

Requiem for Red

by Kaye George
Chapter One

Intrada: A short introduction or prelude. [Early December]

Maddy was worried. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other and picked at the corner of her cardboard sign, watching the passengers coming into the baggage claim area. She waved a sign that said “Cressa Carraway” and hoped she’d recognize her charge. They had met briefly two months ago and Maddy wasn’t sure she’d know her again.

Her cell phone chirped from deep in her coat pocket, and she tucked the sign under her chin to dig it out. It was her brother, Barry. Maddy sighed, then pushed the answer button. “Maddy, I don’t know what to do. I can’t, I can’t...”

“Barry, slow down.” He was getting bad again. It was discouraging. “Where are you?”

“I’m home, Sis. But I’m all alone. How could he? How could he do this?” He was sobbing. “We were so...He just doesn’t...How can I...”

“Barry, stop!” she shouted.

Heads whirled in her direction and she lowered her voice.

“I need to come over, to see you,” she continued, hunching down and turning her back on the staring crowd. “But I can’t come over right now. Later. Sometime tonight, I promise. Right after the interview. Just sit tight and—”

“Hi. I’m Cressa.”

Maddy punched the button to end the call and straightened up.

“Madison Streete, right?” She stuck her hand out for Maddy to shake.

In a flurry of confusion, Maddy dropped her sign, stuck her cell phone into her purse, and took Cressa’s hand.

“That’s me,” Maddy admitted. “I don’t know what possessed me to marry a man named Streete. I sound like a downtown Chicago road when I use my full name.”

Cressa laughed. “I think it’s a great name, Madison.”

“Please call me Maddy,” she said as she grabbed one of Cressa’s two bags and led the way out of the shelter of the airport terminal to face the icy December blast. way out of the shelter of the airport terminal to face the icy December blast.

“Brr,” said Cressa giving an exaggerated shiver.

“I don’t think Minneapolis is any colder than Chicago right now, is it?”

The wind whipped mini-tornadoes of dry snow around their ankles. The lights of the parking lot caught the glint of a few swirling flakes.

“Well...” Cressa hesitated. She looked doubtful as she glanced at Maddy, who was leaning into the weather. Maddy could feel her cheeks starting to glow, a vibrant, alive feeling. She turned to Cressa in the dim, watery sunlight.

“I know,” Maddy said. “I’m probably crazy, but I love this weather. This is what living in Minnesota is all about.”

“Maybe the weather isn’t different in Chicago, but the attitude sure is,” said Cressa. “Chicagoans hate winter. Do all Minnesotans love it?”

It was Maddy’s turn to laugh. “I think most of us do. We’re all a little nuts.”

Her car was parked close in, so they didn’t have more than a few minutes in the icy wind. After they stowed Cressa’s luggage in the back and climbed into the car, Maddy started the engine and cranked the heat all the way up.

“We just got this cold wave day before yesterday,” she said, backing out of her space. “I guess this is your welcoming committee. This way you’ll know what you’re getting yourself into if you accept the job.”

She steered around the corners of the labyrinthine garage, searching for the exit.

“I’m excited to be here,” Cressa said. “And nervous, too. Do I conduct first or interview first?”

“This afternoon you’ll be interviewed by a panel of four people, and that’s scary enough. But tonight, the chamber ensemble meets and you’ll conduct them.”

“Are the others here, too?”

“Yes, all six candidates for the job will conduct tonight. We’ll vote when you’re all finished and should be able to pick our new conductor by tonight or tomorrow, at the latest.”

She glanced at Cress to see what effect her words had, but Cressa just nodded. Maddy was glad to see she looked confident.

Maddy’s reputation was on the line. She was helping a chamber group get started, in hopes it would grow to be a symphony orchestra someday, and the group needed a conductor. Maddy had recommended Cressa for the job after seeing her conduct a piece

she had written last October. Maddy had been impressed with the composition, called “Affirmation,” and with Cressa’s obvious ease on the podium. She hoped she wasn’t wrong about Cressa’s potential.

Maddy slipped into the interview room behind Cressa and took a seat at the long table. The banker-philanthropist, a small rotund man who was funding the group as it got started, motioned Cressa to the head of the table.

The interview panel consisted of Maddy, who was the concertmistress of the group, the banker, another violinist, and Roger Hirt, who seemed to be a local musician of some sort.

After only a few questions, it was obvious to the panel that Cressa would know what to do with a baton. She had studied conducting with the Conductor Emeritus of the Chicago Symphony while studying for her master’s degree.

“What do you like about chamber music?” asked Heidi, the other violinist, a tall blond woman. “Don’t you want to conduct a large orchestra?”

“I grew up playing chamber music,” Cressa answered. “I love conducting symphonies, but the intimacy of a chamber group is more personal. A chamber ensemble is like a gentle relative of the big, bombastic symphony orchestra.”

Maddy saw the group nod.

“What are the future plans for this group?” Cressa asked. “Will it always be a chamber group?”

Roger Hirt answered. “We’d like to perform as a chamber group for a few years. Eventually we want to expand and someday become a full-fledged orchestra, but gradually, not right away.”

“Sounds like an exciting job prospect.” Cressa didn’t seem daunted by the scope of the undertaking. She picked up a paper Maddy had mailed her. “I noticed in this schedule that you’ve already had one concert. Who conducted that one?”

“I did,” answered Roger. “I led the fall rehearsals and the first concert, in November. After we hire a permanent conductor I’m willing to remain on the board in an advisory capacity.”

At that moment Maddy’s phone rang. She snatched it from her purse, jumped up, and left the room, giving an embarrassed “Sorry” as she left.

This time it was her younger brother, Frank.

“Maddy,” his voice, usually calm, broke on her name. “I’m really worried about Barry this time. I just got a weird call from him. Something is bothering him, but he won’t tell

me what it is.”

“I got one, too. I’m going over later, I told him.”

Barry, their older brother, lived in Hopkins near Maddy’s family.

“What did he say?” she asked. “I’m in the middle of some interviews and can’t talk right now.” She and Frank were used to worrying about Barry.

“He was angry at someone he called Woody. Said something about ‘Woody can’t do this to me,’ but I couldn’t calm him down enough to figure out what the problem was.”

“I’ll go over there as soon as I can, Frank. After these interviews. Really, I gotta run now.”

“Should I ask you how you think it went?” asked Cressa, fastening her seat belt.

“You did fine, Cressa,” Maddy said. And she did think Cressa had a good shot. The panel interview had gone well. Cressa didn’t have as many formal credentials as some of the other interviewees, but she did have Maddy’s personal recommendation. Maddy knew she carried weight with the chamber orchestra, since she was one of the founders and also played first-chair violin in it.

If Cressa had turned out to be unsuitable, it would be a reflection on her, so she was relieved to see that her protégée had made a favorable impression. At least one thing was going right.

“Good,” said Cressa. “The more I hear about the job, the more I want it.”

“You don’t mind moving from Chicago?”

“Not really.”

She stopped at Barry’s after dropping Cressa off at her hotel, but he didn’t answer her three doorbell rings and many knocks. Before she drove away she left a message for him from her cell phone.

Barry called back five minutes later, just as she was pulling into traffic on the main road. He pretty much repeated what he’d said to Frank, ranting and not making much sense.

“Maddy, he doesn’t understand,” he sobbed. “I thought we had...I thought we would...”

“Barry!” she shouted.

He was quiet for only a second. “You said you’d be here.”

“I was. I was just there. You didn’t answer the door.”

“Please hurry. I’ll be right here.”

“I can’t do it right now. After the tryouts, later tonight.”

“All right. I’ll be here.”

“And answer the door?”

Barry’s disappearance last July ran through Maddy’s mind. When he surfaced after a month, Madison had to monitor his bipolar medicine daily for a couple of weeks until he was stable again.

He’d been a troubled teen-ager and young man, but she and Frank thought he seemed more at peace since announcing, just a few months ago, that he was gay. Until now.

“Yeah, and answer the door, too.”

She had to leave it at that. She hoped this wouldn’t be a repeat disappearance.

In the evening the musicians met and, one by one, each candidate led the group for ten minutes. They all conducted the same piece, the Bach Orchestral Suite #2 in B minor. Cressa was the last to audition.

Maddy thought Cressa did an excellent job, although she tripped stepping up onto the podium.

“Hi,” Cressa began, smiling, and the group smiled back.

“It looks like you’re working on the Bach?”

They nodded.

“Okay, anybody want to tune?”

When several cellos and a viola nodded she flipped the switch on the electronic tuner. Everyone listened to the pure four-forty A for about three seconds, did some perfunctory tuning, then became quiet.

Cressa grinned at the faces turned upward toward her, most of them wearing bland smiles and expectant eyebrows, and took a deep breath.

“First movement first, okay?”

She raised the baton, the violins and violas tucked their instruments under their chins, the cellos raised their bows, and the one flute licked her lips.

Then Cressa hesitated, put the baton down, and pointed out the pitfall of this movement, the Overture, which has rhythm that is never played as it's written.

Good for her, thought Maddy.

"Just want to make sure that all of you know to double-dot here. Make the long notes longer and the short notes shorter than written," Cressa said.

Then she raised the baton again, and led them through a page and a half of that movement, stopping a couple of times when the rhythm was getting sloppy in order to re-emphasize the timing.

Maddy noted how Cressa cued the flute, approving of her easy, but exacting, style.

"Okay, guys," said Cressa when they stopped. "This is a monstrous-long piece--eight movements, and I only have ten minutes, so we'll have to pick and choose here, can't do it all. I'd like to start the second movement. It's a little tricky, too, because, although there are four beats in every measure, it sounds as if the first beat always comes in the middle of the measure, on the third beat. So count carefully and watch my downbeat or you'll start thinking that the third beat is really the first."

Cressa's conducting was clear, easy to follow, and they stopped only once, when the violas missed an entrance.

After a page of that movement, Cressa stopped them with a quick cutoff motion, then put her hands down, took a deep breath, smiled at everyone, and said, "Let's do the last movement, just because it's so much fun."

It was one of Maddy's favorites, too. She often used it as a wedding recessional with her string quartet because of its rollicking joy.

In the middle of a passage the first chair cello player, the official timekeeper, looked at his wristwatch, waved his bow around, and said Cressa's time was up.

She thanked them, said she'd had a great time (Maddy was sure it wasn't something Cressa would want to do every day, though), got off the podium without falling, and left the practice hall.

The same group that did the interview in the afternoon met after the instruments were put away and all agreed that Cressa Carraway was their first choice. One point in her favor was her smile. Some of the candidates had been so serious they came across as stern. And two of the six didn't seem to know the piece very well, which surprised Maddy since it's a standard piece for chamber orchestras.

Barry didn't answer the door when Maddy went by on her way home. So much for his

promise to be there.

She didn't know if she could go through this again.

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