

# ***UNSTRUNG***

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# **Chapter One**

*Boston, Massachusetts*

## **Olivia**

Sasha nudges me. Not only am I to move my head—propped on ink-stained fingers—I’m to stand. Following her lead, I rise and squint at the judge, a dour-looking man cloaked in black. He moves with condemning authority. My hazy gaze registers pilgrim.

*Burn the witch!*

It reverberates across three hundred years and into this modern-day courtroom. A baritone voice announces Judge Nicholson. Gravity dominates and I begin a slow sink into the chair. Sasha grabs my arm. “No, no . . . no, Liv. Don’t sit.” I’ve never noticed the grating tone of Sasha’s voice—a woefully out-of-tune E string. Slapping my hands on the table, I thrust upward. Good thing the fingers are insured. I jerk my arm from Sasha’s grip. I need legal counsel, not corporeal support. I can stand on my own two feet. I’ve

been doing so for forty-six years. The judge hammers his gavel like a blacksmith on steroids. Mercy would be a direct hit to the head.

“Could you please not do that?” I ask.

“Pardon?” His eyes match all his narrowness.

“The gavel—must you? I’m erect. What more do you want?”

“Miss Pease,” he says, addressing my best friend, who at the moment is dressed as my attorney. “The Starbucks your client frequents may not have opened yet, but even at this early hour she continues to test the law.” He glances at some papers. “Disturbing the peace, possession of a dangerous weapon, malicious destruction of property, and resisting arrest. It will pale compared to the charges she’s already facing, but if she likes, I have no issue holding her in contempt as well.”

“Absolutely not, Your Honor. Our apologies to the court. Mrs. Van Doren has had an incredibly upsetting night.”

“Pfft . . .” I breathe, stealing a backward glance at Rob, who is the lone spectator in the galley. “The only incredibly upsetting part is that I didn’t smash the taillights on his Porsche before the cops showed up.”

Sasha juts an elbow into my side. “Liv, shut up.” The remnants of a half-dozen gin martinis slosh about my stomach. I press the back of my hand to my mouth and nod; speaking isn’t an option.

“Mrs. Van Doren, are you going to be . . .” the judge asks. I nod more fervently. He points to the baritone bailiff. Like a knight in shining armor, he whisks a metal trashcan from across the room to under my nose. The retching echoes as it would in any hollow castle. “Get her some water, please.”

A different courtroom worker delivers a water-filled paper cup. I sip a mouthful and grasp the bailiff's arm as he attempts to retract the trashcan. Rinsing, I spit into the receptacle. "What?" I say into the bailiff, who looks at me as though I've spit on Lady Justice. "Like it's not already a trashcan full of vomit?" He backs away. I turn toward Sasha and spin back to the bailiff. "Thank you." I have manners, they just have so very little to do with my life.

"Miss Pease, can your client proceed in a civil manner? Or perhaps spending the remainder of the weekend in lockup would give her perspective."

"No, Judge Nicholson. Again, our apologies."

I lean into Sasha and whisper, "Is his name really Jack Nicholson?" Another jab comes via Sasha's elbow. She's *so* going to hear about that later. "Right. I'm good," I volunteer. I want this over with. I take a cleansing breath and state my case: "Yes. I absolutely beat the shit out of my husband's Porsche with a baseball bat."

*A looks could kill* glare darts from me to Rob. One arm is slung over the chair beside him, his fingers tapping as a rhythmic unit. Fascinating—visible nerves from my cool-to-the-core husband.

"Liv," Sasha repeats. "Just don't say anything." Her flawlessly aligned teeth are tightly gritted. I peer hard at the near ventriloquist feat. I should probably take a hint and be her cooperative puppet.

It's not in me.

"I'm sorry," I announce to her and Judge Nicholson. "I didn't realize we were questioning the part about me bashing the Porsche with a Louisville Slugger."

Honestly, by the time the cops showed up, I doubt a junkyard compactor could have done a better job. I'm nothing if not thorough.

The judge looks curiously from me to Sasha. "Were we, Miss Pease? Going to debate Mrs. Van Doren's actions on the evening of September 8?"

Sasha sighs and closes her eyes. "No, but . . ." she continues, rallying the war cry that makes her a hell of a best friend, "there are extreme extenuating circumstances. Unbeknownst to Mrs. Van Doren, Mr. Van Doren used her family home in Wellesley, entrusted to her by her late father, for collateral. With the failure of Mr. Van Doren's latest business venture, it means she'll lose the home. And her mother—"

*My mother . . .* Now we're getting somewhere. Although Eugenia Klein is, by far, the lesser mitigating fact linked to this evening.

"Is counsel under the impression I was being anything but sarcastic? Have the rules of law changed? Is it your assumption that I'm going to entertain 'extenuating circumstance'"—the judge places air quotes around the phrase—"during an arraignment?"

"No, Your Honor," Sasha says with a demureness I would never tack to her. Yet she's so willing to rush to my aid. If they recast Wonder Woman, she'd get the part hands down.

I turn toward her. "Why the fuck aren't there more women superheroes? That's just wrong."

"Liv," she says again, her jaw as stiff as cut glass.

The judge ignores me. "As it stands," he says, "I'm certain Mrs. Van Doren will regale the court thoroughly on her appointed date." His practiced gaze shifts to me. "The

beauty of the weighty wheels of justice, ma'am. It gives you time to rehearse and craft.” He slips glasses to the end of a nose so pointed I’m thinking about woodpeckers. Maybe Jack Nicholson cast as a woodpecker. Judge Nicholson reads from desktop papers. “Ergo, by the appointed date, I’m sure the defendant will have counsel convinced she was arrested while holding a Q-tip, not a baseball bat. Certainly not while assaulting a \$90,000 vehicle, aggravating circumstance by demanding that the responding officers . . .” The judge clears his throat. “Let me read directly from the report . . . The alleged perpetrator said, *‘Super. You brought guns. What’s the going rate for shooting asshole husbands? And do you take credit cards?’*”

My head clears as the visuals crystalize. If someone was documenting Olivia Klein Van Doren bad behaviors, this might make the top ten. I chew on a thumbnail. Sasha sighs again.

“Miss Pease, I suggest you come at this with your plea-bargain tools honed and ready. Based on Mrs. Van Doren’s in-court behavior, I’m inclined to go with the DA’s charges. Since the Porsche is only registered in her husband’s name, those charges include malicious destruction of property, disturbing the peace, and so on . . .” Judge Nicholson speaks to the Huckleberry Finn DA seated next to us. He hasn’t uttered a word and continues to scribble on a legal pad. No doubt he’s comparing the charges with fresh-from-law-school crib notes. “Does the State wish to add anything else?”

“No, Your Honor. I mean yes.”

I roll my eyes.

“The State is willing to set bail at \$25,000.”

“Your Honor, Mrs. Van Doren is a respect—well, a longtime resident of the Back Bay community.” Sasha yanks the lapels of her stylish suit. She’s remarkably put together for the crack of dawn. I rub my hands over the thighs of dirty slacks while trying to hold a torn pocket in place. I’m guessing public vomiting and my appearance don’t scream *Back Bay resident*, an elite edge of Boston brownstones that most people pass by to daydream about. “Aside from her prominent, permanent address,” Sasha says, “Mrs. Van Doren is a professional violinist. She’s an extremely gifted musician.” I sling back my neck, wishing Sasha hadn’t brought that up. Apparently she thinks it’s a plus. Maybe it is; it’s hard to tell. My relationship with music—well, it’s in worse shape than the Porsche. Sasha goes on, “Clearly, this was a singular . . . uh, unusual, private domestic issue that unfortunately turned public.”

Is she nuts? I never realized what a cool liar Sasha is. In the past year, *domestic issues* have become more of a staple than a quart of milk in our brownstone. Yet, Sasha continues to spew accolades.

“Her professional commitments alone guarantee that Mrs. Van Doren should be released on her own recognizance.” That part’s true. Thanks to my husband, I’m not in a position to abandon a stable income. I glance at Rob. The judge raises his hand and Sasha immediately ceases and desists.

“Olivia Van Doren . . .” But as he reads from some papers, his narrow look widens. He smiles. “You’re Olivia Klein, violinist with the New England Symphony?”

*On the other hand, when thrust into the spotlight . . .* “Yes, Your Honor.” I’m not a household name. But in the right circle, I have rock-star status. Apparently Judge Nicholson knows the circle. I run my fingers through my hair, prepared to gracefully

accept inbound compliments. Well, as gracefully as one can with drying vomit on the ends.

He sits up taller, as if suddenly in the presence of greatness. “I’m a tremendous connoisseur of the arts—music, art, the ballet.” I nod in solidarity—as if violinists spend off-hours scouring museums and dining on . . . well, *air* with ballerinas. “If I’d only had the skill to . . .” He clenches silent what are surely pained words about never progressing beyond third-chair, high school musician status. His gaze returns to me. “I’m afraid my only talent is listening, an acute appreciation for the fine arts. Music in particular.”

*I never would have guessed . . .*

“My wife, Conchetta, and I have been season ticket holders to the New England Symphony for more than twenty years.”

I smile admiringly. “Is that right?” What are the odds? A judge who covets symphony tickets more than box seats at Fenway Park. Perhaps he’d like an upgrade to the gallery balcony? A glance at Sasha says I shouldn’t make the offer.

His expression changes and he points his gavel at me. “But the reason I know your name is because I saw it in *Musical Notes*.” I nod at Judge Nicholson’s reference to the highbrow, online journal that covers New England’s finer musical offerings. Orchestra mates subscribe. I avoid. He taps his gavel lightly, as if recalling specifics—perhaps a review of the ensemble recital given at the governor’s mansion last spring. Even I admit it was a stellar moment. But from the obvious knot of anger that is his face, I’d say we’re not recalling the same *fine arts* experience. “The article, it was about the Sotheby’s auction of your Amati violin.”

Shit. The gig at the governor's mansion would have been a much cleaner talking point. "Uh, that's correct, Your Honor." Quickly, I craft strategy. This can play to my advantage, maybe get the charges dropped. "How impressive that you noticed," I say, coaxing tears. Sasha twists toward me; her face contorts to a confounded look. "I'm afraid the sale of the Amati was a cruel necessity. Before tonight, that incident was my husband's only financial catastrophe. It came as quite a shock to me. And the Amati, as painful a sacrifice as it was—"

"If I recollect from the article, the instrument was a gift from your father on your sixteenth birthday. Is that right?"

"Yes. It is." I sniff at his photographic memory, which prods a vague recall of the article. I didn't actually read it. Sasha summarized the story when it ran: a dozen intense bidders, the vintage Amati going for a cool \$600K. It was \$50K over what I'd anticipated. I paid off Rob's debt and bought a case of Cristal with some of the surplus. As for the rest—I did what I always do with extra dividends. But that's not the story Judge Nicholson needs to hear right now. "Years ago, in light of my gift, in hopes that I'd attend the Boston Conservatory . . . well, *Daddy* only wanted me to have the very best. He treasured the Amati—almost as much as me." I briefly close my eyes, forcing down a slight surge of vomit.

"But the article, it said you didn't graduate from the Conservatory."

"Uh . . . no," I admit. "It wasn't a good fit. I transferred to the Manhattan School of Music."

Satisfied with the mention of the Conservatory's rival school, he looks back at the paperwork. His constricted gaze shoots back up. "And so you earned your degree in

music there, at the Manhattan School of Music?” My mouth gapes at his anticipative outcome. The judge shuffles in his high seat. “I see. Not a good fit either. Is that correct, Mrs. Van Doren?”

I note that I am no longer Olivia Klein, New England Symphony violinist. “Uh, not quite. Again, not the right atmosphere for me.” He waits. “But after that I was accepted into UNC School of the Arts. It’s in Winston-Salem . . . North Carolina.” I say this assuming he cannot recognize culture beyond Connecticut. “UNC, it’s an excellent program too.”

“From which you finally graduated.”

“No. Not exactly.” My teeth are clenched. The demand to know pisses me off. In fact, any mention of North Carolina pisses me off. I shake my head, which now throbs from the fresh smack of ancient history.

Sasha comes to my aid. “Your Honor, is this really relevant to Mrs. Van Doren’s current circumstance?”

Judge Nicholson stares as if I’m being arraigned for homicide. His tiny eyes cut to Sasha. “You’re not without a point, counselor.”

“Just to add . . .” I say.

“Don’t add anything,” Sasha hisses.

Too late. “Since Your Honor is such a connoisseur of the arts, I’m sure you appreciate the challenge involved in earning a chair as a violinist with a major symphony.” He nods, apparently aware of the grueling three-day ordeal, whereby symphony applicants are listened to via blind audition—you’re not even allowed to wear shoes, which might indicate gender, onto the partitioned stage. About two in two hundred

violinists make the last round of cuts. Only one is awarded the coveted available chair. “Just so you know, I earned my place with the symphony sans degree, on my first audition.”

“Personal history speaks to your talent.” He looks between the papers on his desk and me. “As well as your inability to follow the law, which you may wish to note is not a suggestion.”

Judge Nicholson removes his glasses and taps them on the desk. “Your counsel is correct, Mrs. Van Doren. While irrelevant to this proceeding, I just happened to recall the article about the sale of the Amati. Such a coveted, beautiful instrument. It made an impression on me.”

Excellent. A chance to regain his sympathies. “I was under a great deal of duress at the time.” I glance back at Rob. He does his best to avoid eye contact, inspecting cracks in the courtroom ceiling. “It nearly crushed me, parting with the Amati—a sacred piece of musical history.” A breath shudders from my belly as I swipe at a tear. “Then tonight, when I learned that my husband lost my family home to—”

Judge Nicholson holds up his hand. “The reason I recall the article, Mrs. Van Doren, is your quote in *Musical Notes*.”

“Was I quoted?” I glance at Sasha, whose head has bowed, her delicate cheeks ballooning with air.

“Yes. Something to the effect of ‘I told my husband to take it . . . sell it . . . burn it . . . whatever.’ Said you ‘never wanted the damn thing in the first place.’” My fragile smile crumbles like Rob’s latest investment deal. The judge continues. “While I’m surely paraphrasing, it’s the type of callous remark that sticks in the craw of a true music lover.

But by all means, I'm a fair man." He leans back in his high leather chair, brushing his hand through courtroom air. "Tell me if *Musical Notes* fabricated a slanderous remark for the sake of sensational content."

I dip toward Sasha and whisper, "Am I, like, under oath here or anything?" She doesn't reply, rubbing two fingers across her forehead.

"I, uh . . . It's not that simple, Judge. You don't—"

Sasha interrupts. "Your Honor, my client is here for an arraignment based on the incident stemming from the evening of September 8, not—with all due respect—to have her character judged."

He holds up a hand. "It pains me to say it, Miss Pease, but you are correct." Sasha relaxes a bit, though it hardly stops him from sharing his opinion. "However, this is my courtroom." He smiles. "Aside from your client's careless disregard for an instrument that is a revered piece of art, her admitted conduct this evening proves her character could benefit from a modicum of judgment, perhaps some advice." He looks directly at me. "When you return here, Mrs. Van Doren, know that over privileged attitudes won't be tolerated. Not the kind that takes for granted a God-given gift or callously sells a coveted Amati like it's a garage sale fiddle."

The word *fiddle* sinks into my ears, triggering a full-blown eruption of ancient history. "*Come on, Livy . . . Grab your fiddle and play me something fun . . .*" I close my eyes; the smell of Kentucky Clear is sudden and strong, so is Sam's voice.

Judge Nicholson interjects; the visuals vanish like dying fireflies.

"Clearly you were an over-indulged child, who grew into an entitled adult. One who sees it as acceptable to destroy property like a common hoodlum, blaming others for her

behavior.” He pauses to offer Rob a sympathetic glance. “May I suggest some serious introspection before returning here? Perhaps an anger management class. Work past whatever it is in life that has turned you into, exactly . . .” He looks me up and down. “*This.*”

That’s it. I won’t be judged. Not by a man who is the most abhorrent garden-variety elitist snob—an *admitted* talentless wannabe. “You know what?” I take a formidable step toward the judge. The bailiff takes one too. “Go fuck yourself, Jack Nicholson. Parting with a hunk of wood that came with more strings attached to it than an entire violin section has nothing to do with how awful I turned out.” It’s said with more clarity than anything I’ve uttered so far. But as I lunge forward, the stiff arm of the bailiff impedes any progress. “Superior, presumptive jerk!” I say, flailing about. The next thing I know, I am physically subdued and cuffs are clamped around my wrists. I don’t look at Rob or Sasha as two bailiffs usher me out of the courtroom. But I do glance back, speaking to anyone who is listening. “You don’t have the first clue why I turned out exactly like this.”