

Chapter 1

1953. *Providence, Rhode Island.* The train stopped and her cello hit up against her side. “Here, Miss.” A young man handed her suitcase down, and she went quickly out ahead across the crowded platform and through the small station. Outside, cars were bumper to bumper, windshields flashed in the sun. Businessmen hurried toward the station, and a woman dragged a suitcase and a child, one in each hand. The sunlight was hot on the concrete sidewalk. She held a hand above her eyes and spotted the Desoto they’d told her to look for behind a large station wagon with wooden panels. Charles Breedlove sprang from the driver’s seat.

“Irena, right? Irena Siesel?”

She was twenty-one and newly graduated from the conservatory. There was that blouse she’d worn with a scalloped neckline and a dark skirt, gathered at the waist. She was strong looking, large boned with wide shoulders and a square, determined jaw, soft gray eyes and long hair that fell forward when she played the cello, parting like a curtain to reveal a driven but dreamy expression, as if she saw phantom shadows.

She’d been hired to perform at the music festival last minute because the cellist with The Modern Strings, a new ensemble group in New York City, had broken his arm. Patrick Dempsey, the group’s violist had phoned her. They’d had trouble finding someone, and John Pincer who taught her at the conservatory had given him her name. They were playing the final event in a four-day festival that would showcase classical music from the Baroque to the moderns and debut a new composition by Arthur Cohen, a rising young composer and their pianist. Was she available, could she do it? Had she studied or performed

modern classical music? It was a difficult piece.

Yes, she'd answered readily to each question, though the conservatory hadn't taught the new modern composers. "I'll take the train down Monday morning."

He said they'd fit in rehearsals during the festival and he'd mail her the music. Charles Breedlove, the quartet's violinist, would pick her up at the station in Providence.

A few days earlier, she'd been offered a teaching job at the music academy in Boston where she'd once taken lessons, but if you were good enough, and at the conservatory they'd called her gifted, exceptional even, you performed, you didn't teach. Mildred Ridley had managed a career performing the cello, and so had Phyllis Kraeuter. Erica Morini, the only female solo violinist in recent years (there were no solo violists and cellists), claimed the problem with women performers was they lacked the single-minded devotion necessary to sacrifice everything to their instruments.

Charles drove through the crowded streets. Cars glistened in the sunlight, horns blared. At the far side of town, she smelled the stink of the fish canneries through the open windows. Then they reached the city's outskirts where they drove faster. A small track of recently built houses appeared then disappeared, and billboards flashed by too fast to read them. As they left the city, the road wound closer to the ocean where tall sea grasses grew by the roadside and the water appeared in patches.

"I love a road that winds along the coast, don't you?" Charles called out.

A damp wind blew through the car as they turned onto a two-lane road close to the water. When they crossed the bridge that spanned the inlet, her hair streamed out the window. Above her the sky felt huge.

Charles asked about her name, and she told him she'd been named after her grandmother and called Reenie when she was growing up.

"Reenie," he repeated. "That's brilliant. Reenie, you are."

Later she was introduced that way and her name differed only on the program.

Charles drove casually, ignoring speed limits and not slowing even when they crossed a high, narrow bridge with open grating above the inlet. One hand stayed on the steering wheel and the other waved about. “Have you heard Arthur Cohen’s recent recording? We’re featured on it. He and Patrick met at Yale, and last year when they both moved to New York City, they formed The Modern Strings. We’ve played to several good-sized audiences, but this performance will be the biggest.” He glanced across the seat at her. “You have a copy of the score, don’t you? Patrick said he’d sent it to you. John Pincer claims you’re very talented. In fact, he says you’re unprecedented. We were lucky to get you, since we only learned last week that Les Carmichael broke his arm.” He glanced across the seat at her. “Water skiing,” he added. “No doubt he had a girl on both sides.”

They passed marshes and fields thick with brush. In the bright air, everything gleamed—beachfront hotels, the small white houses with dark green trim, and the ocean behind them. The sun was a glowing white ball. Something was about to happen that would change whatever happened afterward.

“We’re very forward looking,” Charles called out over the rush of wind blowing past the windows. “It’s implied, after all, in the name, so it’s perfect that we’ll be the one group at the festival with a female musician.”

“Don’t worry I’ll fit in,” she laughed. “I’ll wear trousers.”

He said they’d be playing the final concert and the other concerts, featuring Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, would lead up to theirs. The festival, held in a mansion in Newport, would attract a large, wealthy audience. There were great opportunities for musicians who performed the new and more difficult music. Did she know? Did she realize? He tossed out the names of modern artists—Mark Rothko and Willem De Kooning.

“David Tudor, John Cage, and the likes of them are equally

transforming music,” he said. “It’s revolutionary.”

“Yes,” she answered, “of course,” and in the distance, she made out a line of events, each opening toward the next in a vast spread of opportunity.

They had a ferry ride to the island where Charles bought them hotdogs, and Reenie stood on the deck watching the narrow island’s coast spread into view. Mansions dangled at the top of the cliffs, like a strand of beads on a fancy necklace. They hung over the steep descent to the water. Charles pointed at one of the largest, named The Breakers, a sprawling white mansion he said the Jamesons had rented for the performances.

“I love this, don’t you?” he asked. “Pretending for a few days that we’re rich?”

When the ferry reached the island, they retrieved the car and drove away from the small town toward the island’s point. She saw walls of white and blue hydrangeas, a field of blue delphiniums, boats in the harbors, and the ocean laced with waves. White stones shimmered in the heat through a screen of greenery. They passed a pasture with a yellow barn, then tall hedges growing close to the road, hiding vast grounds and long drives leading to the houses along the coast.

“That’s where the performances will be held, behind that black iron-gate,” Charles told her, pointing at a placard with “The Breakers” written on it. A mile or so farther up the coast, the Jameson’s driveway cut a circle through boxwoods, and a rambling, three-story Tudor rose up out of the sand.

“They’ve put us all in the main house, except for Arthur who’s staying in one of the cottages. Did you say you’d heard that recording of his? You must if you haven’t. He’s taken every piece of music written and synthesized them into his own style. Perform Arthur Cohen now, and you’ll end up in Carnegie Hall or the Met. That’s what it feels like. That’s what I predict.”

Men milled about the cars and taxis, unloading suitcases and instruments. Charles walked her to the doorway. “Oh look, there’s Thomas Baxter and Louis Heath. They’re performing

Bach tomorrow evening.”

They walked onto the front portico lined with potted ferns and stepped inside a large entryway with a chandelier the size of a dining room table. Her room, Charles told her, was upstairs, the fourth door on the right, just down from his. He set her suitcase and cello by the stairs.

“They can sleep up to thirty people here, and I think our numbers are close to that, with all the performing musicians, along with a few guests.”

She followed him down a central hallway, past a parlor and dining room. “Patrick and Arthur are by the water. Come, I’ll show you. I’ll introduce you.”

A comfortable looking living room in the back of the house opened to the outside through a pair of glass doors that led to a stone patio. White hydrangeas ringed the lawn, and near the terrace yellow roses bloomed. Beyond them, she saw the ocean, light glinting off the waves. Three men and a woman stood at the end of the lawn, looking out at the sea.

“The two on the right are Harmon Rothschild and George Shields,” Charles said waving.

“Didn’t Harmon Rothschild perform as a soloist with the Philadelphia Symphony this past winter?”

“Yes, I believe you’re right. See that man on the left next to the woman? That’s Patrick Dempsey, our violist who telephoned you.”

“Who is the woman?”

“Adele Jameson, our patron. Patrick and Arthur met her last year. She’s funding the entire festival.”

Patrick bent toward Adele Jameson, and his head obscured hers. Beyond them the cliffs fell off sharply, and below that was a rocky beach. Close to the shore, the water was pale blue with white foam. The sunlight blinded where it touched the ocean, but when Reenie squinted, she could see far out where the blue sky darkened.

“Arthur is the one in the ocean. Do you see him?”

She held her hand above her eyes. Other musicians were walking out onto the lawn. She felt pulled toward something she couldn't see, something important.

"That's his dark head above the waves," Charles said. "Earlier this summer we performed at an event on Long Island. A group of us stayed up late drinking the night before. Arthur stayed the latest, but the next morning he was up before the rest of us, swimming laps. I watched him going back and forth along the shoreline and thought, how does he do it? Then of course, his performance was the most remarked upon." He paused, waiting for her to respond.

"Strange," she said.

"Impressive. Do you swim?"

"No," she answered.

"He'll get you in the water at some point. He has a way of convincing us all."

In the distance, the dark head skimmed above the waves. It looked like the swimmer was approaching the shore, but just before he reached it, he turned and swam back out into deeper water.

Later that evening, a group of them gathered outside on the lawn. The sun was about to drop into the water, all that fiery light being extinguished. Arthur stood next to her, smoking. He'd just told her a story about a whale that had washed up onto shore.

She didn't find him immediately attractive, not with his straight, dark hair worn a little too long, and she was on her guard. Violet Hammer at the conservatory had had that affair with her violin instructor that had ended so badly. No one was surprised when she didn't pass her solo performance.

"It's a true story," Arthur insisted about the whale. "I heard it from a fisherman near the island's point when I went for a walk. The whale washed up onto the shore, and the fisherman happened upon it. It was still living when he found it."

“Was the fisherman able to save it?”

Arthur shook his head. “He got help and they tried to pull it into the ocean, but the whale was too heavy and the waves kept bringing it back. They migrate at the end of the summer, and sometimes one comes too close to the island.” He gestured toward the water. “They’re swimming out there somewhere, just beyond the point.” She peered far out into the ocean. “You received my music, didn’t you?”

She told him she had. It was the hardest piece of music she’d ever played, but she told him it was interesting and impressive. He was older, had studied composing with Paul Hindemith at Yale and then with Walter Piston at Harvard. He’d already won those awards for his piano playing.

He talked about Schoenberg and the importance of serialism and atonal music, giving vague descriptions of what he called “new” music that broke with tradition. The new music sounded nothing like the old, and the world needed boldness, not composers like Leonard Bernstein who catered to popular taste. “The fundamentals of music are rapidly changing,” he said, “and we won’t know who the most influential composers are for many years. We have to constantly reconsider what makes music, music.”

“I guess that’s the work of a composer,” she said, surprised at how he’d dismissed Bernstein.

“It’s not just the work of a composer,” he told her. “It’s the work of any serious musician.”

The sun had dropped into the water, pulling all the light out of the sky. The only piece left was a deep pink glow at the horizon. His voice had a ring of certainty. *I’ll be such a musician*, she told herself.

She knew, didn’t know. She was in the memory unit when the envelope with the music book arrived. It came by post, a thick brown envelope addressed to Irena Reynolds at the house on Hickory Street, then forwarded to her room #139 in the mem-

ory unit. The envelope contained a sonata composed by Arthur Cohen and left for her in his will. There was also a letter from Deborah Cohen, his niece and executor of his estate, along with a copy of his obituary and a music program from the Newport, Rhode Island Festival in 1953.

She forgot to dress, didn't seem to know or hear. Her mind was elsewhere. They worried about loss of balance and falling was a danger. She'd moved into the memory unit several months ago because of the strokes. Words didn't string together. She stuttered on sounds, didn't know how they fit, and she forgot what day it was, couldn't be counted on to know, couldn't count. She didn't follow or understand, but she heard everything—voices in the hallway, machines beeping, intercoms speaking. The memory unit contained endless floors and halls, each with countless rooms. She heard them all around her, a labyrinth.

Arrangements had been made. Her will and directives were signed. Did she want to review them? Her daughter Judith had many questions, a sudden interest in family history. Where was Irena's father buried, and when and how did he die? What part of Germany had Irena's grandmother immigrated from, and was she Jewish by any chance? Wasn't there a story about her speaking Yiddish the last years of her life when she moved in with Irena's mother? And who was this composer, Arthur Cohen? Do you remember playing with him at a festival in Newport, Rhode Island? He must have held you in high esteem. The letter says you were the only person outside the estate to receive his music. If you died before him, he wanted the composition destroyed.

Outside the window clouds circled, an eye peered through the glass panes. A giant ear noted everything. Nothing was solid. People sat in wheel chairs or drifted ghost-like in the hallways.

Come with me.

Wait here.

I'll be right back.

She heard pieces of what was said, couldn't follow, didn't

reply. She heard Judith's voice, the words that were her questions. She heard footsteps in the hallway, heard other voices in other rooms and the sound of a great machine, a sound that never stopped. It rose up from the basement and poured through the rooms and hallways.

Judith showed her the program of the music festival from 1953. Do you remember playing in it? It would have been several years after the war, and it says here that Arthur Cohen was part of that post-war generation. The composition he left you in his will has never been performed, but his niece thinks it the best of his work, greater even than his piece that won the Pulitzer. He was briefly famous after an opera he composed about the Viet Nam War and then he won the Pulitzer a few years later, but after that his music was rarely performed. The obituary says his music always began with a vision of a gold or yellow rectangle. The piece that won the Pulitzer was called "Those Golden Fields." *The Times* says his music was lush with echoes of the composer Rachmaninoff. Do you remember? Do you agree? And didn't you play in that opera? I have a vague memory that you did.

Rachmaninoff? She didn't know, couldn't say. She'd once had a copy of the program like the one in the envelope, but she'd thrown it away, along with that newspaper article. The notes in the music book were hand written in dense, dark notation. When she touched the backs of the pages, she felt the circles of the notes with her fingertips. It was a sonata for the piano and cello, and his niece had found it while cataloguing his music. Until then she hadn't been sure the piece actually existed. She'd eventually found many versions of it.

Judith said, I want you to hear it performed. I think it might help. The doctor said.... He claimed.... Music has certain effects on the listener. I've spoken with Deborah Cohen and we're arranging for a performance.

The woman who did the straightening came in and a toilet flushed. Shadows moved upon shadows. Rooms superimposed

on one another. There were things Irena had never told anyone and now she wouldn't say them, couldn't. It was impossible. Dates didn't matter. She forgot where she was, forgot that she had granddaughter in college and that a therapist came three days a week. She forgot the time when the therapist came and forgot the therapist. Time meant nothing. They said it was August and soon it wouldn't be so hot, but she was cold in the memory unit. She wore sweaters and the fleece jackets Judith bought her. They told her to come out in the hall and walk and they held her arm. They said just take small steps when she'd always been sturdy and strong, a good walker.

The hallway of the memory unit was brightly lit. Cords dangled from the walls in case of emergencies. She heard a phone ringing and someone said the man in 109 needed help. She heard him shouting but couldn't hear the words, couldn't make sense. Other things crowded in, loomed vividly. She heard music she'd performed. She heard what she'd said and what others had said. She saw what she'd done, saw what others had done, and felt it all over again, felt it more deeply. At night she had so many memories she couldn't sleep. She saw the house on Hickory Street and the academy where she'd taught cello lessons. She saw symphony hall. And now she saw those four days in Newport with Arthur Cohen and The Modern Strings. They rose up before her even though she didn't know when Judith was coming and couldn't follow what she said. The present was blurred but her memory was detailed and distinct. A door that had shut long ago was open, and a performance was happening. She'd gone to that festival a few months after turning down Benjamin's proposal and feeling so distraught. *You'll regret this the rest of your life*, he'd told her as she got up to leave the restaurant in tears. Then the offer had come to play in the festival, and she'd taken the train down and driven along the ocean to the island with Charles. There'd been that white blouse with the tiny buttons up the back and all those skirts she'd folded and packed in her suitcase. Trousers weren't an