

ADAGIO

by lizzie Qnert

Lena was raised on violin lessons and minimal parental supervision. Both of which led to her current situation.

“Guard,” the pasty-white, greasy-haired woman called from their shared eight-by-ten holding cell. “When am I gonna get my phone call?”

“Quiet down back there,” the guard replied.

The woman paced and cussed under her breath. “You know, blondie,” she said to Lena. “We got rights. Tell’em you want your call. Maybe if we’re both bitchin’ we’ll get results.”

“I’ve got no one to call.” Lena turned her back on the woman and laid down on the hard bench. The scent of stale sweat and urine was stronger now that she was closer to the floor. She flung her arm over her nose and pulled her knees up into a fetal position. Counting the cracks in the wall, she tuned out her cellmate’s whining.

Ten years ago, when Lena turned sixteen, her parents took off, leaving her alone in their roach-infested rowhouse with no food, no money and no job. Desperate to avoid foster care, she continued to attend high school and kept quiet about her circumstances. She stole the essentials from the local corner store, scrounged for the occasional burger and fries outside of fast-food joints, and learned to swipe wallets from drunk tourists reveling in Baltimore’s Fells Point.

“You look too hotsy-totsy to be stuck in here,” Greasy-hair said, poking the toe of her scuffed, red stiletto into Lena’s bare back.

A formal black gown was an unlikely outfit for a prison cell, but for Lena’s line of work it was de rigueur. Looking and acting the part of a cultured young woman was essential to her success.

“Looks can be deceiving,” Lena said, pushing up to a sitting position. Strands of honey-blond hair fell messily from her updo.

“What you in for?”

“Betrayal,” Lena muttered.

“Cheatin’ ain’t a crime. If it was, my asshole ex-husband woulda got life.” The woman cackled at her cleverness.

Lena rested her elbows on her knees and cradled her head in her hands.

Greasy-hair sat down on the bench beside her. “Come on, blondie. Talk to me. We ain’t goin’ nowhere and if you clam up, it’s gonna be a damn long night. Tell me your name at least.”

Head still in hands, Lena twisted her neck to look at the woman. “Lena. My name is Lena.”

“I’m Mariann. Pleased to meet ya.”

Mariann. You’ve got to be kidding me. Mrs. Hawley’s first name is Mariann. The universe is taunting me.

Mariann Hawley was Lena’s guardian angel and high school music teacher. Music class was the one hour a week when Lena felt alive. She could let her imagination soar on the trills of a flute or her worry pump out with every beat of a drum. Every piece Mrs. Hawley shared with the class was a new adventure for Lena, but only one moved her to tears, Albinoni’s Adagio, a haunting violin solo, and the musical embodiment of Lena’s lonely soul.

“So, Lena,” Mariann said, picking her teeth with her pointy red fingernails. “Who’s gonna bail you out? Ain’t you got no family?”

Family. For many, that word conjures images of love and safety, but to Lena it was synonymous with disappointment. Abandonment cut the deepest, but earlier letdowns had left a trail of scars. Sign-ups for violin lessons opened her freshman year, when her parents were still around. Lena signed her name at the top of the list, even though she would have to buy or rent the instrument. She rarely asked for anything, but wanting—no, needing—to release her ragged emotions through music, she begged her parents for lessons.

“You think we’re made of money?” her mom scoffed as she scrolled her Twitter feed on the very latest iPhone.

“Only spoiled little rich bitches take violin lessons,” her dad said, kicking off his Air Jordan’s.

When Mrs. Hawley found Lena’s name crossed out with angry black pen slashes, she guessed the problem, and—against school policy—allowed Lena to borrow a school-owned violin.

“No, no family,” Lena said to the concrete floor.

Mariann bumped her thigh against Lena’s. “Aack, don’t sweat it. If you got money, you can post your own bail. If you don’t, your public defender can get you a bondsman.”

Lena nodded, still too stunned to consider what would happen next.

Mariann stood and stretched. Her cropped top rode up, revealing a butterfly tattoo on the side of her stomach. Her heels clicked on the concrete as she sauntered to the metal door. Threading her fingers through the steel grates, she looked down the empty hallway. “I want my damn phone call!” No answer. “Do you hear me?” After a minute of silence, Mariann sighed and sat back down on the bench beside Lena. “I’m here for solicitation. Ain’t my first time and won’t be the last. A girl’s gotta eat.”

Another woman doing what’s required to survive. Having been in dire straits herself, Lena warmed to her cellmate. She slipped off her Jimmy Choo heels and tucked them under the bench. Sliding her back against the wall, she pulled her feet up to sit cross-legged. Her silk gown shimmered under the harsh fluorescent lights.

“I hear you,” Lena said.

“Puh-lease,” Mariann said, rolling her eyes. “Like your fancy-ass has ever been hungry.”

“It’s been a minute since my gut was eating itself, but trust me, I’ve been there.”

Mariann twisted sideways on the bench to face Lena. “Okay, then how’d you get out?”

“By playing the violin.”

“Yeah, right,” Mariann snorted.

“It’s true.”

Once Mrs. Hawley saw Lena's prodigious aptitude for the violin, in addition to the school sponsored lessons, she tutored her every day after school from three to five for her entire high school career. During her sophomore year—probably in response to Lena's obvious weight loss—the tutoring sessions included a snack (aka dinner). By her junior year, Mrs. Hawley was bringing her thrift shop clothes, coats and shoes. Maybe she suspected Lena's parents had left, or maybe she simply thought they were struggling financially; either way, Lena was grateful.

“Then spill,” Mariann said. She tossed her patent-leather heels off and leaned against the wall, pulling her knees up to her chest and propping her feet on the bench.

“Back in high school, I started playing outside of the food court in Inner Harbor. I'd lay my violin case open in front of me and play classical solo pieces. The tourists loved being serenaded during their visit to Charm City. On summer weekends, I'd go home with a hundred a night.”

And any leftover food she could salvage from the restaurants' dumpsters. Lena knew she had to squirrel the money away to get through the rest of the year. Even with her austerity, by February (at the latest) Lena struggled to keep the rent paid, the power on and food in her belly.

Mariann rubs the silk fabric of Lena's gown between her tobacco-stained fingertips. “A hundred a night didn't buy you this bourgee dress.”

Lena's walk-in closet was full of Dolce & Gabbana, Gucci and Prada; quite different from the ill-fitting, hand-me-downs from her childhood. She sighed. “You're right.”

“So?” Mariann said.

“So, one night I got an offer.”

Mariann looked down at her pleather booty shorts and let out a harsh laugh. “Bet it ain't the kind of offer I get.”

Lena laid her head back against the concrete wall. “It was an offer to play at a society event. Paid five hundred for five hours.”

Mariann let out a low whistle. “Damn! Where can I get me a violin?”

Mrs. Hawley's graduation gift to Lena was a Stentor violin. Lena adored the fine-grained, solid spruce top and ebony fittings. It was the finest thing she had ever owned.

As word of her skill spread, her event bookings increased, and Lena needed a higher quality instrument. She retired her Stentor to a place of honor, resting on a custom-made stand on her living room mantle. Though she loved her new, professional-grade Yamaha, she still treasured her first violin—at least she used to.

“I had three dozen in my car earlier tonight,” Lena said dryly. “That, in fact, is why I'm here.”

“Girl,” Mariann said, backhanding Lena's tanned shoulder. “I don't follow. How can having a few dozen violins land you in the joint?”

Good question—one of the many Lena wished she had asked. But when her longtime benefactor, Mrs. Hawley, requested a favor, Lena said yes without a second thought. After years of Mrs. Hawley's kindness and charity, how could Lena refuse?

Mrs. Hawley's son was flying into BWI for a long overdue visit. Unfortunately, his plane was scheduled to arrive at the same time a shipment of thirty-six student Stentor violins were due to clear customs at the South Jersey Port in Camden, New Jersey. The school budget being tight, Mrs. Hawley didn't want to incur extra docking fees, so she asked Lena to pick up the violin shipment from the Container Freight Station.

Timing was tricky. Lena was already scheduled to play at a swanky corporate party in Federal Hill at seven. In order to get to the venue in time, she would need to deliver the violins to Mrs. Hawley by six.

Though it raised a few eyebrows at the freight station, her formal attire may have sped up the loading process. Several male employees helped her tuck the three dozen violin cases into her Escalade, leaving just enough of a gap for her to see out of her rearview mirror. All went smoothly until it didn't.

Lena shook her head with despair. “When I crossed into Maryland, I was done for.”

Mariann furrowed her eyebrows and twisted her features into a what-the-hell-are-you-talking-about face. “Ain't violins allowed in Maryland?”

“Not when six of them have cocaine taped to the inside of their bellies.”

Mariann popped off the bench and threw her hands on her hips. “Damn girl! I didn’t peg you as a drug runner.”

Lena dropped her head towards her chest. Her shoulders hunched forward. She didn’t cry when her mom and dad abandoned her. Not a single tear was shed when her high school sweetheart dumped her for a cheerleader. Her eyes were dry when her one and only friend moved out-of-state. But, after years of reliable kindness and care, Mrs. Hawley’s willingness to gamble with Lena’s future was a gut punch. Lena allowed a few salty tears to fall before wiping her face with the back of her hand. She lifted her head and her mascara-smudged eyes met Mariann’s. Squaring her shoulders, Lena inhaled and clenched her jaw with resolve. She had always faced hard times head on. This would be no different.

“I’m not. I’m a violinist.”