to her and make that go away.”

Helena says, quietly, “It would relieve you of your burden, at least somewhat. Apparently a Russian-speaking musician who associates with many other musicians, some of them famous, would be useful to her.”

“You gave up everything for me already! I’m not letting you do anything like that, ever again!”

“The lock, the lock, the lock,” Helena chants, still quietly. “Myka, if not for the lock…”

“I was too loud, Allen had already heard me. He would have kept trying. So we’re back to me again. And you can’t erase Alex from my conscience. Just let me take the blame for all of it. Go back to New York and live your life. Please. I want you to be happy.” She does want Helena to be happy, she does, she does. The way she talked about the record, the way she looked when she listened to the record: that was Helena, happy. She should have that all the time.

But Helena says, “How can I? I have done nothing for a year and a half, it seems, but give my attention to songs about love. It concentrates the mind. When I saw you this summer… it didn’t matter that I was angry, thinking you had pitied me. All I saw was you and a man, together. I was with colleagues, several people, but you were with only one person.”

“True. I was with one person.” She thinks, briefly, of Max. Of his joy in everything, all the beauty, all the compensations he finds. “I was with one person. But I wasn’t with this person.”

It is a tiny caesura in this argument, or confrontation, or whatever they are having, for Helena to say, with a precious growl of frustration, “Why does Abigail call me that?”

“Operation Import This Person,” Myka says. “Does it matter at all?”

Helena gives her head a small toss. Her hair is knotted at her neck, as usual, but this late at night, some strands have made their escape. They move against her face. “No. What matters is that I saw you and was so jealous I could hardly function. I sat and tried to imagine what I could possibly say to you, but then Harry went to play and I couldn’t leave… and then after he came back, when I looked again, when I could have made my way to you, you were gone. I tried to tell myself that that was all right, that it was better that way. But I don’t know how much longer I would have held out before coming to find you—because if just that one sight did that to me? It brought everything back. I am still so weak for you.”

Bleakness settles in Myka as she confesses, “I tried to feel something for someone else. Not Max. Another woman.”

“I…” Helena pales. Myka is always surprised that anyone can look even as pale as Helena does naturally; she is doubly surprised that blood can leave Helena’s face. “I could not imagine such a thing. Before you, I had sworn never again. After you… well. For a time, I told you, I thought of
somehow returning to you, though I could barely imagine that you would take me back. And then, obviously, circumstances. I did think that any such part of my life was over.” She pauses. “So did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Feel something for someone else?”

Myka shakes her head. She can feel her own hair, which has been making its stealthy way out of its pins since she came home, moving against her neck. “I told you: I tried to. That’s the end of the story. It didn’t work. I didn’t want other people. I wanted you. For so long, I wanted you.”

“I wanted you too. I couldn’t forget.”

Myka holds up her right hand and shows Helena its back. “If I’m ever tempted to forget. I’m not, but if I ever were…” Helena’s expression becomes even more horrified, and Myka hurries to add, “I can touch and hold things. I can write. I can do all the things I did with it before. But it feels different. And sometimes… sometimes I just don’t use it. I shake with my left.”

Helena is staring at Myka’s hand, watching as Myka lets it fall back to her side. “My hands—don’t have those scars. My body… well. Having a child.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“But Myka, I’m not. Not for that. I mean, I am, but… my child. If I’m ever tempted to forget. Strangely, she’s what I had of you. Would I give her up? I can’t see how. She saved me too.”

Myka touches her scars with the fingers of her other hand. “There’s a thin line between salvation and destruction. Or maybe it’s a moving line. Or they’re the same thing. I don’t know anymore.”

“Which would it be if I asked you to kiss me now?” Helena moves closer.

Myka is not taken aback, not exactly, but she feels tangled in something, something she thinks she should want to be free of. “I don’t know anymore.”

Helena moves closer still; they have not been this near each other since London. “You saved me,” she says, as if it explains everything.

And maybe it does. Myka says, “Is this gratitude?”

“Of course, but—”

“Then I don’t want it.” That’s not tangled. That’s simple, so it must be the truth.

“Well, at least you’re a better liar than Abigail,” Helena says. “But you didn’t let me finish. Of course it’s gratitude, but it isn’t solely gratitude. Can’t I want to thank you—and simply want you—at the same time? Can’t both those things be true? I’ve been perfectly capable of being furious with you and senselessly weak for you at the same time.”

Slug you. And then not slug you. “Yes. That, I understand. That, I remember.”

“Then remember this too.” Helena leans up and puts her lips to Myka’s in a kiss that is soft and strange at first, then soft and familiar. But Myka can’t let a kiss lead her to hope again, because how much hope can there be, really, for anything more than this? She said it to Helena already: she has a good life. If all this will do is make her look on that good life as somehow less good than she
believed it to be yesterday, then why do it? Things shouldn’t be brought back from the dead. It’s a lesson she should have learned well enough by now. Helena’s body in her arms, Helena’s mouth under hers, these are just revenants, ghosts of the past. She pulls away from Helena, backs away and says, “If something’s dead, it should stay that way.”

She expects Helena to agree, to nod and leave. Surely she too has to believe that the past is past? And Helena does nod, and Myka prepares herself for the sound of the deadbolt clunking clumsily open, for the creak her door’s hinges make, for footsteps receding, this time for good.

Helena says, “If something is dead.” Instead of moving to the door, she turns again to the record player, where the disc is still revolving; she lifts the needle and sets it down to restart the record. “We’ve never danced together. All this time, so much music, yet we’ve never danced together.”

“I don’t know when we would have,” Myka says.

“I don’t either.” Helena extends her hands, and now Myka thinks that this must be it: that their first dance will also be their last.

“All right,” Myka says. She takes Helena’s hands, lets them pull her body close, then closer; she feels that Helena is grasping her right hand very lightly, that her callused fingertips are resting gently against the edges of Myka’s scars, and Myka lets herself revel, just this once, this first and last time, at their perfect fit in this, too. The world is small again, small enough that they can move in something like a dance together, behind a closed and locked door. No one has followed Helena here. They are safe. It is over, and they are safe. The song rolls on as they dance their last dance. They are dancing, and soon it will be over.

But not until the song is through. “Listen,” Helena says against Myka’s shoulder as the second bridge begins: the violins play, and Helena now says, into Myka’s ear, “I think of you.” Myka closes her eyes. Helena’s voice continues, “I think of you; I think of us. If this were dead, I could not think of you and play like that.” That voice in her ear… that is even more familiar than the kiss, and when Helena does not stop, when she says, “I don’t know what I am to you, what I can be now, but to me you are still my love,” that, at last, is the exultation of the release… and this time Myka does not stop to think, to worry about hope and where it leads: she is kissing Helena with years and years’ worth of hunger, and Helena is kissing her with the force of all the time they have lost, and it must be that they have to make up for it all, right now, behind this closed and locked door—the song has not even ended yet; it has not even begun to fade as Myka pushes Helena into the bedroom, this tiny bedroom that no one else’s eyes were ever going to see, pushes her down onto a bed that no one else’s body was ever meant to touch.

Nothing in those years’ worth of hunger prepared her for the absolute joy of feeling Helena’s body against hers again, of Helena’s hands pulling her hair down, her own hands and mouth trailing through locks of dark silk, and now she has to get Helena out of her dress and she can’t do that if they are on the bed, so she pulls her up, pulls her close, and Helena’s dress is probably lovely but all she knows of it now is that it zips down the back and that it is dark: as that dark recedes, more and more of Helena is there for her to touch. “You aren’t playing fair,” Helena says, with a sweet, slight pout of exasperation. “Yours has buttons. Far more difficult.” But Myka can feel those fingers, callused and not, working the buttons open, and she seems to be doing just fine…

“It might not be fair, but I didn’t have any idea,” Myka says, with a yank that takes the dark dress down over Helena’s hips, “that this would happen today.”

“I didn’t either. I can’t believe this,” Helena is saying as she finally succeeds with the last button, as her hands start to work at undergarments, unclipping, pulling, stripping away. “I can’t believe it.”
“You don’t have to,” Myka tells her. “If you can’t, then don’t. You don’t have to believe it; I can’t believe it either, you’re not real, you’re not here…” The words are tumbling out; they are nothing but placeholder syllables, their articulation simply something for her lips to be doing until the undressing is finished and she can put her mouth back on Helena’s body where it belongs.

And once she does, she lets herself remember Helena’s neck, remember how it twists, and that twist now comes like magic, so fast, so very very fast, that Myka may not believe any of this is happening, but she does believe she is still Helena’s love, and that Helena is still hers, and that even if it is not happening it should be happening, always, quickly this time—and Helena now twists the other way and closes her eyes in what might be embarrassment—but it can be slow later… she tells that to Helena: “Slow later.” Helena answers not with words but with open eyes and an open mouth that rises to meet Myka’s again, and yes, it will have to be slow later, because now Myka’s entire body is twisting and winding everywhere in the wake of Helena’s hands… and the kiss-strangled cry she offers to Helena’s mouth is a poor yet perfect expression of the exultation of this release.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original tumblr tags: they have been really recalcitrant about getting from point A to point B lately, with luck everybody can calm down a little bit now, as I and they work on Operation Bring This Thing In For A Landing, I have been referring to a lot of things in my life lately, as Operation This, or Operation That, I'm going to miss this Abigail when this story's over
Myka’s breathing slows. Not a moment ago, her body and Helena’s body were as desperately joined as any two bodies could be, but now they are separate again, despite the fact that they are touching, despite Myka’s hyperawareness of the skin and sweat of this body pressed against hers, this leg draped across hers. This body that she just made contort with something like pleasure, that just made her do the same, is now unfamiliar to her; even her own body seems that of someone else, someone she does not know. Does that mean this was the last dance? That they had needed some different note to end on, something that was not Germany, was not London, was just two people in a bed that no one had followed them to, that no one was listening to, that was nothing to be ashamed of but nothing to truly delight in either?

She had known very clearly what she wanted when clothes were being stripped, dropped, discarded. She’d known when their bodies touched, for the first time in so long; then, too, everything was clear. But in this awkward after, she and Helena are two people who don’t even know each other anymore, two near-strangers who now are lying naked in bed together. It would be so sweet to believe that they could just start again… but no one can just start again. Certainly not after so much time and so much misunderstanding and so many things done and undone.

Myka coughs, just a small cough as she is trying to work up to speech. They have still not even shifted position in the moments since Myka fell apart. It was a release but not a relief, Myka now thinks. She is not at all relaxed, and despite Helena’s posture, she cannot be either, for there is none of the peace, the boneless blending, that is still impressed upon Myka’s body from times before. No hands are moving in the involuntary aftermath caresses that Myka remembers. She coughs again, her nervous cough, the cough that she coughs on purpose, when she is lost, to cover that she is lost.

In response, Helena clears her throat. She says, “I’m sorry. I’ll move.”

“No,” Myka says. She coughs again. “I mean, you don’t have to.”

“I should. In any case.” She removes her leg, pulls her body away from Myka’s side. Then she sits up, sits on the edge of the bed. She doesn’t look at Myka.

Myka is now forced to regard Helena’s back, her shoulders; the light from the living room is bright enough to show details, to cast shadows. How many times has she pictured these shoulders? How many times has she wished for these shoulders, and now here they are, but she doesn’t feel that she has any right, any leave, to touch them. She lifts a hand experimentally. It doesn’t stretch all the way. She would have to move closer.

“I’m sorry,” Helena says. “I was too… forward.”

An absurd idea, given what they have just done, given that they have done so much more than that, in the past… Myka says, as carefully as she can, “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I had no right to speak to you of love. Or to let it lead to—”

Myka interrupts, not carefully at all, “What are you saying?”

“I am apologizing. For what just happened.”
“If you regret it,” Myka starts. “If you do, I’ll understand, but don’t apologize. The only thing to apologize for… would be if you didn’t mean what you said. Was it true?”

“Of course it was true,” This is a snap, and it comes so quickly, with such annoyance, that Myka believes it. “I told you: incessant love songs concentrate the mind. I do think of you when I play. I think about you constantly.”

And Myka believes that, too, but: “You think about a girl you knew in 1952.”

Helena’s shoulders shrug. She says, “I suppose I do. I suppose I was speaking of love to her, rather than to you. So for what just happened? I am apologizing to you, not to her.”

“I don’t need your apology. I’m still her. But I’m different. You’re different too.”

Helena laughs a little at that. Myka can’t see her face, so she can’t tell what kind of laugh it is. Helena says, “And yet I was very recently told that people can’t change. That I, in particular, am exactly the same.”

Myka pushes herself up on one elbow. She reaches her other hand toward Helena again, a little farther this time. Still not quite far enough. “I’m sorry I said that. I was angry.”

“So was I… well. Mainly, my pride was hurt. It still is: I am still ashamed that you saw me and found me so pathetic, so much so that you had to… take steps.”

“Did it not occur to you at any point that I might have taken those steps for another reason? And I don’t mean my guilt, because you didn’t know anything about that.”

“What other reason?”

Myka sighs. “You’re not the only one who listens to a lot of love songs, you know.”

Helena looks over her shoulder. What seems to be an absurd amount of anticipation is gathered in her eyes, and if Helena is hoping? If she is really hoping? If Helena is hoping, then it will give Myka hope, but she needs to make sure, she needs to make very sure…

Myka says, “The problem for me was that for a long time, I didn’t know who I was thinking about when I listened to those love songs. Was it someone who called me Les Paul and was weak for me? Or was it someone who had lied to me the whole time, who just wanted to compromise me and then walk away?”

Helena manages to hold Myka’s gaze through this; she takes it. But then she turns back around. Her head drops forward.

Myka goes on, “And I wanted to find you, so I could finally find answers… but I also just wanted you. I wanted you so much.”

Helena says, to the floor, “You wanted a woman you knew in 1952. A woman you might have known in 1952.”

“Yes.”

Helena looks over her shoulder again. “What do you want now?”

What does Myka want? All the time they didn’t get to have, in all the ways they never got to have it. The life that would have come after the honeymoon they never could have had. A world that
would have let them have that life with less pain, less damage, less to live through. Myka looks at the face, the hair, the shoulders before her. Helena is different now, and Myka is too. But what just happened: that isn’t different… or it didn’t need to be. What Myka felt when she listened to Helena and Abigail play: that wasn’t different either, or if it was? It was the right kind of different, the kind that said yes, it is now and not then. It is now and not then, and destruction and salvation may, sometimes, with time, turn out to be the same thing.

She moves forward, reaches out that hand and touches Helena’s back. She moves even closer, and closer still. She settles behind Helena, wraps her legs and arms around Helena’s body.

“When I want now,” she says. “I want to try to find out. Who you are now, if we could be like this now. Because for once, this time, we could try. Nobody’s watching. Nobody cares.”

“Immigration would care. Your university would care.”

That is a token protest; Myka can feel it. “Not tonight,” she says.

“No, not tonight,” Helena says.

Helena’s head is still turned to Myka. And now she leans her head back, now their mouths meet; Helena raises a hand to reach behind her, to tangle in Myka’s hair. That hand… Myka feels that it is steady, sure. It is not shaking.

When they part, Helena says, “Slow later…”

Myka can’t think; the kiss was so heady, so rich. “What…”

“You told me, slow later…”

“I did…” And she smiles, because Helena is smiling too.

Very softly, through her smile, Helena says, “Please. Please.”

Myka, familiarly helpless against that “please,” says, “Just tell me that you want to try too.”

“The only thing I want more than that is…”

“What?”

Helena drops her head forward, then leans it back again. “Slow now.”

This overcomes Myka entirely; the earlier, feverish rush of their bodies colliding had been exhilarating in its moment, but these words start an agitation, an excitement that wants to unfold rather than burn away. “Medlenno,” she agrees. Slow. For a moment she does not even realize she has had the thought, or said the word, in Russian; she has involuntarily scaled to its enormity, its yearning and grasping for home and redemption and reconciliation. Helena nods as she leans back against Myka, as Myka’s lips are at Helena’s neck, just where they used to long to live, but it is not the past. It is now, the now of the white-streaked dark hair that Myka must push aside to get to Helena’s neck, the now of her body that Myka is touching everywhere, softer in some places, harder in others. The now of her hands, their veins more visible, running up and down Myka’s thighs, making her ache, making her close her legs more tightly around Helena. Those hands… those hands are caressing her legs… and those hands are not shaking.

“Ne slishkom netoroplivo,” Helena whispers. Not too slow.
Not too slow… or no, Myka considers: “leisurely” is closer. Not too leisurely. In context… “Which sounds better to you, ‘slow’ or ‘leisurely’?” Myka asks, and she realizes that she has foolishly let herself be sidetracked—that she has actually for a moment begun to weigh words despite the naked woman leaning back against her—when Helena turns again for a kiss, then says, firmly, “neither.” She grasps Myka’s hands with hands that do not shake, and obediently, Myka moves where Helena guides her, her left hand up, her right hand down, between Helena’s legs. The idea that her right hand, her damaged, scarred hand could be here, now, on Helena’s body, could be making her hips begin to move this way… that the fingers of that hand could stroke against her and make her skin heat this way and her breathing fall uneven this way… Helena gasps sharply once, twice; she throws her head back, then tightens her grip on Myka’s hand and holds it still. The idea that this could happen, just this way…

Myka puts her mouth to the sharp jut of a still-square shoulder. “That wasn’t very slow at all,” she says against it, and she is trying to keep her tone light, bracing herself for embarrassment from Helena again, or for that still, strange distancing again…

…but that is not what she gets. What she gets is Helena turning her head again, kissing her mouth again, then saying, and it sounds like a promise, “This won’t be either.” She shrugs Myka off of her shoulder, pushes her back onto the bed, and proceeds to make good on her word. Myka tries, perversely, to hold out, to prove her wrong, but Helena is above her, smiling, saying “bystro,” fast, or at least that is what Myka thinks she heard, but maybe she is just hallucinating in Russian now, because she can’t hear anything anymore when she is concentrating on a hand that does not shake and a rhythm that does not falter and that is absolutely all there is in the entire world until she shudders and she has lost and Helena has won.

This time, as her heartbeat returns to normal, Helena kisses her, then kisses her again, then says, “You looked surprised to see me, when you opened your door tonight.”

Myka can barely talk yet, but she manages, “That’s because I was surprised to see you.”

“I thought the knock would have given it away.”

“The knock? The knock… the series? I didn’t even hear it.” She had been so sure it was Steve. So very sure.

Helena says, “I’m gathering that. And yet I did it thinking, well, I am knocking out the one, one, two, three, five, just like this, and she will know exactly why I’ve come to her, just like that, and I won’t even have to say it, and we can simply…”

“Simply what?”

“Does it paint me as too crassly eager if I say, ‘do this’? I didn’t really believe that we would, of course, but I couldn’t help but hope.”

“To be honest, I might not have opened the door if I’d realized it was you.”

“Oh,” Helena says, an unreadable utterance. “Good, then, that you didn’t. Realize.” This is said offhand, as if it doesn’t matter.

They will need to revisit that, but for now, Myka says, “I agree.” She kisses Helena again—because she wants to kiss her, but also because she does not want to have to think about what would have happened if she had understood that it was Helena knocking on her door, and if she had decided that answering that knock would be too confusing… or worse, pointless.
Neither of them is fully present in the kiss; it ends ungracefully. Myka feels tension in Helena’s arms, feels her neck tighten, as if she is about to sit up, to pull away again, and so all right, they will revisit it now. Myka says, “I didn’t want to see you because I thought we were finished. No, worse, I thought we might not be finished, but that we should be. I was wrong.”

“I’m always wrong,” Helena says, with that martyr’s edge. But the stiffness leaves her body, which is once again easy against Myka’s.

“You can say that as much as you want to,” Myka tells her. “It doesn’t make it true. You came here tonight, and that wasn’t wrong. Was it?”

Helena doesn’t say anything; she just breathes at Myka’s neck, so Myka pushes her over, onto her back, and lifts herself up, so she is looking directly down into Helena’s eyes. “Answer me,” she says. “Was it wrong?”

Helena blinks once, slowly, and Myka has one instant of panic, hears in her ears a terrified shrieking echo of her own years of doubt. Then, as Helena opens her eyes, her expression changes from neutral to luminous, featuring a smile that Myka can tell she herself is mimicking, even as it breaks over Helena’s face. “No,” Helena says. “It wasn’t wrong.”

Myka hates to take that smile from Helena’s face, but she has to kiss her, has to show her what that admission means. In the end, though, the smile persists through the kiss, persists for both of them. Myka drops to Helena’s side, delighted, afloat. “Here’s an easier question,” she says, “and whatever the answer is, it’s fine: can you stay?”

“The night? I practically have.”

“Will Christina be all right?”

“I think she will. I told her I might be gone for some time when I left to come here.” Helena smiles a different smile. “Her eyelids were already drooping mightily—Pete and Charlie wore her out further after dinner, while Abigail and I were… talking.”

“How did that come about, exactly?” Myka asks, though she has her suspicions.

“When they all came back from the park to find you gone, she was not pleased. She noted that you and I are ‘the two biggest idiots who ever drew breath.’ That is a direct quote.”

Suspicions confirmed. Myka sighs, “She’s probably right.”

“I don’t doubt that she is. I did try to explain that circumstances and attitudes have not been particularly congenial to us, but she was having none of it.”

“She doesn’t really let much stand in her way.” Myka isn’t sure, as she says this, whether she’s trying to console herself, reassure Helena, or simply state a universal truth.

“Nor do you,” Helena says. She doesn’t turn her head, but she looks a sidelong smolder at Myka. “You certainly removed my dress very quickly.”

“You’re a fine one to talk, you with your ‘not too leisurely,’ with your ‘fast.’” But Myka runs a finger down Helena’s chest, neck to sternum. She is pleased to see Helena shift her hips, possibly involuntarily.

Helena responds with an answering caress, a brush of her fingers against Myka’s face. “Well, I’m older now. I don’t have the stamina I once did.”
Myka coughs, but this time it is to cover a snort of disbelief. “Stamina?”

“I’m over forty, Les Paul,” Helena says. She sounds very serious, even as she says the nickname.

Myka doesn’t bother to cover the snort this time. “Stamina. Honestly?”


Myka gives in too. “I couldn’t help myself either.” She reaches for Helena again, saying, “And I can’t now. Is it all right?”

Helena slides easily into her arms. “Always.”

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Myka wakes up suddenly, to morning light from her window and lamplight from the living room, and to disorientation, because she seems to have slept strangely close to one side of the bed, too close to the lamp, the clock, the stack of books on the nightstand that is looming too large in her vision. She turns over, ready to move over, back to the middle… and there is the most welcome surprise: Helena, asleep on her back, one arm stretched above her head, her hand tucked between the pillow and the wall against which it rests. Her face is soft, her jaw slack, and in relaxation she appears weary, older still. Her age is there to be seen, to be studied, in the gathers around her eyes, a doubled line at the bridge of her nose. The creases by her mouth. The slightly deepened furrow between her lower lip and her chin.

Every sight more beautiful than the one before: and Myka falls in love again.

Which might not be enough, she tries to remind herself. One night does not prove anything. Years ago, she had thought one night proved everything, but she knows better now. Helena might wake and, on seeing the morning light, change her mind. She might think of Immigration and all that she has, now, to lose, and she might decide that this overwhelming yet tentative rebeginning is not worth the risk.

But until Helena wakes up, she has not changed her mind. And as much as Myka wants to uncover her body again, to cover her mouth, she tells herself to be content with, to savor, the sight of Helena’s chest rising and falling beneath the sheet—the threadbare sheet, and I need new sheets, Myka now tells herself in something like panic, if she’s going to be here again, which she might not, but if she is, everything she touches should be as beautiful as she is.

But right now be content to lie next to the woman who fell asleep just after having murmured, in response to Myka’s whispered was that all right, was it good, “It’s a good start, isn’t it.”

Not much time at all passes before Helena blinks herself awake. “Good morning,” she says. Her voice is a rumbled husk left over from the night, and she seems to feel that the daylight is too bright for it. She clears her throat and says, now, “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that you had better not make me wait eight years this time to wake up with you again.” That was not precisely what she had meant to say… but it was precisely what she had been thinking. And really, why try to hide it?

She is relieved when Helena smiles and says, “Agreed.” She is so relieved that she leans over and kisses Helena’s cheek; Helena tousles her hair and now says, a bit more seriously, “But it’s going to be difficult.”

“What is?” Myka asks, wishing that she could ignore what Helena means. “Making sure I don’t
tire you out with all my youthful stamina?” When Helena starts to explain, Myka says, “No, I understand. I wish you and Christina lived here in D.C.”

“I wish you lived in New York,” Helena says.

“Okay, so those things aren’t true. So what do we do?”

“To begin with, I am planning on not letting you out of my sight today, but that doesn’t affect how we wake up. Christina and I have to go back tonight.”

Myka is very, very tempted to start saying “no” to this—not weeping, just denying. But she says instead, “That makes me very unhappy. When can I come to New York to see you?”

“Or I should be asking when we can come here to see you.”

“It’s easier for me to travel. I don’t have to bring a daughter and a violin. Oh, and I also won’t have to buy new sheets.” Helena raises her eyebrows, and Myka goes on, “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but these? Have seen better days.”

“Have they?”

“Well, they’re pretty old—”

Helena sits up on her elbows and looks back down at Myka, severely. “We are in them. We are in them together. What exactly are the better days they have seen?”

Myka opens her mouth, closes it. “You make a surprisingly good point,” she finally says. “Thank you. And I suppose you’ll just have to put up with the sheets I have, then, whatever their state.”

Myka doesn’t want to bring her next thought up, but it needs to be said. “Will it be… I mean, I can stay in a hotel.”

Helena, still severe, says, “That does nothing to address the waking-up situation. Of course you’ll stay with us.”

“I don’t want to upset Christina. I really don’t. And even when we go back to Abigail’s today; I don’t want to confuse her, either. So if you—”

“I don’t think you need to worry so much,” Helena says. “The music business, in this country, is interesting in this regard. There is a certain bohemian bent. Not openness, precisely, but… Christina understands that some people we know have special friends, and that it is polite to inquire after their special friends. In the same way that it is polite to inquire after someone’s wife or husband.”

Myka smiles at that. “So can I be your special friend?”

“Mm. Don’t get ahead of yourself.” But she says this with a smirk that Myka recognizes. “I’ll certainly make clear to her by the time you visit that you are extremely special to me, but she’ll most likely understand perfectly well the minute we walk in Abigail’s door. She’s an intuitive one. Generally when I would prefer her oblivious, but there isn’t much to be done about that.” She leans over Myka, kisses her briefly. “No matter what happens, we’ll have to hide each other from so many people. I would rather not have to hide you—hide us—from her too.”
The feeling that is trying to push its way out of Myka’s chest: she remembers this feeling. It is happiness. It is happiness to lie in bed with Helena, for a few more minutes, to lie in bed together and know for the first time, know with certainty, that there will be a next time, because: “Two weeks,” Helena says. “Can you come two weeks from now and stay the weekend? If that’s too soon, I’ll understand, but I—”

“Two weeks,” Myka tells her.

They bathe, dress; Myka decides that since it is Sunday and she will probably only be going to Abigail’s and visiting hours at the hospital—and then, she curses, the train station—she will wear her one pair of capri pants. They are vertically striped, and they make her look still taller than she is, such that even Pete sighs and says that if his mom had only forced him to drink milk as a kid, he could’ve got tall too.

Helena emerges from the bathroom wearing Myka’s robe. She looks at Myka in her capris and says, “How is it that I can ever forget your height? Because evidently I do.”

“It’s the pants,” Myka groans. “I shouldn’t wear them. All I get is jokes about giraffes on stilts.”

“They remind me, though, of something I thought I should tell you: Christina now regularly wears a pair of denim overalls.”

Myka can’t help but grin at this news. “Does she?”

“They were handed down to her by her friend Mike Lookofsky. Well, by Mike’s mother, Helen, but Christina is certain that Mike himself decided they would suit her.” Myka’s smile widens, and Helena nods. “Yes. We will apparently be marrying Mike when we are of age.”

“How does Mike feel about this?”

“Mike may not be of precisely the same mind. He is eleven, and I believe he thinks of Christina as an additional, and additionally annoying, little sister, rather than as a fiancée.”


“Yes. My daughter is in love with a much older man.” She glances at Myka and smiles. “But I believe her mother is in love with a much younger woman. So it evens out.”

“Does it?” Myka asks.

“Yes,” Helena tells her.

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Over the next two weeks, Myka will take out and polish many, many moments from the night and the morning—Helena sleeping, Helena saying she is in love, Helena explaining the strings on a Drifters record, even Helena trying to pull away because she thinks it might be the right thing to do. But one occurrence will, eventually, stand out: Helena has nearly finished dressing, and wordlessly, she turns her back to Myka and lifts her hair from her neck. Myka goes to her and zips her dress up, from the small of her back to the nape of her neck. She drops a kiss on that neck, then moves away. Helena lets her hair fall. The scene is natural, the communication tacit. And it is not until later that Myka will think on these short seconds, but when she does, she will see, suddenly, that that was the world opening out before them, showing her a brief, beautiful glimpse of everything they may have been given a second chance to be.
Myka gives Helena a quick kiss as they stand on Abigail’s porch after ringing the doorbell. Helena just smiles as they hear Abigail yell “Come in!” They shed their coats (Helena into and out of her coat, Myka thinks again), and in the dining room they find Christina, Abigail, Pete, Steve, Liam, Leena, and a girl Myka doesn’t know, all seated at the table, eating Eggo waffles.

“I’d offer you two some waffles, but Pete ate half a box by himself,” Abigail says. “I mean I couldn’t ever have fed this many people, you know that, but Steve and Liam had some at home, and they called Leena and she had a box too. This is Claudia. She’s Joshua’s little sister, and I am unclear as to how I feel about seeing her today, particularly since she didn’t bring any frozen waffles to the party. But anyway, what’s important is that this is kind of her first date with Leena, so be nice. I think that gets you up to speed.”

Claudia says, “I am really really sorry about the waffles.” Myka suspects that if Claudia sticks around, she will be showing up to every event with a box of Eggos, just to stay on Abigail’s good side.

“Hi, Mom,” Christina says serenely. She is sitting at the head of the table, and Charlie Barker is beside her chair, squirming with adoration.

“Hi who?” Helena demands.

Abigail says, “That’s kind of my fault, okay all my fault, given that I told her to go ahead and try it out, but in my defense, she says her boyfriend Mike calls his mother ‘Mom.’”

“Her friend Mike is American.”

“You two are staying till tonight! If I could make an idiot Taiwanese agent into a Chinese peasant in six weeks—which I could, by the way—making some kid into an American in twenty-four hours is like… getting Charlie, or Pete, interested in food. By which I mean—”

“Hi Myka,” Steve interrupts, around a bite of waffle. Liam waves his fork at her, as Leena and… Claudia, that’s right, Leena and Claudia smile. More at each other than at anyone else.

Helena says softly, “Which of your friends is which?”

“You sort of know Steve,” Myka says.

Now Steve waves his silverware. “Hi, Helena.” He then looks at Myka and raises his eyebrows in a way that only he has a right to, in this particular situation, a way that leavens genuine happiness with a bite of distrust. It conveys the very clear message we will talk later.

“He’s your gentleman friend,” Helena says. “Of years ago.”

“Right. And this is Liam, his gentleman friend. And this is Leena. Liam’s sometimes Leena’s gentleman friend, the same way Steve is, or was, mine.”

“This is slightly confusing,” Helena says.

Leena says, to Myka, “Her?”

Myka nods. “Her.”

Leena says, “Okay.” She smiles again and nods, and it really is okay.
Helena looks from Myka to Leena and back again, and she begins to develop a focused, fox-at-hunt aspect, her shoulders rising slightly… in response to which Myka wants to start laughing and never stop. “Are you really here?” she asks Helena. “Am I just making this entire thing up inside my head?”

“Perhaps you are. I told you last night, I’m not a philosopher.” She’s distracted, which was part of Myka’s goal.

Abigail remarks, “Personally, I’d like to think that if you were going to make something up, you’d be nicer to Miss Calder.”

“I would,” Myka says. And she would, because that is the wrong note: that Artie and Miss Calder are not here. Artie would be shaking his head at everyone, and Miss Calder would… be Miss Calder. She would shake her head at everyone too.

Abigail shrugs. “Must be real then.” She gestures toward the kitchen. “You really should eat something. I have Sugar Frosted Flakes hidden in the bottom cabinet, behind a bag of rice. You could have some of those.”

Now Pete’s the focused one. “You have Sugar Frosted Flakes?”

“And that’s why they’re hidden,” Abigail announces. She points at him. “But they’ll be in a new place tomorrow, so don’t you mess up that cabinet looking for them.”

Helena stops and kisses Christina as she and Myka head to the kitchen. Christina looks up at her, and Helena says, “‘Mom’? Really?”

Christina gives a passable imitation of both Abigail’s shrug and her accent: “Abigail says I’m an American now.”

“Miss Cho may be a brilliant worker of miracles,” Helena says, “but she does not bestow citizenship. Or green cards, for that matter.”

Abigail is unperturbed. “No, but I have friends at State and INS. Operation American as Apple Pie!”

“Operation Mom!” Christina adds.

“Operation Pie!” Pete bellows.

Charlie Barker starts barking, probably something about Operation Drop Food to Me.

Helena delicately pinches the bridge of her nose, and Myka takes her arm and hauls her away, saying, once they’ve left the chaos behind, “Operation Breakfast.” She gets out two bowls.

“Please stop,” Helena says, and then, skeptically, “Sugar Frosted Flakes? What is the matter with this country? Everything contains sugar, and Christina loves it all. To her, America is sugar.”

Myka, who has found the correct cabinet and is rummaging for the cereal, says, “My grandmother thinks it’s instant coffee.” She gets her fingers onto the cereal box and emerges, triumphant, offering it to Helena.

Helena looks at it like it might bite. “It says it contains a magic wand,” she says.

The front of the box does indeed promise a magic wand. “I guess it probably still does, if Pete
hasn’t got to it. We can give it to Christina.”

“A magic wand,” Helena says, and Myka realizes she’s made a monumental error. “A magic wand that will do what, exactly? Improve her manual dexterity? Make her hands grow large enough to at last palm a playing card? Teach her how to direct an audience’s attention? Magic wand…”

“Or we just won’t mention it,” Myka suggests.

“An excellent idea,” Helena proclaims. She takes the box from Myka, as if she does not trust her to keep the wand hidden in it, away from Christina.

Yesterday, Myka had looked at the options in her own kitchen and had decided to skip breakfast. Today, she finds herself looking at Helena gingerly holding a box adorned with a cartoon tiger, pouring cereal into two bowls, still muttering complaints about magic wands and oversugared foods. Myka goes to Helena and wraps her arms around her from behind again. “It’s a good start, isn’t it,” she says.

Helena folds the bag closed inside the box, then closes the box. She sets it down. “For one’s day? It’s a hideous breakfast.” She leans back against Myka, leans back in a way that speaks of last night; Myka feels it also murmur of years ago, in another kitchen, when she said to Helena look at how I don’t have to let go. “I don’t know what we’ll face,” Helena says as Myka holds her. “But this is a very good start.”

TBC (in a very lengthy—i.e., multipart—epilogue!)

Chapter End Notes

original tumblr tags: I would like to assure everyone, that Eggos were in fact available in 1960, I originally wanted to use Pop-Tarts, but in shocking news, they were not introduced until 1964!, I know right?, we are solid on the cereal though, also the striped pants, Operation Giraffe on Stilts is totally a go, don’t mind me, I am a little bit exhausted
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

Here is the thing: as will come as a shock to Absolutely Nobody, this epilogue is taking on a life of its own, in much the same way as the real recording session during which it is set did. Make fun of me if you like… but I take comfort in the fact that all “epilogue” really means, word-origin-wise, is “to say in addition.” I’m just saying a lot of stuff in addition, is all: while I knew what was going to happen, I hadn’t fully reckoned the extent to which Myka in particular, but Helena too, would need to process and deal and come around. I don’t know what I was thinking—these two loons are made of complication, so I had to set up some extra emotional dominoes to be knocked over. Anyway, this is the beginning of what we are laughingly calling the epilogue.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Friday, June 23, 1961, 10:15 pm

Myka figures that if she counts the summer of 1960, she has spent very close to a full year making biweekly trips to New York. She can navigate certain parts of the city with confidence now; she even feels competent on the subway, sometimes, though she is, still, almost always happy to leave it behind and take to the sidewalk, even in winter. Tonight, this summer night, she is striding along the sidewalk of West 54th, heading for the brick-and-stone building that houses Bell Sound Studios. She is unsurprised to find this part of town still jumping: plenty of bars and cafés are open for the recording-industry personnel who seem to do nothing but allow themselves to be moved like chess pieces around a five-block radius of offices and copy rooms, tiny composing cubicles and cavernous studios. Sometimes when Myka’s every-other-weekend train trip—it is beginning to feel like a commute—up from D.C. ends, she will drop her small suitcase off at Helena’s apartment (“It’s easier if you have a key,” Helena had said, early on, and Myka had given Helena a key to her own apartment, “not that you need one, but…”—and these exchanges had seemed both smaller and larger, in terms of importance, than perhaps they actually were) and then meet Helena at the end of her session. “From the apartment to Broadway and Lafayette; subway to 7th,” Myka had repeated as a mantra the first time she made that particular trip. It had given her a certain sense of calm, if not peace, to focus on the route instead of the woman she would meet at the end of it.

Friday nights sessions generally last from seven o’clock until ten, and after Helena has finished playing, she and Myka will eat a quick dinner, sometimes with others, sometimes not—usually at Turf or Jack Dempsey’s, which flank the Brill Building on Broadway—then pick Christina up, tuck her into bed, and fall asleep, usually immediately, themselves. Friday sessions are exhausting for Helena, Myka knows, because they are likely to follow a full day of bookings; often the musicians stay in one studio and play and play and play, session after session, as vocalists and groups cycle through. In the nights that follow those days, Helena will maintain a sociable façade during dinner, but on the walk or subway ride to get Christina, she will sag toward Myka and offer some variation on “I am unable to play another note.” Myka will say “Ever?”, and Helena will declare her musical career unequivocally finished. And yet Myka will often awaken the next day to the sound of her practicing.

Today was to have been one of those three-session days, so Myka is hoping that this last one might
have ended a little early. As she approaches the building, however, she sees outside on the sidewalk no one she recognizes. That doesn’t bode well. This was to be a large session, albeit with not quite as many strings as the twenty-piece section Helena is sometimes a part of—several violins, however, and a couple of cellos, as well as the usual guitarists, bassists, percussionists, backup singers...

Myka sighs on Helena’s behalf and enters the building. She tells the security guard that she is meeting one of the musicians in the session for dinner, and he snorts. “Dinner? I don’t know, lady; could be breakfast instead.” Myka laughs at this, because she knows perfectly well that a session longer than three and a half hours is simply unheard of: the musicians make time-and-a-half for the first half-hour after three hours… but from then on they make double scale. It’s cheaper to book another entire session for the next day than to keep going. So fifteen more minutes, and Helena will be free. Myka tells the guard that she’ll just go upstairs, if he doesn’t mind, and he shrugs. “Doesn’t matter to me. Tell ‘em I hope they survive it, anyway.”

The second floor houses two small studios; Myka has seen one of those, and it is very small. She saw it when Helena played as the single violin on a demo version of a song, and Myka and Christina both had come to listen to her play… that had happened on Myka’s second weekend in the city with Helena. Her first weekend she had spent wondering if they would make it to a second, for everything had seemed so perfect as Helena and Christina left Washington, and Myka had honestly believed she might die of anticipation during the two-week wait, during the almost four-hour train ride, even during the moments her eyes searched the crowd of people meeting the train. Then she saw Helena, and while they could smile at each other, smile and say words about how happy they were to see each other, they both knew perfectly well, or decided at the same time, that it would be too dangerous to touch. They took the subway to the Bowery, walked to Helena and Christina’s apartment building… and all Myka could do was stand and shake her head at its stone steps, its double red doors. “I could have run into you both on the street,” she had marveled, for she and Max walked by this very building every time they went to the Five Spot, walked by it twice: once on their way to the club, and again on their way back to Chelsea.

“I’m glad that didn’t happen,” Helena had said. “I don’t think anyone was ready.”

Christina, who was holding Helena’s hand and being a bit more shy now with the tall lady she had happily hugged at the station, said, “Ready for what?”

Helena looked down. “I can’t speak for Myka. But I think I meant: ready to start.”

“What?”

Myka answered, “For now let’s say, start letting me come visit you. If it’s really okay that I’m here.”

“It’s okay,” Christina said, still a little diffidently. “If you practiced your magic trick.”

“Holding the penny is really hard for me,” Myka told her. “I think I need another lesson.”

Helena said, “Christina, you should let her use a quarter instead. Her hands are… not large, but they are larger than a seven-year-old’s.”

“Seven and a half,” Christina said.

“Nevertheless,” Helena told her.

They continued to speak through Christina like that until she went to bed, and even after that they
were still awkward, formal; Myka wanted things to be natural, as they had been before, but now, now it was, as Helena had said on the street, starting. Really starting, and Myka hadn’t considered it that way until Helena said it, but… they couldn’t touch each other at the station. They couldn’t hold hands on the street. Even without the Agency looking over anyone’s shoulder, they would still be unable to sit on a bench and share a kiss under pink flowers. So what was it that was really starting? They did go to bed together, they did find each other’s bodies with hands and mouths, but they had to be so quiet, as quiet as, even more quiet than, they had been in Germany, and Myka did not resent Christina’s presence as the reason for that, but she could not keep from wondering how much had really changed. Just because no one was being followed…

Helena had had a session on Saturday afternoon, and that was something of a relief for all of them. Myka stayed with Christina. They worked on magic: Christina was amazed to find that Myka was less of a lost cause than she had at first appeared, for the quarters made an enormous difference. “Just imagine what I could do with a silver dollar,” Myka told her.

Christina, clearly a practical girl, asked if she could keep the quarters when they were finished, and Myka had to agree that fifty cents seemed a fair price for a magic lesson that had turned out so well. “What if I give you a lesson every time you come to visit?” Christina asked. “Will you give me two quarters every time?”

“Sure,” Myka said. “But I don’t know how many times that’s going to be.” She didn’t want to get anybody’s hopes up, Christina’s for quarters, or her own for… whatever this was going to be. Or not going to be, because where was the perfect feeling of two weeks ago in Myka’s bed? Or even in Abigail’s kitchen?

“It’s okay if you don’t have two quarters. We can do a trick with just one,” Christina assured her.

When Helena came home, Myka was learning how to take a quarter from Christina’s ear. She was even worse at that than she had been at getting a penny through her palm. “I really think I’m not cut out for this,” she told Christina.

“Nonsense,” Helena said as she set her case and handbag down. “What a terrible attitude.” She walked to the sofa and, after kissing Christina hello, sat down beside Myka, leaned her head against Myka’s shoulder. “Practice,” she said.

“Is that all it takes?” Myka asked.

“Perhaps not all it takes. But I think you should come back in two weeks, and we should try it again.” Helena closed her eyes.

Myka looked down at her, at her closed eyes and her smiling, knowing mouth. She wanted to lean down and kiss that mouth, but instead she told Christina, “I guess you’re looking at another fifty cents pretty soon.”

Now Myka—many, many quarters poorer—travels up in the elevator, past the floors of offices belonging to music publishers, producers, agents, up to the top floor, the home of Studio A. She waits in the hallway outside the studio. She can tell they are playing because she feels the thump from the percussion, but other than that, very little sound escapes to let her know what is happening.

The beat ceases suddenly, and after a brief pause, people pour out through the studio and booth doors. Myka smiles at several musicians she recognizes, says “Hi Gary” to the drummer. She sees him so often that she is sure there must be a law requiring Gary Chester’s presence behind the drum kit in every session recorded in New York. “H.G.’s right behind me,” he says, and Myka
shakes her head, as she always does, at how musicians love to use nicknames. He goes on, “But don’t get your hopes up. This is just a break.”

“Is Harry here tonight?” she asks.

“Hash? No, he’s at home, lucky bastard. Decided to skip it. All the kids are over there, though.”

He means Christina, of course, as well as other musicians’, songwriters’, and producers’ children. For convenience, they may be stowed together in one home or another, under the supervision of someone’s spouse or parent or grandparent, particularly during these evening sessions; Myka once found herself in Helena’s apartment on a Saturday night with six kids under the age of ten, plus an infant. Helena was playing the session in question, and Myka’s memories of her own babysitting session are hazy, such that she is still not entirely sure that all the children were returned to their appropriate owners. “I don’t want seven kids,” she had told Helena the next day—Helena was kind enough to let her sleep in, but she was still exhausted—and Helena’s response was, “Fortunately, I have just the one.” At the time, Myka hadn’t been sure what to make of that. She is still not entirely sure.

Myka looks past Gary to get a glimpse of Studio A: it’s an enormous room, with ceilings that must be twenty feet high. No one would ever guess, standing on the street and regarding the outside of the building, that such a space could exist inside… microphones and their cords surround musical instruments throughout the room. Grand piano, drum kit, timpani, xylophone, guitars, violins, but then Myka doesn’t care anymore, because Helena is standing in front of her, smiling and saying, “Hello, Les Paul.” She clasps Myka’s left hand, but very briefly—for it is one thing for Helena’s colleagues to know, as some of them do, but it is quite another to give them something to look at. “How was the train trip?”

“Too long,” Myka tells her. “Kind of like your session?”

“Do you see that young man over there?” Helena asks. She points down the hall. “Next to Carole.”

“The one in the sunglasses,” Myka guesses. Sunglasses at ten at night… indoors… Myka is becoming more familiar with eccentrics in the music business, but… “Is he wearing a cape, too?”

“He is. Intermittently. His name is Phil Spector, and he is our producer this evening. His first session of this size.”

“Is that why you’re running late?”

“No. We are running late because he is a martinet who will not stop until he obtains a precise sound, one that he will know when he hears it.”

“You like it when people know what they want,” Myka says.

“I do. But I also like it when people finish on time so that I can greet you properly.” She smiles: an apologetic, beleaguered little twist of lips that Myka, too, wishes were meeting hers.

Myka doesn’t mean to sound quite as hopeful, quite as eager, as she does when she says, “But you’re almost finished, right?”

“I am not certain young Mr. Spector understands the meaning of that word.”

“Which word?”

“Any word, quite frankly. He is far more interested in the sound. Oh, and here we go again,” she
says as people begin drifting back into the studio. “The process of finding that elusive sound is quite interesting, I have to admit. Go in the booth and listen; we’re on tonight’s final song, at any rate.”

“I can’t do that,” Myka protests. “I’ll be in the way.”

Helena waves that off. “As I understand it, everyone is in the way tonight. I have never seen so many people in a control room in my life; no one will notice one more.” To Myka’s skeptical look, she says, “Oh, all right, they’ll notice, but it shouldn’t matter. We’re working on Carole and Gerry’s song now, and you know they won’t mind.”

Myka nods, because that is most likely true; their daughter was the infant Myka had taken care of, and she knew that that child, at least, had been handed off correctly. Helena squeezes Myka’s hand once more and turns to go back in, but Myka says, “Wait, I didn’t even ask—Christina’s okay?”

“She is. She’s with Harry and Helen, and everything’s fine. Although Mike is apparently being insufficiently attentive today—the gall of him, preferring the company of his friends.”

“Hard to imagine that in a twelve-year-old boy,” Myka agrees.

Mike is in fact very sweet, and he is far nicer to Christina than most boys his age might be. He’s certainly nicer to her than any boy ever was to Myka at that age… all of the Lookofskys are very sweet, and in the months she’s known them, Myka has nearly, but not quite, managed to get over the embarrassment of having thrown her arms around Harry the minute Helena said, “Myka, I’d like to introduce you to—”

“That isn’t usually how people respond to meeting me,” he’d laughed, and his wife, with a roll of her eyes, had agreed.

“I owe you a lot,” Myka told him.

“I think I owe you just as much. Your fiddle player here can almost keep up with me.”

“Almost?” Helena scoffed. “We’ll see how you do later this evening, old man.” Because, as it turned out, the plan was that Helena would sit in with Harry’s own combo for a bit at the Five Spot. This was Myka’s second New York weekend, and Harry and Helena both promised something special, just for her.

“Should I be worried?” Myka asked Harry’s wife, Helen.

“With those two involved? Absolutely. They probably invented a new stringed instrument just for the occasion: a tenor Lookofsky-Wells bowed ukulele.” She shook her head. “I couldn’t be happier to know her, and Christina too. But the last thing I needed was another jazz violinist. Thank god my son wanted to play the piano instead.”

“You should watch out for piano players, too,” Myka told her, thinking of Abigail.

The special something turned out to be the combo, plus Helena, playing “How High the Moon,” followed swiftly by “Ornithology.” Myka smiled the entire time; not even Max, she was sure, could have found anything, anything in the world, so wonderful: Helena, up on the club’s small stage, smiling, sparkling. Smiling and sparkling just for Myka. (“Harry says I play too much like Grappelli,” Helena confided to Myka later, “but I say it means we complement each other. Then he bemoans my lack of innovation, so I ask him precisely when he first played Charlie Parker on strings, and he has no choice but to admit that it was after 1952. So I have him there.”)

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bemoans my lack of innovation, so I ask him precisely when he first played Charlie Parker on
strings, and he has no choice but to admit that it was after 1952. So I have him there.”)
“I wish Abigail were here,” Myka told Helena when she and Harry came back to the table—Harry for a breather, Helena to stay.

Helena said, “I think Hank is a delightful pianist, so please don’t tell him I said this, but: so do I.”

“You mean the formidable Miss Cho, don’t you?” Harry asked.

“That’s right,” Myka said. “I guess I hadn’t thought about the fact that you know Abigail now too. That’s my fault; I should probably apologize.”

Harry said gently, “I’ve been sending records to her for months, but for all that time, I didn’t know those records were for you. I’m glad I know now—and I’m glad your Helena, my H.G., can give them to you herself from now on.”

That had been the first time Myka had heard Helena referred to like that, and so to cover her impulse to cry with gratitude, she asked what in the world he was talking about. “I’m apparently impossible to nickname,” Helena had said. “They wanted to call me something they found hilariously British—‘Chips’ was suggested, as was ‘Queenie,’ and if you can imagine my answering to either of those, we will be rethinking our acquaintance—but it was eventually decided that my initials could be used.” At Myka’s unspoken question, she sighed. “It’s George. Helena George Wells. Go ahead, laugh. I suppose I should be happy they aren’t simply calling me George.”

“They could try ‘this person,’” Myka offered, and Helena responded to that very helpful suggestion by saying “impossible to nickname” again.

Now Myka is standing in the rear of Studio A’s control booth, where nineteen people are telling Phil Spector what he should do. He is in turn ignoring them all. He leans forward, holds down a button on the intercom to the studio, and says, “H.G., I need a violin. Stand up.” Helena stands. “Try it that way. Geno, one step back from your mic.” Gene Pitney, the singer, takes the instructed step. “Right. Let’s tape this one.”

The song begins with two strikes of the timpani, accompanied by an “oh woo” from the deepest-voiced backup singers. Gary then starts, as do the piano and guitar players, with other singers crooning “dip dip” and other nonsense doo-wop syllables. Gene Pitney—who looks like he would be perfectly at home, age-wise, with Myka’s students—takes a huge breath, his head turned away from the microphone, then turns toward it and unleashes a higher voice than Myka had expected. “I hardly ever thank the stars above,” he sings, “for sending me your very precious love.” He goes on, and Myka dares a look at Spector. She now has a guess as to why he wears the sunglasses: so no one will have any idea if he is pleased or displeased.

The verse ends: “Oh no darling… only with every breath I take.”

Helena and the rest of the strings begin to play for the second verse. Helena glances at the booth. Myka knows she’s too far back for Helena to see her, but she likes that Helena likes that she’s there. She wonders whether, if for some reason Helena were in her classroom as she led a graduate seminar or delivered a basic lecture on Russian nouns and verbs, she would be able to concentrate on anything at all… maybe. If Helena can play with that smirk on her face, that smirk that Myka knows perfectly well is for her, then surely Myka could talk about the instrumental case. Skripka, she imagines telling the students. Violin. Feminine noun. And if we want to use this violin in the instrumental case, if we want to play music with the violin? Skripkoy.

And with her violin in the instrumental case, Helena—along with the other strings too, of course—eventually starts to play a part of the song that seems to be in the right place for the bridge, but that
Myka realizes is an instrumental version of the verse. Instrumental case, instrumental verse. Myka blinks to make sure her eyes are open and considers that she might be a little tired.


“I’ll be standing over it!” Helena complains.

“That’s the idea,” Spector tells her.

They start again: boom-boom on the timpani, oh woo from the singers. “I hardly ever thank the stars above…”

*Friday, June 23, 1961, 11:55pm*

“Five minutes,” Spector says. He lets his cape fall to the floor, then lets himself fall into a chair and tilt it back, looking for all the world like he’s taking a nap behind those sunglasses.

Everyone else bursts out of the rooms again, and Helena grabs Myka by the hand when they meet in the hall. She looks around, says “aha!” and pulls Myka after her, toward the emergency exit stairwell. “I can’t move this fast,” Myka complains.

“We have only five minutes,” Helena reminds her.

They reach the stairwell, close the door behind them, and just like that: they are alone in a space that was never intended for any such purpose, but Myka cannot bring herself to care at this moment, because they have… four minutes left for a proper greeting. The first kiss after two weeks is usually just a bit self-conscious, but this time they must be too tired to be ill at ease; they fall against each other unceremoniously, just two bodies and mouths that want nothing more than to be together.

“You should go back to the apartment,” Helena says breathlessly. “As this is clearly never going to end. I can see that you’re tired.”

“No, not unless you think I should go get Christina. I want to find out what happens.”

Helena exhales, a small *oof* of sound. “You’re the only one. I want to go home, and so does everyone else.”

“Phil Spector doesn’t want to go home,” Myka points out.

“Phil Spector wants… actually, I’m not sure what he wants. Other than to pay a great many musicians large sums of money.”

“You’re getting very interested, though,” Myka says, because Helena’s focused attention is unmistakable, “in what he’s trying to do, whatever sound he’s trying to find. I saw it when he made you stand over the microphone.”

“Yes,” Helena says. “And then he had me sit back down.”

“I know, I saw that too. I also saw you looking at me, or where you thought I might be. You need to get that smug look off your face before people who aren’t clued in start getting ideas.”

Helena pouts, “But you know it helps me play to think of you!”

“Not like that,” Myka warns.
“And yet I’m also thinking of the fact that Phil Spector is keeping me out of my bed, and keeping you out of my bed.” She leans to kiss Myka again.

Myka tells herself she really needs to pull back, really needs to… she is a magnet trying to detach itself by sheer force of will from metal, but she eventually gets her mouth free and says, “Stop it. I’m pretty sure it’s been five minutes, and I certainly don’t want you to hold them up.”

“If I’m lucky, he’ll fire me,” Helena says, chasing Myka’s mouth again.

“I think he likes you. You’re the one he keeps telling to stand up.”

“And sit back down. Kiss me again.”

“Stop stalling,” Myka tells her. Helena sighs theatrically, but she accedes.

Back in the booth, Carole beckons to Myka. She says, “I called Harry. The kids are all fine—out cold.”

“Lucky them,” Myka says. Carole, too, is young enough to be a college student… and yet here she is, at nineteen, writing and arranging hit songs, married, with a child.

Helena is more than twenty years older than Carole King, but she has spoken more than once to Myka of how insightful the girl is, how musically astute. “She reminds me a bit of Abigail,” Helena said once. “In that ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ session in particular: she was determined to create that record to her specifications and no one else’s. She was eighteen years old! She had never written a string arrangement before! And yet it is astonishing—I can’t imagine the record, or even the song, without the strings. It seems to me that the lyrics ask, will you still love me? And the strings answer, emphatically, yes.” She had raved, too, about the session itself: “One of the best experiences I’ve had… I believe we women may even have outnumbered the men in the studio that day. My feelings were influenced by the strings’ importance, of course, but even so. I will never forget young Miss King muttering about the timpani, then throwing that poor man out and taking over the mallets herself.”

“You should do that,” Myka had said without thinking.

“Do what? Play kettledrums? The fellow from that session aside, there are many skilled—”

“Produce records. You could do it.”

Helena smiled. “I’ve told you in the past that I’m not a philosopher. Nor am I a producer: I play the violin.”

“I know. But is it what you want to do for the rest of your life?”

Helena hadn’t answered. But she did give Myka an extremely thoughtful look.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original tumblr tags: the epilogue commences, I really honestly want everybody's thoughts and actions to make sense, and I realized I was giving some things very short
shift, and it might also have a little bit to do with the fact that, I don't want to let them go yet, p.s. Carole King is a genius, she seriously was 18 years old and in one night created her first string arrangement, oh and also was like 'dude your timpani playing is not the droid I'm looking for', and took over, so really it is not hard to see, why one HG Wells of our acquaintance might have an in-character response of thinking her an okay person
This, while long, is not yet the end. These are some of the emotional dominoes mentioned earlier… they are big, the dominoes. Anyway, whatever. At this point, either you dig this or you don’t.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Saturday, June 24, 1961, 12:30am

Helena is standing over the microphone again. Yet another microphone extends down from a boom high above her head. From the angle at which Myka, inside the booth, is watching her, she looks to be trapped between malformed metal hands that threaten to close and crush her at any moment. She is not directing her gaze toward Myka now, not even in Myka’s theoretical direction, and she is not smiling, smugly or otherwise; instead, she is intently watching Gene Pitney, for she and the other strings have been instructed to begin *precisely* when he starts to sing the second word of the second verse, and Spector doesn’t care if he’s off the beat or on it, ahead or behind, inside or outside, that’s when they are to start.

So that’s when they start: “And *every* time we have to be apart,” he sings, and *every* seems to swell.

“He was a little ahead,” Carole whispers to Myka. “Phil won’t like it.”

“I hardly ever find you in my heart,” he sings on.

“No. Too much, strings,” Spector says. “You’ll get your turn. Keep it down till the middle eight.”

They go again. Pitney makes it to the third and fourth lines of that second verse: “And when it comes to thinking of, the thought of losing all your love—”


“If I could rewrite those lines,” Gerry Goffin now mutters to his wife. “‘Thinking of the thought.’ What the hell thought was *I* thinking of? Why’d you let me get away with that?”

“You were in a hurry,” Carole consoles him. “But if you get it into your head to change it now? If you bring this thing to a screeching halt? Everybody here will want to kill you, and I won’t even try to stop them.”

Myka says, “I have a friend who’s translating some of Anna Akhmatova’s poetry from Russian into English. He’d probably appreciate running into something as straightforward as ‘thinking of the thought’… actually he’d probably start raving about how avant-garde it was.”


Myka would already have brought Max around, if he’d come to New York, but he hasn’t been back in the States at all. He’s kept Myka busy, though; he regularly sends her translations he has in
progress, so she can cast her critical eye over them, and he pushes her to reciprocate. In the fall he’d been working on more Tertz, and he’d sent her a short-story manuscript three weeks before Christmas, asking her to check him, “because I love that he is attempting to write what may be a conversation with God, but it is narrated in alternating first and second person and I cannot possibly be doing it justice, Myka!” He concluded his letter with, “If you could get this back to me by early January I would die of happiness!” Myka was sure that one day she would pick up a newspaper and see the headline, “*Doctor Zhivago* Translator Max Hayward Dead, Tragic Victim of Excessive Happiness.”

She was in fact not excessively happy to have received the manuscript, for she had been planning to take something like a real vacation: Helena had invited her to spend Christmas in New York. She was to arrive on Saturday the 17th and stay for two weeks… after which she had to go back to Washington and hurriedly plan for the next term’s start, the day after New Year’s. For those two weeks, however, she had intended to think not a word of Russian—not academically, at any rate. But it was Max, so she took the manuscripts, both the Russian and the English versions, with her.

She started reading the story in Russian on the train, and its shifts in pronouns and perspectives made her head spin. She wanted to send it back to Max with a note saying “I am dying of confusion rather than happiness.” But when she tried again the next afternoon, sitting on the sofa with Christina, who had a book of her own, and listening to Helena practice, she had to admit that excessive happiness was increasingly likely to bring about her own demise, regardless of the contents of the manuscript.

Christina kept sneaking glances at the pages in Myka’s hands. “Do you want to see the story I’m reading?” Myka finally asked. Christina nodded and scooted closer. She leaned against Myka’s side and squinted at the Cyrillic.

“Why can’t I read it?” she asked.

“It’s in Russian, and that’s a different alphabet,” Myka said. “Look, here’s the title. You say that ‘Ty i ya.’ That means ‘You and I.’ This is part of what I do: I read things in Russian and translate them into English. Your mom can do that, too. Didn’t she ever tell you?” Christina shook her head.

Myka called to Helena, “You’ll teach her magic but not Russian?”

“Magic was easier,” Helena said, letting her bow hand fall. “So would the violin be, if she had the slightest bit of interest.”

Myka declared, “Christina, it is time for your first Russian lesson.”

“Will I like it?”

“I have no idea. But you won’t have to pay me fifty cents, no matter what, okay?” At Christina’s nod, she pointed at Helena’s violin. “That thing your mom plays? Skripka.”

“Skripka?” Christina repeated.

“Da.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means yes.” They worked through “nyet,” “pozhaluysta,” *please*, and “spasibo,” *thank you*.

“What’s this?” Christina asked, picking up her book.

“Kniga.”
She pulled at one page of the Tertz manuscript. “This?”

“Paper? That’s bumaga.”

Christina pointed at Myka’s hand. “What about that?”

“Hand is ruka,” she said.

“No. I mean these.” She ran a thin Wells finger along the top of Myka’s right hand, tracing red ridges, white valleys.

“Shramy.” Scars.

“What are they from?”


“What does that mean?”

Helena said, quickly and loudly, “It means, do not pry into other people’s affairs.”

“But it isn’t other people,” Christina said. She tucked both her hands around Myka’s right arm. “It’s Myka.”

Before Myka—or Helena, judging from the look on her face—could begin to consider that fully, the telephone rang. Helena set her violin in her chair and went to the kitchen to answer. Myka heard her say “hello,” then “yes, she’s here,” followed by, “I see.”

She came out and said, “It’s Artie. Your parents are trying to reach you, and he didn’t know whether he should tell them where you are.”

So Myka told Artie it was fine, that she would call her parents; she had been foolish not to let them know where she’d be, because now there would be questions about why… she should have said she was visiting a friend in New York for Christmas. That way everyone would have been happy.

But then she called, and no one was happy, because where she might have been intending to spend Christmas was not at all relevant: her grandfather had had a heart attack and was in the hospital. He was not expected to live much longer, and he had asked to see Myka. He had also asked to see his brother, Myka’s mother said, and when Myka pointed out that his brother had been dead for at least twenty years, her mother informed her that that was not the point, that the family would appreciate her boarding a train and coming home.

Myka looked at Christina and Helena, sitting on the sofa together, waiting for her to tell them what was happening. Two weeks. Her grandfather. Russian lessons. Russian lessons, and home. “All right,” Myka said. “I’ll leave as soon as I can. The next train.” She did not mention that it would be leaving from New York.

She told Helena and Christina, told them that she was so sorry to be missing their Christmas. Christina exclaimed, “But that means you won’t be able to come to the Stars of Christmas program at the planetarium. They play Christmas carols and you see the stars that were in the sky when the Wise Men went to Bethlehem. And then we get hot chocolate and come home.”

“It’s true that that is what we did last year,” Helena said. She didn’t look at Myka. “But we could try something else this year. The Nutcracker at the New York City Ballet, perhaps.”
“It’s a tradition,” Christina said solemnly.

Now Helena did look at Myka. “Well, if it’s a tradition.”

“Because if it’s a tradition,” Christina said, “we can do it next year too, and then Myka can come.”

Helena didn’t move her eyes away from Myka’s. “That is an excellent plan.”

Myka had not yet unpacked her suitcase. She must have known, somehow, and the knowledge must have kept her from unpacking. Her toothbrush, that was all. She changed back into her traveling suit, put her weekend wear back into the suitcase. Helena watched her, in the bedroom. In the bedroom that was supposed to be theirs, together, for two weeks.

“Don’t come to the station with me,” Myka said. “I want to kiss you goodbye, not get on a train and watch you disappear and wish I could have touched you.”

They kissed once, sweetly. Helena said, “How can it have been so short a time?”

“Since I got here?” Myka asked, kissing her again, their mouths open, lingering.

“No. Well, yes, but—since October. When I think that we hadn’t… that we weren’t…” Helena seemed to run out of words, leaving her looking at Myka, as if there had never been a time when she could not, did not, do that, and Myka could have stayed, could have opened her suitcase and taken her toothbrush out again—taken out the nightgown she had had no chance to put on last night, and she thanked heaven for that at least, that they had wanted each other so much that they could not be patient, because otherwise—otherwise, Myka did not see how she could have left this bedroom. “We have two whole weeks,” she had said in the night, trying to pretend that she had that patience, but Helena said, “It’s been two whole weeks.” Two weeks. That was all Myka had wanted for Christmas, all she might ever have wanted for Christmas.

Helena pulled Myka’s head down to hers. “I know you have to leave, so hurry and go, before I tell you I won’t let you,” she said. “And I must let you, because I am in your grandfather’s debt.”

“You are?” Myka suspected that she looked as surprised as her grandfather might, at such a statement.

“Both your grandparents’ debt. If they had not taught you their language, you and I would never have met. I’m sure you shouldn’t give them my regards, but I would thank them, if I could.”

“Causes…” Myka said softly, and Helena kissed her again. But Myka could not keep from thinking of all the things that would never have happened.

At the door, saying final goodbyes, Myka lifted Christina and held her on her hip—because Christina reached her arms up, and though Helena protested that Christina was too big to be carried anymore, Myka could manage it—and kissed her cheek. “I’m so, so sorry I’m going to miss the planetarium.”

Christina whispered, “I’m sorry too. And so is Mummy, I mean Mom. And I’m sorry that your grandfather isn’t well.”

“Me too. For all kinds of reasons.”

“Please tell him I hope his health improves,” Christina said, still quietly.

Myka smiled and said to Helena, “Do you teach her to say these things?”
“Yes I do,” Helena said.

“These things,” Myka said. She shook her head. “These things, but not Russian.”

Helena ran her hand over Christina’s head, then down Myka’s arm. “Is the raising of a child to be polite troubling to you in some way?”

“Not to me, no. But it might be troubling to her, in relation to the other kids on the playground.”

“They sometimes say I talk funny,” Christina confided.

Helena arched an eyebrow at Myka. “And Russian will certainly help with that.”

Myka couldn’t help herself: with Christina still in her arms, she leaned to Helena and kissed her again, kissed her in a way that she hoped meant something like what she did not yet know how to put into words that made any sense together: home. Russian lessons. Two weeks. Family.

Colorado Springs was colder than Myka’s body remembered, and the hospital seemed colder still. She sat in her grandfather’s room and held her grandmother’s hand as the doctor explained to the family that they were doing everything they could for the old man, but that his heart was weak. Myka took over translation duties from her mother and told her grandmother what the doctor was saying, and her grandmother shook her head at her husband. She told him that if his heart was so feeble, he must not really have loved her, all this time. Such a fraud. He smiled and pretended to sleep through it all.

For several days, he did not improve, but he did not worsen, either. On Christmas day, Myka placed a collect call to Helena, because Helena had said she could, because she wanted to hear Helena’s voice, because she didn’t want Christina to think that she wasn’t thinking about her.

Christina answered the phone, accepting the charges in a very mature voice, but upon hearing Myka say “Hi, Christina,” she dropped the adult façade and shouted, “Thank you for the chemistry set! Mr. Harry and Miss Helen and Mike gave me backgammon, but I like the chemistry set best! Here’s Mummy, I mean Mom!”

Myka heard a clunk, then a sigh. Then Helena’s voice was in her ear, saying drily, “Oh yes. Thank you so very much for the chemistry set.”

“It’s what she said she wanted!” Myka protested.

“She just likes saying the words ‘chemistry set.’”

“I like hearing her say the words ‘chemistry set.’”

Helena warned, “When the apartment explodes, you will not like hearing me say the words ‘I told you so.’”

Myka smiled. “I like hearing you say any words at all. Those won’t bother me.”

“You are as silly as Christina says I am,” Helena told her. “But I suppose I am as well, because as evidence? I’m sure you noticed that I forgot to give you your present. To take with you, for today.”

“It’s all right.” She paused. “Do you like yours?”

“I thought I would wait to open it. Until you’re here, and I can give you yours. Christina of course couldn’t wait.”
“Of course not.”

Helena said, and Myka could practically hear the head-shake in her voice, “A chemistry set. What were you thinking, Les Paul?” But she was smiling, Myka could hear that too.

“I was thinking that I… I don’t know what I was thinking. I’m just glad she’s happy.”

“So am I. But more importantly, how are you? How is your grandfather?”

“No change,” Myka said. She tried to make it sound light, but it came out heavy.

“I’m sorry. I wish I could help. But please know that you are very much on our minds.”

“That does help,” Myka said. “I should let you go now—this call is going to be so expensive.”

“I don’t care. Call me whenever you need to. I mean it.”

“Okay,” Myka said, and after their goodbyes she hung up quickly, lest she start to cry in earnest… she breathed out one sob, just one, and then she stopped herself.

But Tracy overheard. “Who were you talking to?” she asked.

Myka brushed at her eyes. “Just someone I know.”

“Is there something you want to tell me?”

“No,” Myka said quickly. Then she said, “Maybe someday.” She hadn’t meant to say that out loud, but Tracy married, and particularly Tracy with her son, was so different than the Tracy she had known years ago. Tracy was quieter now, more thoughtful. She’d relearned some Russian, enough to truly surprise Myka, and she said it was because she hoped Robert, now two years old, would learn it too. “It’s easier for him, though,” Tracy said. “He just thinks it’s more words to say, I guess like we did back then. But I keep hearing ghosts.” Myka did not tell her that the ghosts did not come from the relearning: it was Russian. Ghosts were always there.

Their grandfather died the day after Christmas—died with his wife’s hand in his, died after she gave him permission: “Time to go, Leo Ivanovich,” she had said. Myka could not bring herself to think it a bad thing. Her mother did, understandably, and Tracy was troubled too, because, as she said to Myka that night at the hospital, “I don’t think Baba’s going to make it long without Deda.” Tracy had started using those names for them again, the names she and Myka had called them when they were small, because that was what Robert could manage, in his sweet toddler babble. Tracy seemed to be wrong, however, because the next morning, and then the next, there was their grandmother, up at her usual early hour, making coffee for herself and anyone else who cared to stop by her kitchen… and each morning Myka took a cup into her hand and pictured Helena doing the same and felt that familiar, strong wish, so strong that she had to close her mouth against the words “there’s someone,” followed by “and she’s beautiful.” So many things she couldn’t say, but: “there’s someone” was the most important, “and she’s so beautiful.”

Her grandmother said, as she handed Myka her coffee on the day the funeral was to be held, “You teach so many children, and yet you have no children.” She did not seem to mean it as anything other than an observation, but now Myka wanted to say the name Christina. She had no right to, and she had no room to, but now the most important thing she could not say was the name Christina.

She called New York again after the funeral.
“Are you all right?” Helena asked. “What’s happened?”

“He died,” Myka said. “And I miss you. I miss you both.”

“Then hurry and come… back.”

Myka started to say “I will,” but there was a slight delay on the line, and she realized she had spoken as Helena’s next words were reaching her. “What was that?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Helena said. “We miss you too.”

After Myka returned to Washington, she and Helena agreed that she should wait until two weeks of the term had elapsed before she came to New York again. Two days later, they agreed that that was a ridiculous idea, that a much better one was that she would travel to New York after the first week ended.

“You have to open your presents now!” Christina exclaimed before Myka even set her suitcase down, before Helena was able to close the door behind them. Having to look at two wrapped packages in the house for so long after Christmas had obviously taken its toll. Myka did want to know what Helena would think of hers: it was the October, 1950 issue of the scholarly journal *Mind*. She had Artie to thank for helping her to track down someone who subscribed to the quarterly, and she’d paid that someone, a philosophy professor, far more for this issue than it was worth, in compensation for the breaking of his heretofore uninterrupted run of issues and volumes. But it was the best way she could think of to show Helena that who she had been before, during the war and after the war, was important, that that Helena mattered. That she mattered to Myka, that she was always going to matter to Myka. And after Helena opened the box, after she had given Myka a quizzical look, she turned to the table of contents and justified every effort Myka had made: she touched her hand to the first name on that page and murmured, “He is the only other person who ever listened to me as well as you do.”

“What is it?” Christina asked.

Helena told her, “You won’t remember. But a man you would have grown up knowing, if fate had been more kind, as your Uncle Alan wrote a very important essay that was published in this volume. In a miraculous turn, Myka has found it for me.”

“So Abigail and Myka can both work miracles.”

“Miss Cho works very different kinds of miracles than Myka does. But yes, I believe they both can do that.”

“You are silly,” Myka said. “It’s a journal, not a miracle.”

Helena responded by handing Myka the other Christmas-papered box, which was much smaller than the one that had held the journal. “This seems a completely inadequate gift after that, but I did try.”

Tonight—this morning, now—in a studio control booth, Myka looks at the watch on her wrist. It displays, in addition to hands that tell hour, minute, and second, a dial that shows the phases of the moon. “So you will always know,” Helena had said, rolling her eyes at herself, “how… well. How high the moon.”

Now Myka tells herself to stop looking at her watch, because she knows how high the moon is, and because the impatience she feels at being unable to look at that moon with Helena, or ignore that moon with Helena, is certainly not going to be what convinces Phil Spector that he has found his
sound.

Saturday, June 24, 1961, 1:15am

Myka and Helena are kissing in the stairwell again, this time sitting side-by-side on the top stairstep. “Five minutes at a time is not at all what I had envisioned,” Helena complains.

“I hope this is better than what usually happens when you take five during a session.”

“The reward should be better. What’s happening in that room is torture.”

“No,” Myka says, as mildly as she can, but the word has brought her up short. “It really isn’t.”

That makes Helena stop. She says, “You’re right. I’m sorry,” and she tucks herself under Myka’s arm and leans her head against Myka’s shoulder in a gesture of submission, of contrition.

Myka tells herself that she should not hold this action against Helena, that Helena probably doesn’t remember, and even if she does, she certainly doesn’t and shouldn’t dwell on, how very likely it still is to remind Myka of a weekend she would much rather forget. She can’t say “don’t touch me like that.” And she tells herself that eventually, when Helena does touch her like that, her initial impulse, however fleeting, will not be to rip her arm away from Helena’s body and run.

The mid-February weekend had started simply, normally. Helena and Christina met Myka at the station; at the apartment, they ate dinner, read a chapter of Christina’s latest book (The Secret Garden, Myka remembers, because of course secrets), and went to bed… they had already planned a trip to the Natural History Museum the next day, and Myka knew perfectly well that Christina would be up with the dawn, excited beyond words. She would command, “Get your laughing out of the way!” to Myka and Helena, because they both found it difficult to think of museums without being reminded of years ago, and it was either laugh or cry, so they laughed. Christina had asked why, the first time, and Myka said, through those first tears of whatever sort they were, “Someday, when you’re older, I will tell you all about it,” only to have Helena say “You most certainly will not!”

This time, as every time, Christina asked that they go in through the 77th Street entrance, so that she could look at the Great Canoe.

“Why do we always have to start with that?” Helena asked.

“Because it’s made out of a whole tree. Also may we please go to the planetarium?”

“You always want to go to the planetarium as well.”

“It’s made out of the whole sky,” Christina said, and to her mind, that must have explained everything.

Helena shook her head. “You are the strangest of children.”

“Also because Myka didn’t get to go at Christmas, and I bet she wants to.” Her expectant look was completely irresistible.

“Of course I do,” Myka said.

They decided to save the planetarium for last, because they would be able to sit down after walking through, as Helena pointed out, or complained, “most likely the entire building.” By late afternoon, Helena proved to have been correct in that, and Myka saw that even Christina was moving more
slowly when, after the canoe and fossils and gemstones and minerals and mammals and birds and fish and every other kind of life on the planet, only the planetarium remained on their agenda.

They went to the Copernican Theater first, because Christina wanted to see the planets in their orbits.

“What is this place called again?” Christina asked Myka.

“It’s an orrery,” Myka told her.

“Why is it called that?”

Myka shrugged. “I honestly don’t know. We can look that up together, at home.”

Helena ran her hand down Myka’s arm and smiled.

And then they went to the show in the Sky Room, some production about the future and the past and the stars—Myka didn’t really care, because at last they did sit down. Helena whispered to Myka, “I’m so tired,” and because it was dark and not as crowded as it might have been, Myka said, “Here.” She offered Helena her shoulder, and Helena leaned against it, perhaps because of the word “orrery,” perhaps because it was how they had lain in bed together in the morning, in the minutes before Christina bounded in. For whatever reason, Helena lay her head on Myka’s shoulder, and Myka let herself hold Helena, there in the dark, perhaps because of the word “orrery,” perhaps because even without the word, they were going to go home together. Helena’s eyes closed, and Myka could not resist her sweetly relaxed face: she kissed the top of her head, with gratitude, with reverence. She felt her own eyes beginning to close as deep-voiced words about the beginning of the universe resonated through space itself, as the stars rose and fell and spun…

…but then her eyes opened abruptly as someone tapped—no, shoved—at her shoulder and said, “How dare you!”

“What?” Myka said, a little too loudly; she hadn’t been truly asleep, but she’d been floating just enough to be unclear on where and when she’d opened her eyes.

Heads turned toward her—toward them—and now Helena’s eyes opened, and she had been truly asleep, for she blinked and shook her head and she must have realized in that moment, before Myka did, where Myka’s arm was, how close together they were, because now her eyes, as she looked at Myka, were open wider than they should have been; then the “how dare you” voice spoke again: “Corrupting an innocent child! How can you make her look at that?”

Christina, who’d managed to stay focused on the show above them, now seemed caught by the word “child,” seemed to understand it was being used to refer to her. “Look at what?” she asked. “The sky?”

And now more people were looking, staring, and a flashlight-wielding docent was marching with importance toward the scene. He shone his light directly into Myka’s eyes, so she couldn’t see—she might as well have closed her eyes again. Myka thought for a hysterical moment that she could actually be asleep, because this was a nightmare, the kind of nightmare she had begun to let herself forget to have. She couldn’t see Helena, and she couldn’t see Christina, but she could hear a muttering, an awareness from more and more people, and if she could just yell at them to stop it, at least until Helena and Christina could get away, that would be one thing she could do. But she couldn’t yell, not into the bright light that darkened as she began to see again.
She still hadn’t found the face of their accuser, but everyone’s face, everyone’s voice now seemed the same. The docent warned, “You’d better get out of here or I’ll call the cops.” More talking, louder than whispers now, from figures she couldn’t discern; she knew she must have heard “pervert,” she knew she must have heard “queer.” She wanted to beg Helena, who now had Christina by the arm and was leading her toward the aisle by which they might finally escape, to put her hands over Christina’s ears, so she would not know, so even looking back she would never know, what people said about her mother. What Myka had stupidly, carelessly, led people to say about her mother.

Out on the sidewalk, masses of people hurried by them, as if this were nothing but the early evening their watches told them it was, as if what had just happened had not just happened, as if the terrible words were not turning into memories that pulled at Myka, the one responsible for all of it, the one whose fault everything was, the one who should never have made the mistakes she made. And of course there were tears, stupid hot tears, and she could feel her right hand pulsing at her, reminding her that everything was still the same.

Then Christina tugged on that right hand. She said, “It’s all right, Myka. People would sometimes say things to us in London, and then we would be very sad. But we don’t have to be very sad here, and you don’t either, because we can go home and eat waffles for dinner and look up an orrery to see why they call it that. Don’t forget, we have to do that.”

Myka struggled for words; none came.

Helena spoke instead. “You are absolutely correct, darling,” she said. Then she gave a small shrug and said to Myka, “It’s true. We can go home and eat waffles and look up words.”

So they went home and there were waffles and the word “orrery,” which was so called because the fourth Earl of Orrery owned the first one.

Christina thought very hard about that and eventually said, “So if I’m the first person to have something, or maybe even build it, they might name it a wells.”

“They might,” Helena told her, “were there not something already called a well. I think some people might find that confusing.”

“Could they call it a christina?”

Helena laughed. “They could. Now all you need to do is be the first person to own or build a christina, whatever it turns out to be.”

And Myka could barely participate, other than to do the physical work of turning the dictionary pages, and that only because Christina had plunked the tome in her lap and instructed, “Look it up with me!” while Helena was toasting the waffles.

Now Myka stared at a waffle, perfect and planetary on a plain white plate, while Christina proposed things that might be called christinas (“candles that stay lit all the time! a bowl that can keep your soup hot!”). Helena told her very gently that many of them had been invented and named already (“that’s essentially an electric light, darling, and I believe several people own Thermoses”), but that she shouldn’t be overly concerned because new ideas can take time to develop, that she might even dream one up while asleep. This made Christina very excited about getting to bed as quickly as possible… if this were any other night, Myka would have been smiling, and Helena would have smiled back, at the prospect of privacy sooner rather than later. But this was not any other night… not that Helena was behaving that way, not that Christina was either. Myka watched them and felt herself to be somewhere else, somewhere not in the same room, not even in the same
Myka watched as Christina brushed her teeth, got into bed, and postulated about the ideas she would dream of.

She was commanded by Christina to join them in reading another chapter of *The Secret Garden*. So she did, as if this were any other night.

But this was not any other night. When Myka and Helena were alone in Helena’s bedroom with the door closed behind them, Myka knew she had to try to say what she had been trying to figure out how to say: “I’m sorry,” she started. “I’m sorry. It was all my fault. I’ll leave and I won’t ever come back.”

Helena didn’t say “yes, that would be a good idea,” but she also didn’t say “no, don’t.” Instead, she said, “Christina told you that at times, in London, we were very sad. Do you know what she means, when she uses those words, ‘very sad’?” Myka shook her head, because she thought… she didn’t know what she had thought. Helena went on, “She means that I would break down. Because there were insults I could not withstand, troubles I could not see my way through, and in the face of those things, I would break down. That is what she remembers most clearly about being three, four, five years old—she would ask me why I was crying, why I could not stop crying, and I would say that I was very sad.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry for that, too.” That too: that, too, because now Myka understood why Christina had remembered her. She was not surprised to learn that she had been responsible for something like that. But she hated herself for having done it, for having been the cause of that, too.

Helena raised her right hand to Myka’s face. “But I don’t do that anymore. And Christina knows I don’t, and you should know it too, because it is thanks to you, for so many reasons.” Her hand fell. “If you’re afraid of what people will say to you, will say about you? Then leave me. But don’t you dare leave because you think you’ve hurt me. Not over that; don’t you dare. If you leave me over that, then everything we have lived through—yes, even today—we lived through it for nothing.”

Myka choked, “Deported. It could get you deported.”

Helena’s hands rose to Myka’s face again. “Today had nothing to do with that. Do I live in fear of deportation? Of course I do. I have to take such care not to make enemies, to be agreeable every single day, because some people do know, and I’m sure there is talk. But if you leave me? Then all of *that* has been for nothing, too.” She leaned up and kissed Myka softly. “What happened today was not your fault. You didn’t do *anything* to me.”

“I touched you,” Myka said, and she could not bring herself to touch Helena now, or to let Helena touch her. She pulled away. “I put my arm around you. I *kissed* you. How could I have done that?”

Helena smiled. “I’d like to think it’s because I’m irresistible.”

Now tears, again, because Helena *was* irresistible, because she had always been irresistible, but if time had changed nothing about that—and it had changed *nothing* about that—then it had also changed nothing about what the world thought of that.

Helena seemed to have read her mind, for she said, “I know. We have to be careful; we have to *remember* to be careful. But you make it so easy for me to forget… I look at you, and you are all I see.”

She saw the tenderness in Helena’s gaze, heard the intended reassurance in her voice. But Myka
shuddered with fear, shuddered with regret, because what Helena’s words really meant was that the problem, all along, had never been that Helena was weak, as she had claimed so many times. The problem was that Myka weakened her. Myka was the problem. Helena had said never again, and she would have stuck to that, if not for Myka… and the causes moved back again, back to Helena’s office and Myka’s hand on rough tweed, back to Myka begging Helena to put her hands on Myka’s on a violin, back to Myka’s inability to look away from a coin flashing in a hand to a song about the moon.

“Stop blaming yourself,” Helena said. “Please, stop.”

“I can’t,” Myka told her.

“Then maybe you’re right. Maybe you should leave. Until you can.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

I considered not appending my tumblr tags, because I thought they overexplained--and if I’m so incompetent as to not make things clear in the text, then I shouldn’t presume to write this in the first place... but, still, for documentary purposes, here are the original tumblr tags: Myka is still carrying around a huge ration of guilt, and it didn't seem right to me for her to be able to shed it immediately and be unproblematically happy with Helena, because she has to work (not just wait) through it, and she has to be genuinely willing to pay the price for saying she can't or won't fit into the correct boxes, and while I think she thought she understood that price, turns out no, (and she still has Alex guilt so imagine how she feels about making Christina pay too), what she is doing, in case it is unclear, is telling herself that she is protecting Helena by removing herself, when she is really protecting herself from her own fear and shame, because the minute she lets go, (and note that she has not said or thought the word 'love' in quite some time), there is no going back
Chapter 39

Saturday, June 24, 1961, 1:50am

When Phil Spector is genuinely displeased, no sunglasses can hide it. Myka is watching him try to explain to Gary Chester exactly what he wants to hear in the drum fill that follows the instrumental verse. After a nearly uncountable number of exclamations involving “thump” and “ba-domp” and “dap, dap-dap-BONK” and other no doubt highly technical terms, Spector barks at him, “Just give me two new ones!” Then he waves his hand at Helena. “H.G., last two bars of the eight, and Gary, give me an option that thumps.”

Helena obliges, Gary obliges, but Myka can’t hear much difference between what Gary just now played and what he’s been thumping and ba-domping out for the past three and a half hours’ worth of takes.

“So enough. I need something better.”

Helena plays again, Gary plays again, and this time Myka thinks she might actually have heard a slightly altered series of daps and bonks. She knows she’s right when an appreciative murmur runs through a majority of the booth, and then again when Spector’s cape streams behind him as he practically skips back into the control room to his chair at the board.

“From the top!” he orders the studio.

And it is not the whole sound: no one in either room is optimistic or foolish enough to think that, but one more piece of it seems to have clicked into place.

Into place, out of place. Myka certainly can’t blame Spector for taking his time to find what he wants—and she respects that he does recognize that sound he’s been listening for, once he hears it. She herself can’t say the same, given her history, so who is she to be impatient, to stand here in a booth and feel in any way irritated, with someone who is far more perceptive than she is.

Because after the planetarium, she had left. Helena had asked what she should tell Christina… and Myka had no answer for her. “Then don’t do this,” Helena said. “Don’t leave me.”

“You said I should, and you’re right. Whether it’s because I’m blaming myself, or because I really can’t do the right things, I have to.”

Once the suitcase was packed again, once Myka was ready to walk out the door, Helena said, “Will you come back?”

“I don’t want to lie to you,” Myka told her, and she hadn’t meant it as a slap from the past, but that was, clearly, how Helena took it; Myka watched her turn her head away. It was all the proof Myka needed: they had tried, and it was no good. The horrors of the past were buried in only the shallowest of graves, and the disaster of the planetarium had shown the living present to be just as horrific.

Helena did not meet Myka’s eyes. But she asked, “Will you kiss me goodbye?”

“I don’t want to lie to you,” Myka said again. Their bodies together: that was what had made her think this could be something other than a mistake. But it was a lie.

So she left.
The next morning she called Abigail and asked to meet. “Today?” Abigail yelped. “But you’re in New York this weekend! I’m not getting on a train or making Pete drive me—”

“I’ll be on the Mall in half an hour. Come or don’t.”

Forty minutes later, Abigail sat down on a bench and said, “This better be good. It’s freezing cold out here. Dragging me out to sit in front of some monuments in the middle of February…”

“Send me somewhere.” Abigail’s mouth fell open, and Myka thought, Abigail surprised. One more thing that never changes. And she said what she had been thinking all night. “I want to keep our deal square.”

Abigail said, “I’ve been… not asking. Because you and this person, and you needed time, I thought.”

“I don’t want to talk about that right now. I have spring vacation coming up in not too long; it’s a whole week. Do you want to send me somewhere or don’t you?”

Abigail said, in a mutter, “I shouldn’t ask questions. I should just send you somewhere.” Myka nodded. Abigail nodded back and said, “Okay.”

“Okay you won’t ask questions, or okay you’ll send me somewhere?”

“Both,” Abigail said. “Both, but only for now.”

“Don’t,” Myka warned Pete as they ate pie at Linda’s the day before she left, almost three weeks later. He was fidgeting instead of shoveling food into his mouth: twisting paper napkins into thick little bowties, blowing bubbles in his soda with his straw, drumming on the tabletop with his knife and fork.

He put on a completely unpersuasive face of pure innocence. “Don’t what? Eat this pecan pie? Them’s fightin’ words, there, prof.” But whatever he had been about to say, he swallowed along with the pie.

Moscow again, this time the Gorky Institute of World Literature. Ostensibly she was there to attend lectures on translation, and to deliver one herself: she had been working on the theoretical question of whether any translator could work equally well in both directions by asking whether she herself could take Russian as the target language. She’d asked Max about this, Max who spoke over twenty languages and read almost as many, and she could picture him tilting his head to the side, possibly even disarranging his hair, as he wrote his response to her: “I am always more comfortable in one direction or the other—never both equally! Even when neither language is English!” Myka did not yet know enough about linguistics to be grounding her thoughts solidly in theory, so she was, for the time being, writing from personal experience—and her personal experience was that English to Russian was strange and backward and she could not produce particularly readable Russian prose from, say, The House of Mirth. Or even Peyton Place—at her mention of this, the translators at the institute, who should not have known a thing about such a decadent American novel, roared with laughter.

After her lecture, which she gave on her last afternoon in Moscow, she spoke to several students, one of whom, in the course of conversation, leaned toward her and said “Sinyavsky” very quietly. Myka gave an embarrassed chuckle, as if he’d just told her the punchline to an inappropriate joke, because that was the password: Sinyavsky, Abram Tertz’s real last name. Abigail had told Myka to choose her own password—and she chose that name because who would know that Max had told her? No one would guess that name or say it to her casually. The student then asked her, more
loudly, if she would read a manuscript that he had been working on, and she said to him, in a voice just loud enough to be overheard, if anyone happened to be listening, “Not if it contains jokes like that one.” He laughed; she laughed. She took the thick envelope from him and placed it in her handbag: large for this trip, so that she could, as Abigail had told her to do, make sure that the manuscript would remain in her possession at all times.

She’d asked Abigail what it would contain, why it was so important, and Abigail just looked at her. “I don’t want to know how dirty it is, do I,” Myka said.

“It’s dirty only if something goes wrong,” Abigail said. “And as long as you keep your professorial cool, everything will be fine.”

Keeping her professorial cool was not difficult, despite the fact that the instructors and writers at the institute seemed to want to test her. They asked about Pasternak; Myka said, “He’s very popular, isn’t he.” One man told her he knew neky Hayward, that friend of dissidents, and Myka acknowledged that she did know nebezyzvestny Hayward, that she had to admit that he was a fine translator, but what he wasted his talents on!

There was also great interest in the fact that she was not married, that she traveled alone—though this was no different from home, not really. Boys and men were curious or dismissive; girls and other women found her sad or suspect. So now from these men, and the very few women she met, she heard “nezamuzhnyaya zhenshchina,” single woman, neutral but with a slight undercurrent of lascivious interest, but also “staraya deva”—spinster, old maid. She had forgotten, in the months since October, how to see herself through eyes such as these, how she was seen, when the only person whose eyes had mattered saw her as neither of those things.

One writer paid her particular attention; he fawned over her, praised her language skills. “Professor Arkady Dyatlov,” he had introduced himself, “but to you, such a lovely woman, so alone in this cold city, I must be Arkady.” After her lecture, he asked her to dinner—while also threatening with dismissal the young man who had thought to offend her with his jokes, to impose upon her with his doubtless immature, unsophisticated work—and Myka thought it would sell her cover even more solidly to accept, so she did. There could not have been a more conventional story: spinster (and she had played that card well, she was sure) goes to a foreign country with no expectation of romance, only to be dazzled and swept off her feet by a handsome stranger. Movies about that sort of thing abounded.

Two birds with one stone, in fact… sell her story about why she had come to Russia; sell herself a story about the things she could do, here and even at home. This man, Arkady Dyatlov, was just a man; he looked nothing like any of her ghosts. His hair was brown, not once-black now shot with gray, not sandy straw begging for a cut. He was nothing to her, and she was nothing to him. He put his left hand over her right, as their hands rested on the table at the restaurant: he did not remark on her scars as he covered them. She could let him leave his hand there, she thought—so she did. Now they would finish their coffee, then leave the restaurant and walk into the night—and that is what they did. He would—he did—invite her to his apartment for a nightcap; he would—and did—follow this invitation by pulling her close and kissing her, so that even this obviously, and sadly, inexperienced spinster from America would understand what he meant by such an invitation.

Two birds with one stone. She thought of the manuscript in her bag, how it could make sense to do this to help protect the student who had given it to her. He might himself be a writer or a dissident, or he might be only a courier—but he was participating in something so much larger than himself. He deserved protection.

It would make sense to do this if it were something that Professor Bering, spinster from America,
would do… but Myka did not know, could not be certain, how Professor Bering, spinster from America, should respond even to being kissed.

Apparently, not knowing how to respond was response enough. “You are thinking,” Arkady Dyatlov said. It seemed mild, this statement, not accusing, but…

“It’s difficult for me… not to think,” Myka said. Close to the truth.

He mused, with what she felt to be a very Russian masculine charm, a roughness that might easily sidestep into menace, “Perhaps this is why you are not married. You think, instead of feel, when a man kisses you.”

“Perhaps.” And then she knew what Professor Bering, spinster from America, would say: “I feel I can be honest with you. Can I be honest with you?” He nodded; he gave her what she was sure had to be a calculatedly encouraging smile. She said, “If I’m thinking, it’s about someone from the past.” The truth… so very close to the truth.

“Past is dead. I will make you forget him.”

A smile, this one from both Professor Bering, spinster from America, and Myka. “A Russian man is telling me the past is dead? That is something to think about. And as for me… I’ve tried to forget. I can’t.”

Arkady Dyatlov gave her a look up and down. He shrugged, stepped away from her, pulled a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket. “Past is dead. But I suppose you can live in it if you wish,” he said, and Myka didn’t know whether she should take offense or feel relief at his having decided so quickly that she was worth no more of his persuasive energy.

He walked her to her hotel, and once there, he did not try to kiss her again. Instead, he took her scarred hand and bowed over it. “I hope you forget someday,” he said in English.

Alone, Myka looked at herself in the mirror that hung, slightly canted, above her room’s tiny washbasin. Her face had not changed since the morning. She had expected to see evidence of, certainly to feel, some remorse, at the very least, because she had kissed someone, and that had to have meant something—but there was nothing. She might as well have kissed a chair. She could not sell herself this story, not as something she could do… because who in her right mind would take up kissing chairs? She would be feigning an interest in some esoteric hobby: This is something people enjoy, you say? How curious.

She slept with the manuscript, or whatever it was, under her pillow, and as day broke, she boarded an airplane. She flew away from Moscow, and Arkady Dyatlov, and stories she did not want to try to tell about herself.

Her body had no idea what time it was when she finally met Abigail to give her the heavy envelope. The sun had set in Washington, so perhaps she had begun her day twenty hours before? Thirty? Before she could even open her handbag, though, Abigail had trapped her in a hug. “Thank god you’re home,” she said, “and you’re okay.”

“What? Of course I’m okay. Exhausted, but—”

Abigail shook her head. “You almost weren’t. You should have heard the chatter! You went on a date with some guy? Some guy you thought was a writer or professor or whatever he said he was?” Myka nodded, and Abigail said, “Right. He’s KGB, and he thought you were one of ours.”

“I am one of yours.”
“Nobody but me knows that. But our guys caught a phone call, him telling somebody about an American woman—you—who he was going to take to his place to find out if she was really who she said she was. And if he’d found this envelope on you? You wouldn’t have come back out again. So thank god you are who you are and not somebody else, first because you didn’t go with him, and second because you obviously managed to make him buy your cover. Which I realize isn’t just a cover, but it is a cover, so thank god.”

Myka could think of nothing to say to this, other than something about it being a good idea to live in the past, so she kept her mouth shut.

“Anyway, like I said, thank god you’re home and you’re okay,” Abigail said. She’d been holding onto Myka’s arms throughout this, for her, extraordinarily emotional outpouring. Then she dropped her hands, let her shoulders fall, and said, “But also, thank god you’re home, so you can call this person and get her off my back.”

If the weather had been just a little colder, Myka would have had an excuse to end the conversation and leave. Instead, she asked, “Why is she on your back?”

“Because she couldn’t find you. Why didn’t you at least let her know you’d be away for a while? Because obviously she figured out it had to be my fault that you were gone… she didn’t put it like that, because she still remembers how to talk on a nonsecure phone to somebody like me. But hear me when I say I am sick and tired of being threatened, however obliquely, with the idea of her getting on a plane and ransacking Moscow to find you. Call her or I will kill you myself, and there will be no chatter about it at all, believe me.”

But when Myka went home, she didn’t call Helena. Myka called Steve… because he would talk her into it or out of it, and she didn’t know which one she wanted more. She was too tired to know. Steve could know for her.

“Liam’s out at a union thing till late. Come on over,” Steve told her, and then, a little while later, he greeted her at the door with, “Abigail told me somebody’s looking for you. Kind of desperately.”

“Why does she tell everyone everything?” Myka groaned. She dragged herself into Steve’s living room and collapsed onto his sofa.

Steve sat down beside her and patted her shoulder. “I’m pretty sure you’ve known her even longer than I have. Why does the rain fall from up above? Why do fools fall in love?”

“Yeah. Good question. Why do they?”

“I don’t know, fool. I told you to think twice, back in October. Before you got so involved again.”

“I didn’t think twice,” Myka sighed.

“I know; I sat here and watched you not do that. So maybe you’re doing it now.”

Myka blurted, “In Moscow I kissed a professor who it turns out was a KGB agent who might’ve wanted to kill me.”

Steve patted her shoulder again. “You have a very strange way of thinking twice.”

“I didn’t know about the KGB part. All I was thinking was, if this were something I could do, maybe it would be easier. Safer for everybody.”
“Except, apparently, for the KGB part.”

“I didn’t know.” She was saying it, and it made no sense. Maybe the truth of what Abigail had said would sink in overnight: she would wake up in the morning and be horrified. But she was too tired now to be shaken or even, conversely, relieved; instead, she felt as if she had been told that a dramatic movie she’d thought she’d sat through and understood—hadn’t enjoyed, but certainly understood—was actually an absurdist comedy.

Steve said, “Why don’t you tell me what had you looking so hard for easier and safer.”

So she did. She knew she wasn’t telling it right, because she was so tired, and he wouldn’t understand the full extent of what she had done, but she tried, planetarium, she said, and planetarium, she explained, and she thought she’d succeeded when he said, at the end, “I guess you’re right. It was your fault. Nobody would have said a word if you hadn’t done what you did.”

Myka nodded. “I know. So the best thing to do is keep it from happening again, but the only way to be sure of that was to leave. And to stay gone.”

“Listen,” Steve said. “You need to understand some things, because I don’t think you think like this: nobody ever called me a sissy when I was a kid, okay? I played Little League, I played football. Nobody thought twice about me. And I bet nobody ever thought twice about you either.”

“They said I was a tomboy. When I was little and wore overalls.”

Steve said, “Look at this suit you’re wearing: they don’t say that about you now. And I bet nobody ever said that about Helena.”

“I doubt it,” Myka said.

“So nobody can tell from looking. At either of you. So it’s only if you do something that anybody knows.”

“Right.”

“And so you’ve solved this problem, this problem of anybody being able to tell, by making sure you’re never in a situation in which you might do anything, ever again.”

“Yes! Exactly.” The way Steve had put it… that was exactly right. Exactly right.

“That’s a stupid solution,” he said—and he raised his voice when he said it, which Myka thought she’d heard him do maybe twice. In a decade.

“What? I thought you—”

“Honestly. Who does that help?”

“Her!” Myka said. “It helps her, and it helps Christina. Because otherwise, they could be deported. Helena could, I mean. I don’t even know what would happen to Christina.”

“I didn’t say there aren’t risks.” He put his hand on Myka’s shoulder and left it there. “But it isn’t a matter of solving a problem versus not solving a problem. It’s a question of whether the highs—and I know you love her, so I know there are highs—and the lows, the planetarium kind of lows, together win out over a shrug of ‘at least nobody called me queer today.’”

“That’s not the decision,” Myka said. She shook her head, and she didn’t care if it looked petulant.
One of her hairpins fell out, and she felt a curl drop against her neck.

Steve pulled on the curl. “It is the decision. And it sounds to me like she’s already made hers.”

“I don’t want to be responsible for hurting her again. I can’t take that.”

Steve said, “Liam comes to my company’s Christmas party every year. You know that, right? Everybody I work with knows we’re housemates, and nobody thinks twice about that.”

“Right.”

Steve folded his hands in his lap. “Two years ago he drank too much. Not even really a lot, just enough to feel… good. Safe. He put his arm around me—not like men do, not some brotherly hug, but around my waist. It was late, so not too many people were still there… but three clients pulled their business from us.” He paused; Myka didn’t know what to say. “How do you think I felt about that?”

“Awful?” she ventured.

“Of course. I was furious. I didn’t understand how he could be so careless. I told him that I’d been through losing my job before, and I didn’t want it to happen again. I didn’t want to have to start over, I didn’t have it in me to start over, all kinds of things. And he sat right there, right where you’re sitting, while I stormed around and yelled at him.”

“What happened?”

“He said I was right. And then he told me he’d leave if that’s what I wanted.”

“But you… didn’t want that.”

“But I did want that. Right then, all I wanted was for everything to be easy, and here he sat, making it all so difficult. I wanted him to leave and take all my queerness, all this evidence, away with him.”

“Okay,” Myka said. She sighed. “Okay. Why didn’t that happen?”

Steve didn’t answer. Instead, he went to his record player. He put on a single, one that Myka knew immediately—she heard bass, triangle, soft percussive swishes.

“You know what was great about being in Moscow?” Myka asked, and Steve shook his head. “No radios playing pop songs. No chance I’d happen to hear anything… because you dropped that needle, and there’s Lloyd, playing bass. And Gary on drums. And oh, here’s Ben, and if Ben’s singing, then guess who’s about to play some violin, just so I never ever forget? ‘Things that are difficult to articulate.’ Some days I can’t stand her.”

“Stand by me,” Ben’s voice sang, and then came the bridge, the stupid, swelling, stringed release.

“She played this for me,” Myka said.

“The record?”

“No! This bridge, on the violin. That session, that ‘Stand By Me’ session, happened the day before I went to New York, the first time, in October, to see her. And she played the bridge, because we were—because it was difficult for us, and she had said before that she thought of me, but it was different if we were together, and she was trying to show me… this isn’t even a song to me
anymore! It starts and it just sounds like some people I’ve met, doing their jobs, but then she plays, and it’s something else entirely! It’s that stupid evidence! If I believe her, if it’s right there on a record for anybody to hear? What am I supposed to do about that? What am I ever supposed to do about that?”

“Are you finished?” Steve asked.

“I don’t know what I am. Other than exhausted.”

“Yes you do: you know perfectly well what you are. You’re a fool,” he said. “But that isn’t her fault. Don’t punish her.”

“I’m not punishing her! If I’m punishing anybody, it’s me!”

“You are making my point for me. Abigail told her you were coming home today. Think for just one minute what would have happened if Abigail had had to call her and say something about a KGB agent.”

“Kissing me?”

“Killing you, Myka. You may be a fool, but you don’t have to be an idiot. How would you feel, if it were the other way around, if Abigail called you to say something about a KGB agent?”

She would feel like the world had ended. So she did not wait. She dialed Helena’s number the instant she set foot back in her apartment.

TBC
“I’m… very glad you called,” Helena said. She sounded cautious, tentative.

Of course she would sound cautious and tentative. Of course she would, and that was Myka’s fault… but Helena had told her to stop blaming herself, so she would try. She had wanted to start out by saying something light, something like, “I had to call you, because Abigail would kill me otherwise,” but Helena’s voice—her sweet, low voice, her voice that Myka wanted to hear, always—made her say, “Can you forgive me?”

And the sweetest, lowest of voices told her, “Only if you can forgive me.”

“For what?”

“Exactly.” They breathed on the line at each other, and then Helena said, “Before, when I asked if you would come back, you said you didn’t want to lie to me. How do you feel now?”

“Like I want to come back.” She wanted nothing more than that.

“Are you lying to me?”

“No.”

“Then let’s start again. Come for a weekend.”

“Just like that?”

“I… I do have one request,” Helena said, and again there was hesitation, some slight apprehension.

“Anything.” Penance, atonement, amends…

“I would like to spend a day with you.”

Myka, thrown, said, “Well, if I come for the weekend, that’s almost two days—”

“No. I mean spend a day… I mean a day with just the two of us. I don’t have any sessions scheduled yet for next Friday. I could turn down any that are offered. And I know you teach only two classes on Fridays, and those early in the day, so if you could perhaps persuade Artie or another colleague to substitute…”

“Oh. Because Christina would be in school.”

“Yes.” Helena paused. She breathed in, then out: thick currents of vibration in Myka’s ear.

Myka didn’t understand, not at all, but she said, “If that’s what you want, it’s the least I can do.”

“It isn’t so much that it’s what I want, though I do want it. I think it’s what I… need. Possibly, what we need.”

They spoke twice more before the weekend—and each time, Helena was sweet, Helena was kind—and Myka felt she was being granted clemency she hadn’t earned.
Even their meeting at the train station was far better than Myka felt she had any right to imagine, much less expect. Myka did not usually see Helena before Helena saw her, but this time she got to watch Helena’s face change from anxious to relieved, as quickly as the turning of a page. She tugged on Christina’s hand in hers and pointed in Myka’s direction. Christina’s face, however, did not change: it said that Myka had become an unpredictable, possibly dangerous animal, and that such a thing should probably be kept in a cage, where it could do no one any more harm.

Helena hugged Myka when they reached each other: “Special occasion,” she whispered into Myka’s ear, and though Myka tensed… it was fine. They were surrounded by people embracing, for all kinds of reasons.

Christina didn’t hug Myka. She said “hello,” but that was only at Helena’s urging. She said nothing more in the station, on the subway, during the walk to the apartment. Myka’s train had been late, so Christina’s bedtime had passed by the time they got there, and Christina silently brushed her teeth and got into bed. She did not ask to be read to, and she did not get out a book to read to herself. Helena said to Myka, in the kitchen, “I don’t want to make her talk to you.”

“I don’t either. But do you mind if I talk to her for a minute?”

“Go right ahead.”

So Myka went into Christina’s room and sat on the edge of the bed, where Christina lay, face up, hands folded across her chest, a thin, resentful corpse. Myka said, “I was gone a long time.”

Christina nodded.

“And I didn’t tell you goodbye before I left.”

Christina shook her head no.

“I of all people should understand that that’s a bad idea. I apologize for that.”

“I accept your apology,” Christina said softly, and Myka could hear Helena rehearsing her in that statement (“and when someone apologizes to you, what is the proper response?”). Christina then said, “But it isn’t all better.” This one, Helena most likely had not taught her.

“I know,” Myka said. “Is it okay with you if I’m still here tomorrow?”

Christina shrugged. She turned over onto her side, away from Myka.

Myka said, “I guess I’ll see you in the morning.” She thought for a second she might touch Christina just once, just to smooth her hair or grip her shoulder. But the back that confronted her did not belong to someone who wanted to be touched, so Myka left the room and closed the door behind her.

She went back to the tiny kitchen. “I apologized,” she told Helena.

“It’s a start,” Helena said, then amended, “a restart.”

“Can we? Restart?” Myka said, and in answer Helena moved closer, lifted her mouth to be met. Myka met it, with honesty, but there was something raw about it—not the kind of something that would lead to urgency, but rather to too much sensitivity. She leaned back. “Tomorrow?” she asked, or requested.

“Tomorrow,” Helena said. “But come to bed with me. I won’t have you sleeping on the sofa.”
Before she had begun to spend real, non-desperate nights with Helena, Myka had had no idea how simple and perfect it could feel to sleep, and do nothing more than sleep, with another person. She could be holding Helena close against her, or they could be on opposite sides of the bed, leaving Myka with nothing more than an awareness that Helena was there, an arm’s length or less away. And even knowing that simple perfection, she would not have thought, before tonight, to call this feeling one of the highs Steve had talked about, the highs that worked against the planetarium lows.

“Did you notice?” Helena asked into the dark.

Myka had not noticed anything in particular, so she said, “I guess not.”

“The sheets are new.”

In the morning, Myka felt, and she felt Helena felt, a buzzing of anticipation.

“How can you look so beautiful in a housedress?” Myka asked, because Helena did: a simple dress of checkered blue and white with a bit of a gather at the waist, a dress that buttoned up the front, a dress easy to get into and—Myka let herself think it—out of, a dress of worn cotton, far softer than the new sheets; Myka knew because she slid her hand along the back of the dress as Helena scrambled an egg for Christina’s breakfast.

“Stop,” Helena said, reaching back and stilling Myka’s hand. “Well, don’t stop, just… wait. Just wait.” She raised her voice and called, “Breakfast now, please, and I would like to see a clean face and brushed hair!”

Christina came to the small table, but her face was not clean. Her hair was not brushed. She was still wearing her pajamas. “I’m sick,” she announced.

“Are you,” Helena said. “With?”

“An ailment.”

Myka couldn’t help herself; she giggled. Christina looked at her and said, “Good morning, Myka.”

“Um… okay,” Myka said. “Good morning, Christina.”

“Eat your egg,” Helena commanded her daughter. She grabbed Myka’s hand. “Myka, you and I need to have a short conversation.” Helena led Myka to the bedroom, where she pulled the door to and said, quietly, “She isn’t really sick, of course.”

Myka laughed again. “I know. ‘An ailment.’”

“The question is, is this jealousy rearing its head at last? Does she want to keep us apart? Does she want to keep an eye on you? Or does she genuinely want the time with both of us?”

“She can’t possibly know what we… I mean, can she?”

“You know she’s intuitive…” Helena shrugged helpless shoulders.

Myka said, “It’s your decision. Maybe you should let her stay home, if only to reward her for ‘an ailment.’ I really don’t mind.”

“Don’t you?” Helena’s gaze glowed with intent. “I certainly mind. We could have been so, so decadent.”
“You can’t talk like that, or I will pick her up and carry her to school myself.” Myka was joking, but…

“There’s still the night. But after so much time, it would have been… nice. Not to have to… hold back.”

Myka leaned to Helena and kissed her neck, right at the underside of her chin. “Nice? That’s what it would have been?”

“Now you stop,” Helena said. She took hold of Myka’s arms and moved her back, away. “I don’t want to find myself forcibly conveying a seven-year-old to school.”

So Christina stayed home: they had a backgammon tournament (Christina won), Helena gave Christina and Myka a magic lesson (Christina caught on more quickly), Helena practiced violin (Christina went to her room to read a chapter of *Carbonel the King of Cats*, having suddenly remembered her conveniently unspecified ailment), and Myka wrote a letter to Max to accompany a copy of an article she was in the process of drafting, one about his earlier translations of Tertz; she confirmed, in this letter, that yes, the next time he was in New York, she would try her best to contrive circumstances under which he could hear Harry Lookofsky play again, and perhaps the additional jazz violinist she had mentioned as well. But she would not do any of that, she said, unless he stopped exclaiming in every letter about how much he enjoyed his trip to the Isle of Lesbos.

He had taken to including a snapshot from that trip each time he wrote, now, ever since Myka told him about her new reason to go to New York, and Myka had to admit that it was scenic. But it was not funny. Conversely, when Myka had told Helena—one night in bed, and she could not remember why in the world she had brought it up then—that she looked forward to introducing her to Max, Helena had said, “I don’t know if I can get past my first reaction,” and Myka sighed and asked, “Will it help if I tell you that I could practically fill a photo album at this point with pictures that he’s sent me of an island known as Lesbos? Would that help at all?” Helena had shouted a laugh so loud they were both afraid she’d woken Christina, and Myka told her, “That is basically Max.”

Christina emerged every so often to ask Myka—only because her mother was practicing—what a word meant. Eventually, her curiosity got the better of her, and she asked, “What are you doing?”

“Writing a letter to my friend Max.”

“Is he a special friend?”

“Of course not,” Myka said, as seriously as she could. “Your mom is my only special friend.” She paused. “And I certainly hope I’m your mom’s only special friend. Even now, after I left without saying goodbye.”

“Nobody else ever has ever come to stay in her room,” Christina said.

“That is good news.” *Go slowly,* Myka told herself. “Do you mind that I’m here again to stay in her room? Because you haven’t said that you mind, but I know you’re very polite.”

Christina hopped up onto the sofa, next to Myka. “We are less sad since you called her again.” She was speaking into the pages of her book, not looking at Myka at all.

*Go slowly,* Myka told herself again. “Okay.”

Still looking down at her book, Christina said, “We were sad when you went away and didn’t say
goodbye.” Now she looked up at Myka. She looked up, and she smiled. “Mummy, I mean Mom, was funny before we came to the station to get you yesterday. She changed clothes two times and stood in front of the mirror and asked me if she looked like a very silly old woman.”

“Did she really do that?”

Christina nodded. “And I said yes and she said she agreed but we should probably go to the station anyway. And then I agreed that we should because I know that if you got off the train and we weren’t there like we were supposed to be, then you would be sad.”

“I would have been so sad.” She realized, in that moment, that she was no longer hearing the violin: Helena had stopped playing and was listening to them.

“Would you have been very sad?”

It seemed a guileless question, but Myka did not know how to answer it… because she might very well have broken down. She said, carefully, “Maybe not quite that sad. Besides, I would know that I could come and find you and that very silly old woman you call Mom.”

Christina confided, “I don’t always call her Mom. Because sometimes I forget that I’m an American now.”

“I think it’s okay either way. I’ll still come find you both.” She looked across the room at Helena, who smiled. Myka turned back to Christina. “A long time ago, I told your mom that I would always come and get her. And now I would always come and get you. I forgot that for a little while, and I apologize for that too.”

“I accept your apology. Will you please read the rest of the chapter of Carbonel to me?”

“I thought you were supposed to be reading it to yourself,” Myka said.

“I’m tired. Oh, I’m sick too.”

This time, Myka stifled her giggle. “You and Abigail have some things in common.”

Christina sighed. It was the weight of the world. “Not a dog,” she said.

Myka could see Helena’s eyeroll from across the room as she told her daughter, “For the thousandth time: no dog.”

“But maybe we could we go visit Charlie Barker someday?”

“Well…” Helena said. She set down the violin and came to the sofa. “That brings up a topic.”

“What topic?” Myka asked.

“As you know, I’ve been talking to Abigail a bit more than usual lately. I may need to go to Paris. On… business.”

“The kind of business I’m thinking of?”

“Yes. In June.” Helena sat down next to Christina and said, over her head, to Myka, “I thought that Christina and I might travel to Washington, and that I might then depart from there. And that if you had no objections, Christina could stay with you. It shouldn’t take long—three days at most? And possibly Christina would enjoy visiting Miss Cho and the charming Charlie Barker.”
Myka tried to keep the amazement out of her voice as she said, “You would trust me enough to… do that?”

“Of course I would.”

Myka looked down at Christina. “What do you think of all this?”

Christina thought about it. Christina showed them that she was thinking about it: she furrowed her brow and leaned forward, setting her chin on her hand.

“How very Rodin of you,” Helena commented.

“Here is my question,” Christina said. “Myka, what are your living arrangements?”

“Ah… I have an apartment—”

Christina interrupted, “Because you’ve always come to visit us and we’ve never come to visit you. Is that because the place where you live is not so nice? It’s okay if it isn’t. We’ve lived in places that were not so nice. So nice as this one, I mean.”

“My charming daughter,” Helena said. “So very socially adept. You might as well ask Myka up front if she has rats.”

“Do you have rats?” Christina asked.

“I don’t think so,” Myka said. “I mean I’ve never seen one, and my place is kind of small, so I’d probably notice. I think the only drawback, really, is that my place is small.”

Christina thought again. “Small is okay,” she eventually announced. “If we can really visit Charlie Barker.”

“He’ll be thrilled,” Myka assured her. Later, as she and Helena cooked dinner, she said, “Kind of confident, weren’t you? Working out that D.C. plan.” The kitchen was too small for both of them to work in comfortably… but Myka was not interested in being comfortable. She was interested in colliding with Helena as many times as possible.

“Yes,” Helena said. And in her voice Myka heard not a challenge, but a simple statement of fact.

And finally, after dinner and tooth-brushing and “just one more chapter” and “Myka, will you still be here in the morning” and “Yes, I promise,” finally Christina’s door was closed. And once that door was closed, the space outside her room was too small to hold Myka and Helena apart from each other, and they flowed into a kiss, one that didn’t break until they were behind a closed door of their own.

“I missed you,” Helena said, and it was another statement of fact. “I missed you.”

Myka said, “I was trying not to miss you. I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry that I—”

“Apologize later,” Helena said, and she kept speaking as she put her mouth to Myka’s, over and over, “or don’t apologize at all. Right now I don’t care, because I thought we would never have this again, have any of this, just like so many times before I thought we would never, but if you don’t kiss me now, if you don’t show me you want me now—”

Myka, too, had been so sure she was not going to have this again, because she did not deserve to have this again; she had convinced herself so thoroughly that now that she was having this again,
her awareness that she was attempting to undo the buttons that ran all the way down the front of Helena’s dress made her hands… shake? No, they weren’t shaking, but her fingers tensed, and she could not manage even the first one, and they were huge, these buttons, at least an inch in diameter, and if she couldn’t get her hands under control to perform this simple task, how was she possibly going to manage anything more intimate?

Helena eventually said, “Are you moving this slowly simply to torment me? If so, then I will make you apologize.”

“I’m… nervous,” Myka admitted.

Helena laughed, and Myka’s immediate thought was oh god how can she think it’s funny that I’m falling apart, but Helena said, “I’m the one who should be nervous.”

“What? Why?”

“Mm,” Helena said. She took Myka’s hands in hers and raised them to the first button on the dress, helped her undo it. Then the second. The third. Fourth, fifth… there were nine in all, but five was certainly enough to start to slide the dress off of Helena’s shoulders… her smooth shoulders, which were… bare? And when Myka looked back on this moment, as she did have occasion to do, she chastised herself for having sounded scandalized instead of pleased as she exclaimed, “You’re naked under this?”

“I’m not sure why you feel the need to ask. You seem to be looking rather closely,” Helena said, and she would in turn tell Myka later that her shock was completely delightful, that if she’d known that this was all she had to do to stagger Myka so dramatically, she would have tried it ages before.

“Have you been walking around like this all day?”

Helena shrugged; the dress slipped further. “I told you I wanted to be decadent. The minute Christina left for school, I was going to make you take this off of me.”

“How did I not notice?”

“You’re very… pure-minded.” Helena unfastened another button, and Myka forgot how to count. She swallowed and said, “I… really don’t think that’s true.”

“I think it must be true, since you’re clearly thinking about logistics right now instead of the fact that I’m not wearing any—many—clothes. But let me ease your mind: I may have made myself a bit more decent in the interim. I couldn’t very well play backgammon like this.”

“I don’t know if that makes me feel better or worse.” And then she remembered Helena saying that she was the one who should be nervous, and Myka could not fathom why, for she was such a thing of beauty, such a vision—she was no more beautiful in an evening gown than she was here, now, with a navy blue-checkered housedress about to slide entirely off her body. But if it made her nervous… “You don’t have to do something like this, you know. To… keep me here? To make me… I don’t know. Want you more. Not this, if it makes you nervous. Not if you don’t want to.”

“But I do want to. You make me want things I’ve never wanted… I’ve never done anything like this, so yes, it does make me a bit nervous. But I do want you to want me more.”

Myka shook her head. “I keep thinking that isn’t possible, but you keep proving me wrong.”

“Good. That is so good.” And with one more ripple of her shoulders, Helena shed the dress, and
that was Myka’s cue to shed her own clothes, to grasp Helena’s hips, push her to the bed, watch her fall onto the stiff white softness of the new sheets… to reward her, as well as she could, for wanting, for waiting, for being patient, for being willing.

“What do you want most?” she asked, and she would have done anything Helena asked, anything that would have given her pleasure…

Helena didn’t answer. She smiled like an angel who had seen and forgiven all the world’s sins, and she pulled Myka down to her, kissed her, let their bodies become reacquainted to moving together with nothing in the way. And Helena had said the word *decadent*, but that was wrong: this was lush and luxurious, but *not* decadent. This was not indulgent, not illicit, not immoral, but earned and right and good. So good. “This is what I want most,” Helena said, and Myka understood that she would not have to do much at all, not this time, because Helena was already stilling, and her breathing was changing, and her head turned, and that was that. After a few breaths, she turned her face back to Myka, and she was smiling again. “I’m not going to apologize for that,” she said.

“I don’t see why you would,” Myka said. Nearly always, when they were like this, after or between, it had been Myka’s job to do the holding, to be the body against which Helena placed herself, the shoulder against which her head rested. But now, Myka put her head on Helena’s shoulder; she breathed against Helena’s neck, and Helena kissed her temple, her hair.

“Heavens, Myka. What do you want most?” Helena asked. Her free hand, the one not behind Myka’s shoulders, began to move: arm, hip, thigh.

Myka said, “I didn’t want to hurt you.” She meant everything: by leaving, by staying, by making mistakes.

Gently, Helena said, “I know. I didn’t want to hurt you, either. It’s why I had to let you leave.” Her hand stopped moving. “Myka,” she said. “Do you love me?”

Myka thought about how, for so much of the past, she would have answered that question with an unthinking “yes.” Now she said, “You told me a long time ago that I didn’t understand love. You said I didn’t understand love, and I didn’t understand fear.”

The arm around Myka’s shoulders tensed. “I was wrong.”

“You weren’t. Because today, this day, with you and Christina. And now, tonight.” And yet she had to confess this, too: “I’m still afraid.”

“But?”

“But today. Today and tonight and this minute,” and she hoped, desperately, that Helena would understand what she meant, because she had no real words for it, and even if she had, she would not have been able to think of them, not with Helena’s body here, not with her hand moving again, and certainly not with her whispering into Myka’s ear, “You understand now. You understand.”

The day, and the night, and most especially this minute: their bodies together, what the world wanted to keep from them, this realized desire for each other that the world despised. Not a lie—not a lie at all. They could be slow but not careful, yet not *careless*: slow and confident, slow and continuous.

“You understand now,” Helena said. “You understand.”

“I understand,” Myka agreed.
In the morning, when Myka and Helena were both yawning from too little sleep and waiting for coffee to percolate—but doing both those things while standing in each other’s arms—Christina asked Myka, “Are you coming back in two weeks?”

Myka asked Helena, Helena who was pressed against her back and breathing on her neck, “Am I?”

“Yes,” Helena said.

To Christina, Myka said, “Then yes. I am.”

“Are you sure,” Christina persisted.

“Yes,” Myka said. She was saying it to Christina and Helena, to both of them… and to herself, too: all three.


Helena had told Myka, during one of their telephone calls, that Christina had not touched her chemistry set since Myka left, after the planetarium. The professed reason was that she did not want to use up her supplies.

“Yes,” Myka said. Today, she knew, everything would be yes.

And late, late, late that night, back in the new sheets, nestled again against each other, sliding in those new sheets: “Do you love me?” Helena asked again.

“Yes,” Myka said, and even after the many times she had said that word today, it was still new. “Yes.”

“Good,” Helena said. “Because I love you. I love you. Do you understand?”

New. “Yes.”

The next take, with the new drum fill: it is not perfect, not yet, but it is different in the right way. Everyone in the booth feels that some turn has been taken—someone claps Spector on the shoulder.

Myka looks, with hunger, at her violinist. Soon, she thinks.

TBC

Chapter End Notes

original tumblr tags: I didn't mean for this extended thing to happen, but a particular character basically said, 'I have to do some things and you can't stop me', and my response to that was in turn:, this might be why there are so many dead lesbians in fiction, because they are really annoyingly difficult to wrangle, and might be easier to do away with, yes Myka I'm talking to you, and just so we are clear, I could have had the KGB guy not be persuaded by your spinster act, just sayin', talk about herding cats, try herding one giraffe with an idea in her head, jesus h. christ, I don't envy HG for one hot minute, (I'm kinda reminded of that giraffe-getting-on-motorcycle gif tbh)
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

Okay. Despite the frustration I expressed in tags last time, I didn’t actually use any violin strings to strangle any giraffes. As was pointed out to me, that would be a pretty major undertaking, and honestly I don’t have that kind of time in my day. So here, for your enjoyment or something, is the penultimate part of that thing that some time ago ceased being anything resembling an epilogue. (It was going to be so, so sleek and elegant. I don’t know where it got its hands on the steroids.)

Saturday, June 24, 1961, 2:30am

The breaks are more frequent now, and longer, as the musicians tire and the singers’ voices roughen. Gene Pitney says he feels feverish, so Helena offers to hypnotize him and make him believe he is in perfect health. He laughs—softly, to save his voice—but then he asks, with what sounds like real hope, “Could you do that, H.G.?” Helena pulls a guitar pick from his ear, shows it to him, then makes it disappear into thin air. She says, “What do you think, G.P.?” He looks for all the world like he might take her up on it, but Spector chooses that moment to call for a real break, and everyone scatters.

“Arpeggios!” Helena mutters as she stalks into the stairwell, which now feels like their stairwell, behind Myka. “Stolen arpeggios! Some of us were in the session for ‘This Magic Moment,’ thank you very much, and we are familiar with those particular arpeggios.” She quite literally blows smoke out through her nose and mouth—she had accepted a cigarette and a light from the violinist next to her as they left the studio and had begun to smoke aggressively on her way down the hall.

“Helena—” Myka starts, but Helena is off and running now: “Alan Lauber will kill Phil Spector for doing this to his arrangement, if he ever hears this record, not that we will at any point finish recording it, and I will personally help him. Arpeggios! Stolen brazenly from Stan Applebaum!”

“Helena,” Myka says, more firmly.

“What?” Helena breathes out again, an angry dragon in full, overheated glory.

“I don’t think you can steal an arpeggio.”

“Plagiarized arpeggios!” Helena thunders. “Are you happy now!”

“Not really, no.”

“Why on earth not?”

“First, you’re smoking a cigarette in my face,” Myka says.

Helena sighs dramatically, smokily. “You and your Rocky-Mountain obsession with the purity of air. We are in New York City. The smoke from this Parliament is the purest air you’re likely to breathe all weekend long.”

“But second, we have five minutes again. If you’d rather smoke and yell about how you’re going
to try to help commit a felony, that’s up to you, but…”

“Tick tock?”

“Exactly.”

“Leave it to you to make a convincing argument,” Helena says as she drops the cigarette obediently. The smoke that lingers in her mouth remind's Myka of their first kiss, so long ago, and the distance they have traveled since then. Such a distance… Myka is trying to remind herself of that distance, so that she will be less likely to lose her nerve when it comes to talking to Helena about what she wants to talk to her about, this weekend.

“Your mind is not on kissing me,” Helena remarks. “Here you made me put out my cigarette, and you won’t even concentrate on the task at hand? At mouth, that is… what are you thinking of?”

“Mm. Your mouth. The past,” Myka says.

She had carried the past, or a reminder of it, with her when she went back to New York the promised two weeks after Christina’s ailment, Helena’s housedress, her own new appreciation. She carried a parcel wrapped in newspaper, bound with masking tape, larger even than Helena’s violin, concealing that piece of the past, and she guarded that parcel more carefully than if its destination were Fort Knox.

“What could you possibly have in that newspaper?” Helena asked, there in the crowd at Grand Central Station, eyeing the bundle with suspicion.

“You’ll see.”

Christina was equally suspicious, but even more curious: “Is it alive?” Christina asked. “Could I hold it?”

“Sadly, it isn’t alive, not anymore. And I think I should probably hang onto it. It’s a little fragile.”

When they reached the apartment, Myka unwrapped the tape and paper to reveal a tree branch covered in cherry blossoms. Fewer flowers were attached now than when she had, completely illegally, cut the branch off the cherry tree the night before—with Abigail on the ground not-whispering “hurry up!” at her—but still, enough that she could hold it up above Helena’s head and say, “I was right. They were amazingly beautiful this year, but not as beautiful as you. I’ve been waiting so long for this sight… nine years. Nine years.”

“You are the most sentimental person I have ever met,” Helena said, but she was smiling. Myka smiled back and shook her wristwatch at Helena, who said, “Hm. Point taken.”

“They’re very pretty,” Christina said.

“They’re even prettier when they’re everywhere you look. Maybe next year you can come to Washington to see them.”

“They won’t still be there in June?”

Myka said, “They don’t last long. They’re at their prettiest for a week or so, and that’s it. But there’s a big festival—I think you’d like it.”

To her mother, Christina said, “Would I like it?”
“I don’t know, darling; I’ve never gone.”

“Technically,” Myka said, “you did. You might not have been paying attention, but you were right there on the Mall during the 1952 festival. Heading for A&I. And then walking away.”

“Nine years,” Helena said.

At night, in bed, Myka pulled petals from the branch and let them fall onto Helena’s body.

“You are impossibly romantic,” Helena said.

“I’d brandish my watch at you one more time, but it’s on the nightstand. Anyway, I’m thinking back on two weeks ago, so go ahead, tell me again who’s romantic.”

“You made this gesture, and yet this time I didn’t do anything like… well. I hope you aren’t disappointed. I hope you weren’t expecting—”

“I was expecting you. All that would ever disappoint me is if it isn’t you. I thought we got clear on this last time: I love you. I want you. No one, nothing in this world more than you. Are you confused on that point? Because I can keep trying to clarify it. All night long, if I have to.”

“Then I think it’s in my best interest if I say that you have been extremely unclear. What could you possibly mean?”

She laughed, quietly, as Myka began to kiss the flower petals, everywhere they had fallen, on her skin.

Three days later, in Washington, Myka met Abigail under the fading, wilting blossoms.

“Do we need to steal more government property?” Abigail greeted her. “Did she like it, anyway?”

“I’m pretty sure she did. I need to ask you something.”

“Is this about Paris? Because she basically volunteered, so I don’t think I can be held completely responsible for—”

“It isn’t about Paris.”

“Okay. What?”

“Is our deal still square if I…” Myka paused. She had not said this out loud to anyone, not yet. “If I live somewhere other than Washington.”

Abigail’s chin dropped to her chest; it was a sulk. “Somewhere kind of like New York?” she mumbled.

“Somewhere exactly like New York.” She didn’t think Abigail would mind. But there might have been a small, scared part of her hoping for an objection, because then she could be disappointed, but she would have an excuse to keep some hold on the relative security of her life as it was… but no. She thought of Helena, of how not being in New York with her and Christina had meant, before March, and now meant again, that she was waiting to be in New York with her and Christina. She said, “I don’t even know if she’d want me there, in the city, all the time, so this is just—I wanted to make sure. Before I even let myself think about it.”

“It’s like you think I’m a terrible person. As long as there are trains and planes, our deal is square. That doesn’t mean I won’t be mad at you for moving away, but that’s got nothing to do with our
deal. I’ll just miss you.”

“You’ve got Pete. And Steve and Liam, and even Leena and Claudia.”

“If you think that’s the same, then maybe I’ve found myself in an episode of that Twilight Zone show that Pete likes so much.”

“I guess you’ll just have to come visit your parents more often.”

“Interesting that you should mention Pete, and also my parents. You know your birthday’s coming up.”

“Yes, I do know that. In ten days.” If she did move to New York, she would certainly miss the strange, random comfort of Abigail’s non sequiturs…

“So what would you think if, for your birthday, Pete were to drive you? Instead of you taking the train?”

“Why would he want to do that?” Pete might volunteer to do her a favor, of course, but Myka couldn’t imagine what would prompt him to want to do this one, not for her birthday. He was much more likely to propose a steak dinner, as he usually did. Or a series of steak dinners.

“Because he might be meeting my mother. Well, my father too, but let’s be honest.”

“I see. I would just be a passenger on this excursion.”

“You’d be one of several passengers. Because if everything works out like it’s supposed to, Miss Calder and Artie are going too.”

“This sounds like a very strange trip. Do you need that much backup?”

Abigail shrugged. “It’s this person’s fault.”

“How in the world is it Helena’s fault that you want Pete, and almost everyone else you know, to meet your mother?”

“I could give you a really long story about how if she hadn’t come to Washington, you wouldn’t have lost your job and gone to grad school and met Pete and then introduced him to me. I could do that. But the shorter answer is, she set up a recording session.” Myka’s expression must have said something like please take pity on me, because Abigail said, “The thing is, Miss Calder’s playing again now, and she’s actually mostly back up to speed, so this person decided to set up an actual session for the three of us, because she could.”

“Why didn’t she tell me?”

“Maybe she hasn’t had a chance. She just called me last night to ask if I thought it was a good idea, and when I said yes—I mean, the idea of Miss Calder on a record, isn’t that great?—she said she was going to call her next. And I don’t know how long that might’ve taken, so maybe she’ll call you tonight?”

“Her long-distance bills are getting out of hand. So are mine.”

“All the more reason for you to move to New York, I guess.”

“I guess. If it works out, which I don’t know. I mean, we’ll see.”
“So I figured if a lot of people are going to New York, my friend Pete might as well come too, since he has a big car and can drive us all.”

“This is the story you’re going to tell your mother?”

“I was thinking of starting with that, yeah. Unless I chicken out and tell her that he’s your friend instead.”

Talking to Artie about New York—the possible move, not the weekend trip—did not go as well. Even as Myka was outlining her plan, he was shouting, “You would be a fool to leave here! You’re going to chair this department when I retire!”

At that, she had to laugh. “Well, I am a fool. But I’m also a woman, and we both know that a woman is not going to chair this department. Not in your lifetime, and maybe not even in mine.”

“Going somewhere else would restart your tenure clock!” he tried.

“By one year. In the scheme of things, it’s nothing. And better I restart it now, or at least start trying now, than wait another year. Or more.”

“It’s a mistake. I won’t support you in this,” he said. If she did not have his support, she would be unlikely to get the kind of academic job she needed, if she wanted to be able to… what? Provide for Helena and Christina? They could provide for themselves, so all right, maybe she didn’t need an academic job at all. She could go back to translating, just translating, at the UN, maybe, or somewhere else. She would just need to explore as many options as possible, and surely she would find—

Artie snapped his fingers in front of her face. “Your career is here,” he told her, as if that settled the matter.

“My life isn’t,” Myka told him, and she left to teach the subjunctive mood to a classroomful of undergraduates slavering to learn Russian.

After that conversation, she was not looking forward to the weekend trip at all. She tried to get Abigail to let her out of it—she threatened to just take the train—but Abigail was adamant that Myka’s birthday serve as the secondary excuse for the whole excursion, and particularly Pete’s part in it. “Did you already chicken out?” Myka asked. “How can you be such a chicken about this and so take-charge about everything else?” Abigail muttered something about everybody having weaknesses… and Myka had to agree that that was true. “All right,” she said, “you win.”

She had reason to regret that surrender when Pete pulled up in front of her apartment early on Friday afternoon. The Buick was packed: Artie occupied the front seat next to Pete, and Abigail, Miss Calder, and Miss Calder’s cello filled up the back. “Well,” Myka said. “Happy birthday to me. Do I get to ride in the trunk, or is that where you stowed Charlie Barker?”

Pete said, “No, that’s where the luggage is. Charlie’s with Steve and Liam.”

“Lucky dog,” Artie muttered.

Myka ignored him. “So I am taking the train.”

“You’re squeezing back here with us,” Abigail said. “Get a move on, or my mother’s going to yell at me for being late for this big dinner she’s got planned.”

“You are seriously trying to sell this to me as my birthday present.”
Abigail sighed. “No, not anymore. It just happens to be happening on your birthday. Around your birthday. What kind of crazy person do you think I am?”

“Okay, that’s my birthday present, right? Getting to answer that question?”

“Answer that question and you won’t even be taking the train, because I’ll have you arrested for some sort of espionage. And just try explaining that to this person.”

“Can she do that?” Myka asked Miss Calder. She folded herself very carefully into the remaining corner of the back seat and accepted the neck of the cello case, which was to ride like an extra person lying across all three of them.

“I think you already know the answer to that question,” Miss Calder said. “I’m glad you’re here, though, and I don’t even have an ulterior motive like she does… there’s nothing I need to chicken out of except this recording session that I foolishly agreed to. Is it just that I’ve gotten older, or have Helena and Abigail become that much more persuasive?”

Myka tried to cross her legs; she failed, but she kicked the seat in front of her, to a yelp of pain from Pete. “I wouldn’t know,” she said. “All I ever do is wave a white flag.”

“How’s the chicken now?” Abigail asked.

But once they reached the Chos’ apartment building, once Pete had miraculously found a parking space, once they had extracted themselves and the cello and Abigail’s suitcase from the car, Abigail stood in front of her parents and said, “Ma, Pa, this is… Myka’s friend Pete Lattimer.”

“Chicken,” Myka mouthed at her, from behind Mrs. Cho’s back.

Mrs. Cho said to Abigail, “I watched you as you drove up. This man owns a Buick.”

“He does own a Buick,” Myka said.

Mrs. Cho now turned around and said, “Well, Myka, I’m very impressed.”

Abigail snorted. “With a Buick? It’s no Cadillac.”

“There are reasons I don’t own a Caddy,” Pete said with a shrug. “Clearly, your mom knows her cars.”

“I do,” Mrs. Cho said. She nodded approvingly at Pete.

Abigail looked at everyone with suspicion. The she introduced Miss Calder and Artie to her parents, and Miss Calder and Mrs. Cho began an interesting dance: each seemed to see that the other held a rhyming place in Abigail’s life, and they seemed to agree not to compete over their respective places… but there was, for a while, a great deal of “when Abigail was a girl, she” matched with “at work, Abigail has always.”

Helena and Christina arrived slightly later than expected, with Helena apologizing profusely and Christina quiet. She saw Abigail, and she began a smile. But then she saw Myka, and she moved next to her and held her arms up, so Myka lifted her. “Your mom might be right about you getting too big for this,” Myka told her, but Christina shook her head and said hi, so Myka said hi back and asked her if she remembered Abigail—“Miss Cho,” Helena said with a frown that Myka wanted immediately to kiss—and Christina whispered, “Did she bring Charlie Barker.”

Myka shook her head. “The car was too full, so he stayed home, with Steve and Liam. But I guess I
could have stayed home instead.”

She could not have articulated the emotion she felt when Christina, still whispering, said, “No. You’re better.”

To cover the very real possibility that she would start to cry, Myka said, louder, “Do you remember Pete?” She looked guiltily at Helena. “Is it all right if he isn’t Mr. Lattimer?”

Pete jumped in with, “It better be, because I’m not Mr. Lattimer. Hey, Christina, you’ve got some birthday or something next month, like Myka’s is tomorrow, right?”

Christina nodded.

“So if Myka’s turning thirty-six, that must mean you’ll be… forty. Right?”

“Is he being bad at math again or is he just so silly,” Christina said into Myka’s ear.

“He is so, so silly,” Myka told her. She turned Christina around to face everyone else. “That’s Mr. and Mrs. Cho, Abigail’s parents. And this is Professor Nielsen, and Miss Calder—I mean, Mrs. Nielsen?” This was a conundrum, one from which Miss Calder saved her by waving a hand and telling Christina, “Sweetheart, I can be Mrs. Nielsen, or Miss Calder, or Vanessa, or just a lady who plays the cello. Whichever you like best.”

“Mummy, I mean Mom, always says she has a great deal of respect for cellists,” Christina said, very seriously.

Helena said, “And that has a great deal to do with Vanessa. Miss Calder. Mrs. Nielsen. I suppose I’m no better than anyone, am I?”

“Myka countered with, “I believe that technically, you’d better say ‘thank you, Abigail’ and then take advantage of this smooching situation.”

“When did you become so dictatorial?” Helena asked.

Myka shrugged. “Unless you don’t want to.”

“I didn’t say that.”

Abigail pushed her hands through her hair. “Tonight is all your fault, this person.” She shook her head and backed out of the room.

“Hm. You’re wearing lipstick,” Myka said after a moment.
“Now you’re wearing it, too,” Helena told her. “Rather messily.”

“Is there a kleenex anywhere around? Honestly, what am I going to do with you?”

“Kiss me many, many times,” Helena said. Then she sighed and pointed at a box of tissues. “But I suppose we should save some of those times for later tonight, at home.”

*Home.* And when had that word begun to seem so thrilling?

When Myka and Helena emerged, Myka still wiping at the edges of her lips with a tissue (“I think it’s a lovely color for you,” Helena had said, and Myka had responded, “Which would be fine, if I’d been wearing it when I got here,” to which Helena said a wicked, yet indulgent, “Just say you borrowed it from me,” and Myka could do nothing but look heavenward), they saw that Christina had found common ground with Mr. Cho: they were showing each other coin tricks.

Myka said to Abigail, “I didn’t know your father could do magic.”

Abigail shook her head. “I didn’t know my father could do magic.”

“Mummy, I mean Mom, can make the quarter disappear through her elbow,” Christina said to Mr. Cho. “Can you do that one?” And he could; Christina responded by pulling a penny from his ear. He reached to a side table and retrieved a deck of cards. Christina said, “I’m not good with cards yet.”

“I am,” Helena said. She and Mr. Cho proceeded to trade card tricks: Helena pulled cards from the air; Mr. Cho made one card melt through another. They both fooled Christina with three-card monte. Christina grinned hugely the entire time.

“Fool Pete too!” she urged.

“Nobody fools me!” Pete said, and was promptly fooled three times in a row. He sighed, Christina shrieked with laughter, and Helena and Mr. Cho both smiled. Myka was not at all surprised to note that Abigail’s father could look every bit as smug as Abigail could… every bit as smug as Helena, too.

Myka went to the kitchen to see if she could help Mrs. Cho.

Mrs. Cho was butchering a fish. She turned and looked over the lenses of her eyeglasses at Myka, much as Artie might have done. “Interesting shade of lipstick,” she commented.

“Thank you,” Myka said. “I… borrowed it.”

“Quite recently, I see. How long have you known Pete Lattimer?”

Abigail really did come by every single one of her traits completely honestly. “Seven years.”

“And he’s your friend?

“Pete is absolutely my friend. But I should be clear: he’s not my… friend.”

“I’m pleased to hear that,” said Mrs. Cho. She regarded the fish and moved her hand in what seemed to be the tiniest motion; its scales fell away.

“Okay,” Myka said. “You are?”

“Yes.” She looked up at Myka, over the glasses again. “You’ve known my daughter for ten years,
correct?”

Myka nodded.

Mrs. Cho nodded back. “And you are the only person she has brought here in those ten years. Until this evening.” She paused and looked back down at the fish; she flipped it over, tested the balance of the knife, and more scales disappeared. “And so I am sorting out the situation: Abigail is here to play piano on this record to be made. Miss Calder of course plays her cello, and her professor husband goes where she goes. Miss Wells plays the violin. She also loans you lipstick. You are here, as far as I can tell, to borrow lipstick, while pretending very poorly, or not at all, to be Pete Lattimer’s friend. Which leads me to ask myself: why is Pete Lattimer here?”

“He’s the only one of us who’s got a Buick,” Myka said.

“It is a point in his favor.”

Myka smiled. “Of course he’s no President Eisenhower.”

“By which I assume you mean he is not married.”

“Definitely not married.”

Mrs. Cho regarded the fish again. She made two cuts, then pulled out its backbone in one slow, steady motion. “My daughter is extremely frustrating,” she said. She held up the white, spiny length of bone, and Myka couldn’t help but read the gesture as a bit of a “ta-da!”

“Would it hurt your feelings if I said she sometimes feels the same way about you?” Myka asked.

That earned her a snort. “It would hurt my feelings if she didn’t.”

“Mrs. Cho, have you changed your mind about something?”

“I have been waiting for quite some time for Abigail to feel strongly enough to try to change my mind. We’ll see if she’s reached that point.”

“I can’t speak for her, but I’d like to think she has,” Myka said. She cleared her throat. “Actually, about the lipstick—”

Mrs. Cho raised the knife again and pointed it at Myka. “That is your parents’ problem. But I note that my husband has been charmed into showing off his little hobby, so perhaps if your father has a similar interest in magic…” She lowered the knife. “Now, I need your young eyes. Come here and look closely at the qīng yú… what do you call it? Mackerel. I can’t see the pin bones as clearly anymore.”

“You okay?” Pete asked Myka, after dinner, as Helena and Abigail and Miss Calder were practicing for their session—they had decided, for the sake of both old times and length, to perform the Triple Concerto largo they had first played together—and Christina was dozing against Myka’s side. Artie and Mr. Cho had found common ground on the topic of the new president’s policies and were using a combination of English and Chinese, which Myka was amazed to discover Artie could speak a bit of, to dissect them.

Myka looked down at Christina. “I’m something so much better than okay that I don’t have a word for it. Are you okay?”

“I’m gonna go help Abigail’s mom clean up the kitchen. Because she likes my car, so, maybe.”
When the musicians took a break, Helena came to sit with Myka and the now completely asleep Christina; she glanced around, then kissed Myka lightly. She smoothed Christina’s hair. “Such a shame to have to wake her up, when we leave for home,” she said, and again, there it was. *Home.*

Abigail emerged from the kitchen and said, “Am I awake?”

Myka looked at Helena, who shrugged. “You look like you are,” Myka said. “Why wouldn’t you be?”

“Because Pete and my mother are arguing about whether Wonder Woman could beat Superman in a fight, and I think my mother’s winning.”

“Whose side did she take?”

“Wonder Woman.”

“Pete says nobody can beat Superman. How can she be winning?”

“She’s saying something about using the invisible plane to sneak up on him and drop kryptonite bombs.”

“That sounds… aggressive. But it might work.”

“That’s what Pete said.” Abigail scowled. “You see the trouble I’m having with this whole scenario, right?”

“Pete and your mother are getting along?”

“My mother knows who Wonder Woman is.”

Myka grinned at her. “Of course she does. She’s met you.” She smiled even more widely and said, “Also, I’m pretty sure she knows Pete’s not my boyfriend.”

“How does she know that?”

“Mostly because I told her. But also, she’s very observant, your mother.”

“I don’t want to know what she observed, do I?”

“Not really. But I think you can blame this person again.”

Helena gave Abigail a palms-up shrug. Abigail said, “The entire Cold War, this person. I would not put it past you. Miss Calder in a recording session, now, that’s a bigger thing. That I’ll believe when I actually see it.”

Saturday afternoon, Myka and Helena arrived before Abigail and Miss Calder did at the small studio Helena had rented for the session. Harry, who was to be their sound engineer, waved from the booth, but before they could go in, Helena exclaimed, “Rudy!” to a tall black man disappearing around a corner. He turned back and gave her a supple, graceful smile; he loped a few long strides toward them. “Rudy, my darling,” Helena said. “No Drifters record without me, I hope? I’d be terribly upset.”

“Just a demo for Doc. What’s up? I saw Harry go in—string session?” His voice was as soft as his smile. Myka even now expected singers, when she had heard them singing before she met them speaking, to sound like they did in full-throated song… but she was so often surprised when a shy wallflower who said two low words at a party would turn out to be the same person who stepped
behind a microphone and produced sounds of yearning and passion and, most of all, power.

“A demo of sorts,” Helena said.

“You need a vocal, honey? I can stick around.”

“You’re an angel, but this is instrumental. And I wouldn’t want to keep you from anyone. By the way, you haven’t met Myka, have you? And Myka, as I’m sure you’ve guessed, this is Rudy Lewis.”

He held out his right hand to Myka; she took it in her left. He didn’t blink at that, and she loved him instantly. She loved him even more when he said, “H.G. didn’t oversell you at all. She said you were a good-looking lady.”

“Those might not have been my exact words,” Helena said. But her smile at Myka was proud.

Myka told him, “She tries to oversell you, but she can’t. That last record really was something. She’s been raving about the single coming out in June, too.”

Rudy snorted. Politely. “She just likes her part on that one.”

“That’s not a huge surprise,” Myka said.

“It’s quite striking!” Helena protested. “But none of it would work without your vocal, darling.”

“Don’t be too sweet,” he advised, “or nobody’ll recognize you. How’s that baby of yours?”

Helena smiled. “She’s very well, thank you.”

Rudy said, confidingly, to Myka, “Only kid I ever met who asks me ‘and how is your special friend.’ In that little accent of hers, like the queen herself telling you everything’s cool.”

“Everything is cool,” Helena said.

“We’ll see, honey.”

Myka said, firmly, “Today it is.”

He laughed. “Yeah, I’ll take that. Hey, H.G., you and Harry, you remember I’m your man for demo vocals. Don’t you call nobody else.”

“Today really is instrumental. But you certainly are my man.”

“All right. Good to finally meet your lady.” He tossed a wave-salute hybrid at them, then turned to go.

“I worry,” Helena said softly to Myka as he walked away. He seemed even to walk gently, sweetly. “He wasn’t made for this world. Or this world wasn’t made for him.”

Myka tried to think of something reassuring to say, but it was true; she seemed now to know so many people for whom the world wasn’t made... she was saved, in part, by the arrival of Abigail and Miss Calder, and the resulting introductions with Harry. He was extremely pleased to finally meet Abigail, whose name he seemed to have decided would always be “The Formidable Miss Cho,” and given the truth of it, Myka considered using it for Abigail herself.

Harry was delighted with Miss Calder, too, and she with him—upon seeing each other, they both
remembered that they had met years before. “Howard said we had,” she told him, “but I honestly
didn’t put it together. I should have: he said ‘Harry,’ and ‘Toscanini’ and ‘NBC,’ and obviously,
that’s you.”

“Those were the days,” Harry said. “God, those NBC concerts. I miss that crazy guy. Or maybe
what I really miss is how young I was when I played for that crazy guy.”

“I certainly understand… my cello gets heavier every year.’

“I’ve tried to get the hang of it,” he said, “but on cello I still barely qualify as amateurish. All that
power!”

“My own power isn’t quite what it used to be,” Miss Calder said. “I had surgery some months ago,
and I’m still not fully myself.”

“You are!” Abigail insisted.

Harry said to Miss Calder, “I’m sure your technique is still impeccable. H.G. wouldn’t rave like
she does about you if it weren’t, and I know perfectly well that technique trumps a strong-armed
kid any day.”

Recording the Beethoven was at first extremely difficult. Myka sat in the booth with Harry, while
Helena arranged the studio itself; she said things about microphones and direction and started to
become frustrated when Abigail and Miss Calder didn’t seem to catch on immediately. Eventually,
Myka leaned over in front of Harry, pressed the microphone button that would send her voice to the
musicians, and said, “Everyone whose first time in a studio this isn’t, raise your hand,” at which
point Helena shot Myka a very angry look. But she did raise her hand, and from then on, they
played much more easily. Two complete takes later, Harry said, “I like it. Feels good.”

Myka went into the studio; Helena and Miss Calder were conferring, so she said to Abigail, who
still sat at the piano, “What did you think?”

“It’s not quite the bebop I envisioned, but… she’s really going to be on a record. For all time, on a
record.”

Myka nodded. “I of all people know how much that can mean.”

“I guess you do.”

Helena raised her voice and said, casually, “We’ll have to press the B side as well. Vanessa, I know
we haven’t prepared anything, but is there something you’d prefer?”

Miss Calder seemed to think for a moment. “There’s a piece you and Myka are fond of, isn’t
there?”

“Yes, I believe there is.” Helena took up her violin and nodded.

Myka laughed, because she’d known this was coming; they both began to play “How High the
Moon,” in what Myka was fairly certain was bebop style.

Abigail might have been watching—listening to—a car crash, she was that transfixed. She began to
tilt a little, as if she might fall off the piano bench, but she caught herself and exclaimed, “Miss
Calder!”

Miss Calder stopped playing. “Yes?” she said, mild as could be.
“I think I’m dead.”

“Not yet,” Miss Calder said. “But if you ever tell Howard about this, you will be.”

“He would love it!” Abigail crowed.

“I know. And I’d have to give him another exploding briefcase or twelve to make him stop cackling about it. Why don’t you just settle down and see if you can keep up with these two string-playing old ladies as we bastardize music, all right?”

At the end of the session, Harry told them, “Okay. You’ve got your record. Or you will eventually, because H.G.’s going to mix this down. A little project for her.”

Helena harrumphed. “He is determined that I learn the production side.”

“I see,” Myka said. “You’ll do it if Harry says you should, but if it’s my suggestion…”

Harry said, “I’ll be honest with you: she told me she’s been thinking about it for a while. What we’ll really see is how serious she is.”

Miss Calder said, and Myka knew she spoke as the person who’d known Helena the longest, “She’s serious when she wants to be.”

“But only when she wants to be,” Abigail added.

Helena drooped tragically, a forearm across her brow. “And when seriousness is unavoidably foist upon me.”

“You really do suffer, don’t you,” Myka said. She thought it might be all right, here, now, for her to kiss Helena’s cheek…but she wasn’t entirely sure. So she didn’t.

Harry said, “I like that they’ve known you for a long time, and it’s still the same thing. Makes me feel like I know you pretty well these days.”

“You do, old man,” Helena said. Harry got a cheek-kiss from Helena then, and Myka had to admit that that was right, that was what should happen today. “Thank you for this.”

Abigail said, “I am still in shock.” She did look pale, shocked—excitedly so.

“Wait till you get the record,” Harry advised, “then we’ll see about shock. That mix could be shockingly bad.”

“You know her pretty well already. How do you think it’s going to be?” Miss Calder asked.

Harry said, sighing, “It’ll be a stunner. I’m just hoping she’ll come work for me eventually, when I get my label up and running, instead of starting one of her own.”

Late that night, Myka asked Helena, “What kind of a miracle worker are you, exactly?”

Helena shrugged against Myka’s shoulder. Myka felt her lips move into a smile. “A grateful one. I think everyone in that studio could be said to have carried off some… rather difficult undertakings. This one is mine. I thought to give Abigail a gift. Vanessa thought to as well. And quite honestly I think it’s as much a gift to Vanessa, to see Abigail so genuinely happy.”

“And surprised. It’s always fun to see her surprised.”
“And surprised,” Helena agreed. “I know it’s your birthday, so you should be the one receiving a surprise on a record, or of a record, but… I had been talking to Abigail, and she’d sounded so pleased about Vanessa’s recovery. This was something I could do. I didn’t want to wait.”

“I understand. And my birthday’s turning out just fine, as far as records go.” It was true: in terms of records for her birthday, this one was pretty high on her own personal chart. Not quite as high as “There Goes My Baby.” Not quite. “But I guess that wasn’t even for my birthday,” she said out loud.

“What wasn’t?”

“You,” Myka said.

“I’m here for every one of your days. Birth or no,” Helena told her. “But since it is your birthday… how do those lyrics go? Something about the circumstances under which the darkest night would shine? If you would come to me, or perhaps it’s come for me… would you like that again?”

She knew just how to embarrass Myka… because of course she did want that again, but to say it…

“I really have no idea what I’m going to do with you.”

“I thought we settled this yesterday: you’re going to kiss me many, many times. But if you’d like some additional ideas, my love, I’m always happy to suggest—”

Myka kissed her. Many, many times.

In the car, on the way back to Washington, Artie turned around to face the back seat. He told Myka, “You win. I’ll help you.”

“Help you what?” Pete asked.

“She’s moving,” Abigail said.

“Of course she’s moving. She’s in a car.”

“To New York.”

“Oh. Why?”

Miss Calder said, “I think you were there with us, Pete. I think you saw her with Helena and Christina.”

Pete sighed. “Yeah, okay, it’s cute and adorable and makes everybody’s heart melt. But the important question is, who’s going to go out and eat pie with me if Myka’s gone?”

“There’s no guarantee that I’m going. But maybe Artie can,” Myka said.

Miss Calder raised the neck of the cello case, as if threatening to clout Myka with it. “Artie absolutely cannot. He needs no pie in his diet.”

Abigail said, as if it had just occurred to her, “I might,” and Pete swung his head around so quickly and violently to look at her that Myka, Artie, and Miss Calder all shouted some desperate variation of “Eyes on the road!” Abigail shrugged and said, “Speaking of your eyes, I guess my mom thinks your Buick trumps them.”

Pete put his eyes back on the road. “What about your dad?”
“Why does that matter?” Abigail said.

“Because he’s the one I gotta call and ask.”

Myka muttered, “This is the weirdest proposal ever, and I kind of wish I were not in the car with it.”

Abigail muttered back, “Because this is exactly how I pictured such a thing going.”

Miss Calder, between them, said, “At least nobody has to have surgery in two weeks, all right?” to which Artie cried, in answer, from the front seat, “As far as we know!”

“You are way too depressing,” Pete told him. “I don’t want to eat pie with you anyway.”

Artie said, “I don’t want to marry you, so I think we’re even.”

Abigail sighed. “I guess I kind of do.”

“Do what?” Pete asked.

“Want to.”

“Want to which one, eat pie or get married?”

“That seems like a package deal with you, so… I guess both.”

Myka had never heard Pete’s voice—or possibly any voice—sound as joyful, yet at the same time calm, as when he said, “Okay. I’ll call your dad.”

“You don’t actually have to call him,” Abigail said. “I’m pretty sure I’m not his property.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m clear on that. But I think he’d like it if I did. And more important, I think your mom would like it if I gave him the opportunity to like it.”

Miss Calder said, shaking her head, “This modern approach to marriage…”

Now Artie whirled rapidly to confront the back seat. “Modern? You refused to become my wife for thirty years!”

“I don’t see how that’s relevant. I didn’t want a husband,” Miss Calder told him.

Myka couldn’t be a husband or a wife to Helena, no more than Helena could be either of those things to her. Whatever they would have, it could be nothing like marriage, modern or otherwise. But she clung to the idea that it could be like home.

TBC
Chapter 42

This is where, at long last, it ends. I very much appreciate the indulgence of those who have stuck around for this excursion through a lot of bonkers history… having said that, however, it isn’t totally ending. (Big shocker, right?) Check in with me on Tumblr, or here eventually, for a thing called "Sound," which will shape itself into a sequel of sorts.

Saturday, June 24, 1961, 2:45am

Gary has taken up residence at the door to the studio; as the singers and musicians troop back in from their break, he hands each one a piece of paper. Helena looks back at Myka and shrugs as she receives hers. Then she looks down at it and erupts into laughter.

Once everyone is situated, Phil Spector leans to the microphone. He says, to signal the start of the new take, “Okay. One two.”

Each person in the studio holds up his or her piece of paper. On each one, in large magic-marker letters, are the words “SAVE US.”

The booth, with the exception of Spector, has hysterics—then they have hysterics again as they realize, at just about the same moment Gene Pitney does, that his sign says “KICK ME.” Gene gives Gary a look, then takes that “KICK ME” over to Gary’s drum kit and very carefully balances it on the kick drum.

“Too literal,” Myka hears Helena protest.

“You want it, H.G.?” Gene throws at her.

“I think we strings are happy to hold to the original sentiment.”

“Oh yeah?” he challenges, and Gary starts in with hi-hat and snare, TSST-pah-pah, TSST-pah-pah, and Gene advances on Helena like they’re rival gang members in some teenage rumble movie, TSST-pah-pah, TSST-pah-pah, until they both collapse into chortles.

On the next take, the strings hold up their signs throughout the entire first verse. The backup singers are fighting to keep from laughing—and the subsequent pre-second-verse frantic scrabbling, as signs are dropped in favor of raised bows, makes them lose the fight.

“Cut,” Spector says. For once, he sounds tired. “Could you just give me one? That’s all I want. And then we’ll see where we are.”

Christina had asked for two things when she turned eight, at the end of May: a subscription to the newspaper and a visit to the planetarium. Myka happily contributed to the newspaper subscription, but she was genuinely unsure about whether she could set foot in that building again. Helena told Myka she could stay home, that everyone (pointed look at Christina) would understand. Christina, moodily, said Mike was already staying home, so maybe everyone should just do that anyway.
Helena told Myka, “Mike was invited, and had planned, to join us for birthday festivities, but two
days ago he skipped school to rehearse with his ‘band.’ Harry was delighted; Helen was appalled.
Mike is currently incommunicado.”

They went to the planetarium. Myka felt, walking into the space of the Sky Theater, that she might
faint or scream, but she thought about Christina—thought about it being her birthday—and
managed to do neither of those. She sat rigidly in her seat, however, gritting her teeth, waiting for
something to happen. As the lights went down, she tensed, readying herself to run…but then
Helena put her arm on the rest between them and pressed their forearms, elbows, upper arms,
shoulders together. The contact was gentle, unobtrusive, unobservable. Myka did not enjoy the
experience—but without the comfort Helena gave her, without that bodily reassurance, she could
not have stayed, even for Christina.

“Now we can go at Christmas too,” Christina told her afterwards. “Now that you know it’s okay.”

“When did you get your psychiatry degree?” Myka asked her. But she had to concede that Christina
probably wasn’t wrong. Christina also wasn’t wrong about how everything would be fine during
her visit in June, although Myka was terrified that something would happen to Christina, or even
that Christina would decide at some point that she’d rather sleep in Charlie Barker’s doghouse than
spend any more time with Myka.

What actually happened was that they had a very good time. Helena left early Thursday morning,
and Myka and Christina went to museums together, went to the Capitol University campus so
Christina could see Myka’s office (why she wanted to see that, Myka had no idea, but it was an
activity—and Christina had great fun with Myka’s typewriter, such that Myka developed a certain
intuition about what Santa might be asked to bring this year), went to visit Steve and Liam. “You
need a dog,” Christina informed them. “Why else do you have a backyard?”

Steve said, “It’s what the house came with.”

Liam said, “I would’ve turned down the yard. We have to mow it.”

Christina, however, did not waver: “I would do that, if I could have a dog.”

Myka did not envy Helena the constant dog denials… and she did like that she herself was able to
give to Christina, as if as a gift, the much-hoped-for time with Charlie Barker. They spent all of
Saturday afternoon with Charlie Barker, in fact, because Abigail had to go to work, and she
solemnly entrusted Christina with dog-sitting responsibilities. “And what am I in this operation?”
Myka asked.

Abigail said, to Christina, “Sorry, but you have to be a Myka-sitter too. Think you can handle that,
this person’s kid?”

Christina eyed Myka, who said, “I guess you never know with me, do you? I might go crazy.”

“Put her in the backyard with Charlie,” Abigail advised. “Maybe she’ll even chase a ball or two.”

Later, when they were indeed in the backyard with Charlie, who energetically retrieved anything
thrown anywhere, Christina said, “Myka, I have to ask you something.” She seemed very serious,
so Myka braced herself. “Why does Abigail call me this person’s kid?”

Myka relaxed a little. “Because she calls your mom this person.”

“Why does she do that?”
A little less relaxed: “It’s… a long story.”

“Will you tell it to me?”

“Maybe someday.” Myka thought that might buy her enough time to come up with something convincing. Because she did not know the words to tell herself the real, full story… so how could she tell it to Christina?

“Okay. Abigail calls me this person’s kid. Mummy, Mom, calls me darling, and Miss Helen calls me pumpkin sometimes, and Mr. Harry calls me baby H, and Pete keeps saying he wants to call me silly things like rice krispies. But you don’t call me anything except Christina.”

“It’s your name,” Myka said, and if it sounded like a weak reason, compared to the variety of that list, it had the virtue of being true.

“Does anybody ever call you anything except Myka?”

“My students call me Professor Bering. You saw that on the nameplate on my office door.”

“You know what I mean.”

Myka did know. “Your mom calls me Les Paul.”

“Why does she do that?”

“Because I liked a record he made, a long time ago.”

“Practically everything about you and… Mom, is a long time ago.” She threw the ball for Charlie. It was an ill-tempered throw.

“That’s because we’ve known each other a long time.”

“You don’t call her anything except Helena.”

“That’s because it’s her name.”

“You are boring,” Christina now pronounced. “No wonder people don’t want to call you anything except Les Paul which makes no sense.”

Myka sighed and gave in. “Okay. My grandparents used to call me things in Russian.”

“What things what things!” Clearly, there now could be nothing more thrilling than Myka bearing a nickname that was not the obviously nonsensical “Les Paul.”

“Russian’s a little weird. They called me solntse, that means sun, or solnyshko, little sun.”

Now Christina looked like she was unlikely to believe another word Myka said. Ever. “That is too weird to be true.”

“Well, they’d think pumpkin was too weird to be true. I can’t even imagine what they’d do with this person’s kid. They called my sister Tracy rybka, or rybachka. Little fish.”

“So what would they call me?” And suddenly it was a test: could Myka come up with the right name?

“Hm… maybe zayka. Little rabbit.”
Wrong answer: “I don’t think I’m a rabbit,” Christina said. “Also it sounds too much like ‘Myka.’ How about cat? I’m going to read the second Carbonel book as soon as the school library gets it.”

“They’d say koshka, little cat. Or kotonok. That’s kitten.”

“Dog! What’s dog!” On cue, Charlie Barker whined for a throw of the ball, and Christina obliged.

“Sobaka, but you usually don’t want to call anybody a dog.”

“Except for Charlie Barker, because he really is one.”

Myka nodded. “Exactly.”

Charlie brought the ball to Christina and dropped it in front of her. Christina picked it up, threw it, and shouted, “Duck!”

The ball was nowhere near Myka. “Why do I need to duck?”

“No,” Christina groaned. “What’s duck.”

“Oh. Utka. Utkocha, little duck. My grandmother would say ‘utkocha moya,’ my little duck. Duckling is utenok.”

“Those all sound hard to say. Darling’s shorter. So’s pumpkin.”

“This person’s kid is pretty long. Besides, none of them sound so long if everything’s in Russian.”

“What’s your favorite?”

“For you? I think you should tell me.”

“I like kotonok. Or utenok. They sound like the start of knock-knock jokes.”

“I could just call you knock-knock.”

“Pete would do that,” Christina said, with certainty. “I don’t think you would ever be as silly as Pete.”

“Maybe on special occasions,” Myka told her.

On Sunday, Abigail, driving Pete’s Buick, dropped Helena off at Myka’s apartment after meeting her at the airport. “So we can debrief in the car,” she’d explained to Myka. “So I won’t have to interrupt your little family reunion.”

Helena grabbed Christina first, and if Myka had been expecting a protest from the eight-year-old, who had been preternaturally self-possessed all weekend, what she got instead was a tableau of a mother and daughter, each reassuring herself of the other’s continued existence.

“Three days is a long time,” Christina said, and she was not crying, but she was fervent in a way that suggested she might cry. “Mom.”

“I still don’t know who that is,” Helena said, just as fiercely.

Myka didn’t interrupt them; how could she? She wanted to cry, at the mere sight of them. Eventually, Helena looked at her and mouthed “thank you,” and then Myka felt free to ask, “So how was Paris?”
“You’ll read about a defection in not too long,” Helena said in her ear as they embraced a moment later. “A dancer.”

“And you’re all right?”

“As all right as I can be, given that I missed both of you terribly. How did you get on?”

“This is just a guess, but I think Christina’s favorite part was playing with Charlie.”

Christina said, with enthusiasm, “He knows how to fetch a ball a lot better than he did when he was a puppy. I never have to go get it for him anymore. Another favorite part was, we went to the Arts and Industries Building.” That earned Myka a significant look from Helena. “They had an exhibit of different kinds of money, but Myka said I wasn’t allowed to make any of it disappear. And then we went to have pie with Pete, and I had two kinds.”

“Which two?” Helena asked.

“Rhubarb and pecan, because I never had them before.”

“How horrifying. Not at the same time, I hope.”

“Don’t give her ideas,” Myka said. “I’ve learned that putting her and Pete and pie together is a recipe for… well, an awful lot of pie.”

They did not have time for much of a reunion; Christina’s school was out for the summer, of course, but Helena had a session first thing Monday morning. “I would have said no,” she’d told Myka, “but Carole arranged the strings. Are you very upset?”

“Of course I’m upset. But that doesn’t mean I think you should have told her no,” Myka had said. Now she told Helena, “Much as I’d like to spend more than an hour or so with you, I think this trip was about me and Christina. Wasn’t it, Christina?”

“Knock-knock,” Christina corrected.

“Knock-knock moya,” Myka affirmed, and tapped a knuckle against Christina’s head.

Helena rubbed her eyes. “I’ve been told repeatedly that the correct response to that is ‘who’s there,’ so… I must be more jetlagged than I thought. Did you just call her your knock-knock?”

“You want to tell her how that came about?” Myka asked Christina.

“Maybe on a special occasion,” Christina said.

“Up to you, knock-knock-ok.”

“Little knock-knock? Baby knock-knock?” Helena hazarded. She shook her head. “I leave for a weekend and return to a hybrid—or perhaps entirely new—language.”

After far too little time, Helena and Christina boarded their train at the station. From the train car’s door, first Christina turned to wave, then Helena did. Myka watched, waited for them to reach a window: when they did, Helena ducked down and Christina leaned up as they both swiveled their heads toward Myka at exactly the same moment, in exactly the same way, like a pair of owls, twin barn owls with matching, inscrutable dark eyes. They were strange and foreign to her, but not to each other: a small, exclusive parliament, one that Myka could never truly join, no matter how well she and Christina got along. All she could do was love them… “Moi sovy,” she tried, under her

“Don’t you want a family,” Tracy had asked her, and such a thing had seemed impossible, before, and even now it might still be impossible, but the answer now was yes, yes, this family.

Saturday, June 24, 1961, 4:20am

“I have something to say to you,” Helena tells Myka when they reach the stairwell this time. “Something serious.”

Myka looks at her with exhausted affection. “It’s a little hard to take you seriously when you’re wearing a tweed fedora that’s at least two sizes too big for you.”

The musicians and singers have now begun trading among themselves a number of hats, as many as they could collect from offices and studios in the building. They have two fedoras—a camel one in addition to this tweed—plus a dirty Yankees cap, a gray flannel newsboy hat, a broad-brimmed straw sun hat with an orange flowered band, three porkpies, two Panamas, a boater, one ladies’ pillbox in bright pink, and a black beret that Mike Stoller, in the booth, had pulled off Jerry Leiber’s head and donated to the cause. Phil Spector had refused to put on a hat of any kind, or to hand over his cape and sunglasses in penance, much to the disappointment of the entire booth and studio.

Every time the music stops, the hats change hands—change heads—and Myka has heard “musical hats!” yelled from the studio more than once. “Could you write a song about that?” she’d murmured to Carole, who said, “We might. Love songs get boring.” The musicians are professionals, but they are exhausted professionals. The “SAVE US” signs seem less and less of a joke as time wears on.

“Fine,” Helena says now. “You wear it.” She drops it onto Myka’s head, steps back a bit, considers. “In fact it goes quite well with your traveling suit. You should wear hats more often… I hear they’re enjoying a resurgence for ladies, thanks to Mrs. Kennedy.”

“Great news. So what serious thing do you have to say to me in a hat?”

Helena gazes at her, and she does look very serious. If they hadn’t been trapped in a studio for the past five hours, Myka might have thought her drunk, she is so intent. “I think that if I have to live much longer without you, I’ll…”

“You’ll what?”

Helena sounds puzzled as she says, “I was going to say, ‘I’ll die,’ but that doesn’t actually make any sense.”

“It’s pretty dramatic,” Myka muses.

“Dramatic but nonsensical.”

“That describes a lot of situations you and I have found ourselves in.”

Helena smiles. “Horrifyingly, it does.”

“I don’t think you’ll die, anyway. The session’s going to end, and then we’ll go home and—”

“I don’t mean just live without you until the end of the session, although we might all die before that end comes.” She reaches up and pushes the hat back a bit on Myka’s head. “No, what I really
want to say to you is that I had intended to try to wait the five years, until I could become a citizen, until deportation was no longer an issue. But I can’t wait. It would be almost three more years, and I’ve already waited so long for you.”

“It hasn’t been that long,” Myka says, though she doesn’t know why she’s saying it, because—

Helena says, “You keep pointing it out: nine years.”

And that’s why. “But you weren’t even waiting, for most of those years. You gave up on me.” The minute the words leave her, she hears them as horrible. “I’m sorry, I take it back…”

But Helena accepts it. She nods. “I did.”

“I wish you had believed what I told you.”

“What?”

“I told it to you then, and I’ve told it to Christina now too: if you hadn’t come back, I would have had to come get you.”

“You also told me that I’m not very smart,” Helena says.

“Sometimes you’re not.”

Now Helena pulls the hat back down over Myka’s forehead. “Neither are you.” She leans up and brushes their lips together.

“What? Why?”

Helena kisses her again. “For thinking that I would be at all upset by the idea of you finding a position in New York.”

“Who told you?”

“Who do you think?”

“I will kill her,” Myka growls.

“I don’t believe that would be a successful operation.” Helena tilts the hat to the side. “I had no idea I could be so entertained by moving a hat around your head. In any case, if you’re in jail for killing Abigail, then all the fine planning we’ve both been doing will have been for nothing.”

“I know what I’ve been doing, and clearly you know what I’ve been doing. What have you been doing?”

Now Helena looks very smug. “I may have spoken with an attorney. One of his recommendations is that we rent an apartment in a very nice neighborhood, one with a good school for Christina—”

“That sounds great, but I don’t see—”

“Let me finish! One that neither of us could easily afford on our own. That way, if anyone asks, we would say that each of us understood that we needed to have a roommate. To afford this nicer place—me for my child’s sake, and you for… well, whatever reason we come up with. Perhaps it will be close to where you teach.”

“That is… actually very smart.”
Helena nods. “He came highly recommended, this attorney. He also says that we must maintain separate bedrooms, so that—”

“What? Why in the world would we—”

“Do you intend to let me utter a complete sentence ever again? So that if we are investigated, we will not have to scurry around and attempt to create something plausible, which he says is nearly impossible to carry off successfully. In some cases they can determine whether furniture has recently been moved.”

“I don’t want a separate bedroom!” Myka knows she sounds petulant, but—she doesn’t want a separate bedroom.

“He didn’t say we had to sleep in separate bedrooms. Just that we had to have them. It’s a matter of putting a bed in a room. I could use that room as a practice studio, or perhaps you’d need an office, if you wouldn’t be spending all of your working hours on a campus.”

And this is a delightful fantasy, this idea of bedrooms and studios and offices, but she and Helena are not the only ones involved here. “But what happens if anyone asks Christina about our sleeping arrangements?”

Helena shrugs. “The world is the box. What is a sleeping arrangement?”

All Myka can do is say helplessly—and it might be a protest, or it might be a plea: “She’s only eight.”

“If you can wait until 1964—1964!—I’ll try to find some way to wait too. But you’re looking for a job here in the city, and I’m sure you’ll find the right position. I’m looking for an apartment we can share, and I’m sure something lovely will present itself. I don’t think either one of us wants to wait, and I think Christina will be far happier if we’re together—all three of us—than if we’re apart.”

“I don’t want anything to hurt her.”

“I will not let anything hurt her. Christina comes first, she will always come first. But you bring me to life. You always have.” Helena smiles. She pushes the hat backwards again and pulls Myka down into a long kiss. “Even in that hat,” she says as they move apart.

“Your turn,” Myka says, and she takes the hat off her head and drops it back on Helena’s. And now it is Myka’s turn to smile, hugely, at how ridiculous Helena looks, and at how, even in this hat, she is the most beautiful thing Myka will ever see.

Saturday, June 24, 1961, 5:05am

Count up the cigarettes, the cups of coffee, the takes, the hats—even the horsehairs that have broken and now hang limply from the violinists’ and cellists’ bows—Myka can count, can count obsessively in fact, but she can’t count that high.

Everyone sits down between takes now; the signs begging for help litter the floor; the singers can’t talk at all.

One more time, Spector dashes into the studio; one more time, he adjusts microphones slightly: one cheats toward a cello, one retreats from the timpani. The backup singers all shuffle two inches to the left. Gene Pitney calls Spector over and whispers to him; Spector says, “It’s okay. Go up; it’s a good sound.” Gary says, “That one fill still just after the eight, right?” Spector nods. He looks
over his sunglasses at Helena and says, “Plagiarized strings all the way out, but only if that’s okay with you, H.G.” Helena waves her bow at him dismissively from her standing position, over and under the microphones.

When Spector is back in the booth, he leans to the microphone. “Okay,” he says. “One two.”

Boom-boom. Oh-woo. “I hardly ever thank the stars above…”

The strings begin, ever so quietly, exactly when Gene Pitney sings the word “every” at the start of the second verse.

By the time the instrumental break comes, the faces in the studio are manic, eyes wide open, eyebrows up; something is crackling through all of them. Myka watches Helena’s back begin to move, as it used to when she played jazz with Abigail; she would be unsurprised, at this point, to see Helena’s neck begin to twist.

The drum fill comes, and again it is perfect, and again Myka feels a murmur that speaks to its rightness, but there is also a sense of don’t spoil it don’t jinx it, as they roll through the chorus, roll through it with competence, but she is starting to worry that someone did jinx it somehow, because it is back to being simply competent…

And then Myka understands what Spector meant by “go up”: Gene vaults into falsetto for the final chorus—and that is precisely when the plagiarized strings start, and suddenly it is as if their swirls were always intended to mimic the leap in his voice, designed especially for that moment—a magic moment, in fact, and for Myka, that is how the two songs will always be connected now, the one providing the perfect magic, at the perfect moment, for the other. They play on, play on, play on, until finally Spector says into the microphone, “Cut.”

It’s the take. Every single person in the booth knows it; every single person in the studio knows it. The air above the musicians in the studio is suddenly filled with exuberantly tossed signs and hats and guitar picks and Gary is juggling his drumsticks—actually juggling them—and then someone grabs the timpanist’s mallets and starts beating out a rumba, and it is a dance number in a huge Broadway musical: everyone is rumba-ing, including everyone in the booth (and Myka can’t rumba very well, but that is not going to stop her, and it isn’t going to stop anybody else right now either, and most of them are worse than she is) except Spector, who is still sitting, his posture regal, as if it had been his plan all along to exhaust everyone and then pull these astonishing performances out of every single one of them at the exact same time.

They play the song through once more, just for cover, and this take is loose, happy—if the previous take had not happened, Myka would have said, and she suspects everyone else would have too, that this is the one, this is the record. But instead, it’s just the sound of professionals, goofing off now, still worn out, but hitting every note, every beat.

The scatter of everyone leaving is a sight to behold, and the number of people who manage to pack themselves into the elevator is the stuff of the Guinness Book of Records.

“Let’s take the stairs,” Myka murmurs to Helena, as they watch the crush of sardines.

“It’s four flights!” Helena exclaims.

“You can’t tell me you haven’t gotten attached to this space,” Myka says, opening the stairwell door, beckoning. “Of course if you think it’ll be too much for you…”

“Oh, we will see about that.” Helena rushes to Myka, presses a hot, fast kiss to her lips—just
enough for distraction—then takes off, clattering down the stairs, brandishing the violin case above her head. She looks back up at Myka, laughing, daring her.

Myka looks down and meets those smiling eyes, and what else can she do? She takes the dare: she is sprinting too, pitching forward, learning that long legs aren’t much help going in this direction and also that she had no idea how fast Helena could move; surely at this rate they’ll reach the first floor well before the elevator does…

They don’t beat the elevator. But the force of their downstairs dash propels them through the lobby, and they burst together onto a New York sidewalk, into an early-early morning humid drizzle—and look up to see, in the spaces between the structures that loom around them, the perfect imperfect beginning of a sunrise.

END

Historical notes:

I hope I made it clear enough in the story itself, but that 1961 session was incredibly significant. It did not end up yielding the huge hit song that everybody thought it would (though it is one of my all-time-favorite GP tracks, and the song itself is great except for that one lyrical infelicity), but that’s when Phil Spector really started to craft what would become the Wall of Sound. And yes, I certainly know that Phil Spector has ended up completely irredeemable, but for me, it’s kinda like the Heidegger problem. Das Ding still dingt, regardless, and the Wall of Sound still… I guess it walls?

For the purposes of this story (I realize nobody but me cares about these things, and yet), I took June 23rd as the date of the session, but it could have been June 30th—all I can nail down is “late June,” which ticks me off considerably, so if anybody has definitive information on the point, please send it my way. I am also not sure precisely when the marathon ended, because nobody who has reminisced about it says anything other than “my god it went on forever and we thought we would die,” but “Every Breath I Take,” just that one track, ended up costing $14,000, which was about 25 times the usual cost of a recording, so you gotta figure those sessioneers were raking in that twice-scale money for a pretty long time.

Harry L. might actually have played in that session; I can’t find a record of all the personnel. Gary Chester was indeed the drummer, however, and he did indeed play on so many records.

I made up the signs and the hats.

Max Hayward did take a trip to Lesbos, where I bet he took snapshots.

According to some sources, Rudy Lewis, who sang lead (quite beautifully) on some Drifters songs, was gay. He died in 1964, possibly from a heart attack, possibly from a drug overdose. I pass no judgment when I say that I don’t find it incredibly hard to imagine why a gay black man living in the early 1960s might have been inclined to take some drugs.

In the end, this was a rough time. Some people carved out some space that worked for them; some didn’t. I’m glad, despite everything that goes on these days, that I’m living now and not then—but I have nothing but respect for those who paved the way so that I could live as well as I do today.

Finally: Pete probably drove a LeSabre.

Thanks again.
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