

Chapter *One*

December, 2002. In an isolated farmhouse in Großramming, Steyr-Land, Upper Austria...

The window shutters clanged as fierce winds howled outside the log cabin. Icy draft seeped through minute gaps along the walls. The blazing fire from the hearth was no match against the freezing temperature inside his prison.

Pinagkiskis ng eighteen-year-old na si Johann ang dalawang palad para makalikha ng init. Naninigas na ang kanyang mga daliri sa lamig, nagyeyelo ang hangin kanyang ibinubuga. Hindi niya alam kung ilang araw o oras na siyang nakakulong sa maliit na silid na wala ni anumang kasangkapan maliban sa

isang manipis na kutson, lumang blanket at ang grand piano malapit sa hearth.

Tinipa niya ang tiklada ng piano. Kaunti na lamang at matatapos na niya ang composition. Kailangan niyang matapos iyon, kung di'y mamamatay si Rosalind.

Rosalind... his beautiful Rosalind.

She was an opera singer he met during the premiere of the first opera he composed. Her beauty was enchanting, her movements as fluid as the perfect sonata. He was bewitched!

Twelve years ang tanda sa kanya ng babae. But she didn't look her age and he didn't mind. She taught him passion, introduced him to the pleasures of the flesh. In her hands, he became a man.

Mahal niya si Rosalind. Ito lang ang babaeng gusto niyang makasama habambuhay. Handa siyang talikuran ang lahat—ang kanyang yaman, ang maharlikang pangalan, ang kanyang pamilya at maging ang pinakamamahal niyang musika para sa dalaga. Handa rin siyang ibuwis ang sariling buhay para sa kaligtasan nito.

Ipinikit ni Johann ang kanyang mga mata. Ilang sandali lamang ay papasok na ang lalaking nagpadukot sa kanila. Kapag hindi ito nasiyahan sa ginawa niya

ay sasaktan nitong muli si Rosalind. Her cries and screams of pain reached him. He didn't know how long she could hang on. God knows how they were hurting her. Ayaw na niyang isipin.

Huminga siya nang malalim at kinalma ang isipan. Binasa niya ang score, nagdagdag ng ilang notes sa music sheet at saka iyon sinubukan sa piano.

He banged his fists on the keys. It didn't sound right. The music was bland, lifeless. This wasn't how he made music. This was... this was insanity!

Johann was a musical genius, a child prodigy and a gifted composer. Notes appear and arrange themselves inside his mind, but it didn't happen at will. Like all gifts, it wasn't forced. He composed music at his own leisure, whenever the inspiration struck him. He needed to be in a state of mind where he loses all consciousness of everything else except his music. It was like entering some sort of trance.

He had never written a piece under the threat of death. He couldn't do it.

“Oh, God... Rosalind! How can I save you?”

Sinapo niya ng dalawang palad ang mukha. If only he was older and wiser.

Bumukas ang pinto at pumasok ang lalaking nagpadukot sa kanila.

He looked everything a villain should: tall and broad-shouldered, with dark, unfeeling eyes, a cold sneer and an air of malevolence radiating from him.

Hindi ito kilala ni Johann. Papunta siya noon sa apartment ni Rosalind nang harangin ng isang itim na van ang kanyang kotse. Bumaba ang lalaki kasama ng tatlo pang kasama nito. Sapilitan siyang pinababa ng kotse at kinaladkad pasakay sa van. He was blindfolded, gagged and his hands tied behind his back. He was brought to a secluded farmland somewhere in the Steyr-Land District, mahigit tatlong oras ang layo sa *Dresdner Castle* sa Burgenland. There, he saw Rosalind bound and gagged like him. They kidnapped her, too.

“Make me a piano sonata and I’ll let you two live.”

Ikinulong siya sa isang kuwarto. Iyon din ang huling pagkakataon na nakita ni Johann si Rosalind. Ginawa itong pain para sumunod siya sa lalaki. Kapag nagmamatigas siya ay sinasaktan nito ang babae. Alam niya dahil naririnig niya ang mga hiyaw nito kasabay ng hagupit ng isang hula niya ay latigo.

At one time he heard her call out to him for help, screamed that someone was raping her. He almost died that instant. His body trembled with anger and fear for Rosalind. He didn’t know where in the log cabin she

was kept. She sounded so close and yet he could do nothing to help her.

“What do you have for me, Johann? It’s been eight days.”

“I... I... I’ll finish it soon. I want to see Rosalind.”

“You’ll see her soon.”

“No! I... I want to see her now. Please... I j-just want to see if she’s okay.”

Ngumisi ang lalaki. “You’ll see her once my sonata is finished.”

“Y-you don’t understand. I c-can’t concentrate. I need to see her, please...”

His eyes narrowed into slits, his mouth pressed into a tight line. Ipinukpok nito ang isang kamao sa ibabaw ng piano. “*Arschloch!*” Hinila nito ang kanyang kuwelyo. “You listen to me, finish my piano sonata and I’ll let you have your woman back. Fail me and she dies first,” the man hissed. Sumadsad siya paupo nang itulak nito. “You have until tomorrow.”

“B-but—”

“Until tomorrow, Johann. I’ve waited long enough.”

The door closed with a bang. Tumakbo siya at idinikit ang tainga sa pinto. Wala siyang narinig na iyak o mga sigaw. Nakahinga siya nang maluwap. Rosalind was spared—until tomorrow.

Johann closed his eyes tight. He needed to finish the music piece tonight.

Bumalik siya sa harapan ng piano. Ilang sandali pa'y para na siyang nasa sarili niyang mundo.

The storm had abated when morning came. He couldn't hear the howling winds anymore. The fire in the hearth died down in the middle of the night. The room felt like a freezing casket.

Johann doubled over on the thin mattress. Inilapit na niya iyon sa fireplace. Balot na siya ng kumot pero tumatagos pa rin hanggang buto ang lamig. Kung walang darating para apuyan ang dapugan, mamamatay siya sa lamig. He was physically and mentally exhausted from staying up all night. Natapos niya ang piano sonata at iyon lang ang mahalaga. Makikita na niyang muli si Rosalind.

The door to his room flew open. Bumalikwas siya ng bangon.

“Do you have it?”

Nanginginig ang mga kamay niya nang kunin ang music sheets at iabot dito. Pinasadahan iyon ng tingin ng lalaki.

“Now, c-can I see Rosalind?”

May tinawag itong pangalan. Pumasok ang isang lalaki.

“Take him. You know what to do.”

“Wait!” Nagpumiglas siya nang kaladkarin siya ng bagong dating palabas ng silid. “Wait!”

Nangaligkig siya sa ginaw nang buksan ng lalaki ang pinto. Hindi katulad nito, wala siyang suot na makapal na winter jacket.

“Where are you taking me?”

The man only grunted. Johann could barely see where they were going. He had a feeling it was his end. He would be killed. He imagined his body would be left somewhere on the frozen land to be eaten by wild animals. He thought of his grandmother, Maria. He was missing for more than a week. She must be turning all of Upper Austria upside down to find him. His death would devastate her.

No! He had to do something. Hindi siya puwedeng mamatay! Kailangan niyang iligtas si Rosalind. At kailangan niyang bumalik sa kanyang lola.

Naging malikot ang kanyang mga mata. Papasok na sila ngayon sa kakahuyan. If he could only find something to use as a weapon.

Isang hindi kalakihang bato ang nakita ni Johann sa paanan ng isang puno. Sinadya niyang sumubsob at palihim na dinampot iyon.

“Get up!” utos ng lalaki.

He swung his arm with all his strength. Tinamaan ng bato ang noo ng lalaki. Sinamantala niya ang pagkahilo nito para paulit-ulit itong paluin sa ulo. Wala na itong malay nang tantanan niya. Duguan din ang bato na agad niyang binitiwang. Johann trembled from the freezing weather. Hinubad niya ang jacket na suot ng lalaki at siyang isinuot. It was a size bigger but it alleviated the cold.

Patakbo siyang bumalik sa cabin. Bago pumasok sa silid na pinagkulungan sa kanya ay dinampot niya ang iron poker na nasa tabi ng fireplace.

“This isn’t what we agreed about.”

Nagsalubong ang mga kilay niya. Tinig iyon ni Rosalind. Sumilip siya sa nakaawang na pinto. Naroon nga ito sa loob at kausap ang lalaking nagpadukot sa kanila. Ni walang bakas na sinaktan ito o pinahirapan. She had in fact changed into warm, thick clothes.

“I told you to stay at the house.”

“We have the ransom money, Berne. You’re supposed to let him go—alive!”

“Plans change, Rosalind. You know it’s too risky if we keep him alive.”

“You fool!”

Hinapit ng lalaki sa baywang si Rosalind. “Come now, *Liebling*. You have nothing to worry about. No

one knows we're married so no one would suspect me. You have the perfect alibi. The woman I've hired to pretend as you won't talk. We have the money and with this music piece, I will be famous and you can have whatever you want, *mein Schatz*. It's over. We've succeeded. Johann was a fool to think you could fall in love with him."

Rosalind let out a throaty laugh, wound her arms around the man's neck and kissed him.

Johann was stunned. All along, Rosalind was using him. The screams, the pleas, the cries... they were all an act and it wasn't even her. During the days he worried about her, she must've been sleeping on a warm bed.

Rage consumed him. The bitter tang of betrayal poisoned what's left of his compassion, turned him into a man whose only purpose was revenge.

Humigpit ang hawak niya sa poker. Kasabay ng isang hiyaw ay sinugod niya ang dalawa. Nakaiwas ang mga ito pero bumaon ang nakausling bahagi ng poker sa tiklada ng grand piano. Nakita niya ang music sheets. Dinampot niya iyon at inihagis sa apoy sa hearth.

"No!" sigaw ni Rosalind. Nakabawi sa pagkabigla ang lalaki. Sinugod siya nito at sinuntok sa sikmura. Si

Rosalind ay pilit na isinalba ang music sheets sa apoy. Halos kalahati na ng mga pahina ang nasunog.

“Idiot!” Isa pa uling suntok ang ibinigay ng lalaki kay Johann. Sinubukan niyang lumaban ngunit madali siyang naigupo nito. Duguan siya at wala nang lakas na kumilos nang tigilan nito.

“Berne, just kill him!” utos ni Rosalind.

Noon dumating ang dalawang kasamahan nito. Agad siyang itinayo ng mga ito.

“I’ll kill him, all right. But I will make him pay for ruining my sonata first.”

Paulit-ulit nitong sinuntok si Johann. Hindi na niya maidilat ang namamagang mata nang tumigil ang lalaki. But the torture was not yet over.

Hinugot nito ang poker. “Put his hands over the piano.”

Pilit inilapat ng dalawang lalaki ang mga palad niya sa ibabaw ng piano. Napahiyaw siya nang paulit-ulit nitong itusok ang dulo ng poker sa kanyang mga kamay. Hindi pa ito nakontento, hinila siya nito sa tapat ng fireplace at sapilitang itinapat ang duguan niyang mga kamay sa apoy. Wala na siyang lakas para magpumiglas. He just screamed until he nearly lost consciousness.

“Bring him to the woods and tie him to a tree. Let

him freeze to death,” utos ng lalaki sa dalawang tauhan nito.

“But, Berne, what if someone finds him?” usisa ni Rosalind.

“He’ll be dead by the time. Let’s go. We have to leave.”



Nagtaka si Katarina nang makita ang dalawang sasakyang nakaparada sa harap ng kanilang apartment. Her mother and stepfather were home.

She was not used to having them home early in the day. Madalas ay sa gabi na lamang niya nakakasama ang dalawa. Not that she mind. It didn’t matter whether they were home or not. Her mother cared for no one but herself. At least, her Uncle Berne treated her civilly. Although most of the time she was ignored and neglected.

These past few days, they were rarely at home even at night. Hindi niya alam kung saan naglalagi ang dalawa. Frankly, she couldn’t care less. She was better off alone. Alam naman niya kung paano alagaan at asikasuhin ang sarili kahit twelve years old pa lamang siya. Her father taught her everything she knew. What she didn’t learn from her father, she’d learned by herself—like how to survive alone.

“My plan was flawless, but you ruined it. It was your fault, you greedy fool!”

Bumuntong-hininga si Katarina. Sa hagdanan pa lamang ay dinig na niya ang malakas na tinig ng kanyang ina. May pinag-aawayan na naman ang dalawa. Sino kayang kawawang nilalang ang niloko ng mga ito?

It was an embarrassing fact that her mother was a devious woman, good at manipulating other men. She was always the one in control of the relationship. She used her charms and beauty to her advantage. Ilang lalaki na ba bukod sa kanyang ama ang nahumaling sa kakaiba nitong ganda? Hindi nga niya alam kung anong gayuma ang taglay nito at halos sambahin ito ng mga lalaki.

“You should have killed him yourself!”

Napasinghap si Katarina at natigilan sa pagpasok sa sariling silid. Napukaw ang curiosity niya. Dahan-dahan siyang lumapit sa silid ng dalawa at palihim na nakinig. Nagkataong nakaawang ang pinto, kaya nasilip niya ang mga ito. Her mother was clearly upset.

“Johann is not stupid. He will talk, Berne. We’re in big trouble.”

“He’s dead by now. Dead people can’t talk.”

Rosalind scowled. “*Blödmann!*”

Berne speared her with a hard look.

“We have the money. But you had to have this! What are we going to do with this?” Itinaas ng kanyang mama ang isang partially burned folder. “This is useless. *Nutzlos!*” Inihagis nito ang folder sa kama.

“I’ll rewrite it. I can still use it. I’ll find a way.”

Pauyam na humalakhak ang kanyang ina. “You’re a pathetic excuse for a composer, Berne. You can’t write a single piece. If you can, you wouldn’t have agreed to my plan to take Johann in the first place.”

Nakagat ni Katarina ang pang-ibabang labi. Could they be talking about Johann Frei, the famous pianist who was abducted more than a week ago? Halos gabigabing laman ng balita ang paghahanap sa binata. Ang alam niya ay naibigay na ng pamilya nito ang sampung milyong euros na ransom money, pero hindi pa rin pinakawalan ang pianista.

Nakarinig siya ng kaluskos. Nasilip niyang nag-eempake ang kanyang ina.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m leaving you. You’re dumb and useless, Berne. I don’t want to be with you anymore.”

Berne grabbed Rosalind’s arm. “You’re not leaving me!”

Hinila ng babae ang braso at marahas na itinulak

ang asawa. Nawalan ito ng balanse at napaupo sa sahi. “Oh, yes, I will! And I’m taking the money.”

Natapos sa pag-eempake ang kanyang mama. Nang palabas na ito bitbit ang maleta ay bigla na lamang humarang ang lalaki at lumuhod sa harapan nito. Kahit hindi siya malapit sa stepfather, naawa pa rin siya sa nakitang pagsusumamo nito sa kanyang ina.

When Rosalind just laughed, Katarina decided to flee the scene. Her mother’s selfishness, the cold-hearted way she dealt with people—it was unforgivable and shameful. She was ashamed to be her mother’s daughter.

Nakarinig siya ng mga yabag at ang tinig ng kanyang stepfather na patuloy sa pagmamakaawa. Mayamaya pa’y narinig niya ang pagharurot ng sasakyan palayo sa kanilang apartment. Lumabas siya ng silid at bumaba.

Hustong nabuksan niya ang front door nang humarurot palayo ang pick-up ng kanyang stepfather. Napailing na lamang siya. Sanay na siya sa madalas na pagtatalo ng dalawa.

She was more worried about the missing pianist. Kung talagang may kinalaman ang kanyang ina at stepfather sa pagpapadukot dito, kailangan niyang gumawa ng paraan para matulungan ito. Pero ano?

Hindi niya alam kung nasaan ang binata.

Bumalik siya sa itaas at tumuloy sa silid ng mga ito.

Natuon ang pansin niya sa folder na nasa kama. Binuklat niya iyon. Music sheets ang nasa loob ng folder. Sunog ang halos kalahati ng piyesa. Kinuha niya iyon at itinago sa kanyang silid.

Maghapon siyang hindi mapakali. Nasa isip niya si Johann. Gusto niyang tumawag sa mga pulis, pero wala naman siyang maibigay na impormasyon sa mga ito. Ni hindi niya alam kung nasaan ang kanyang ina at stepfather. Binuksan niya ang TV para palipasin ang oras. Sumingit ang isang balita sa regular program. Natagpuan sa kakahuyan sa Großramming ang nawawalang pianist. Naisugod na ito sa ospital at kasalukuyang nasa critical condition.

Kahit paano ay nakahinga nang maluwag si Katarina. At least, he was found. Umusal siya ng maikling dasal para sa recovery nito.

A couple of hours later, a knock sounded at the door. Dalawang local police ang tumambad sa kanya. Kinabahan siya.

“Can I help you?”