

**The Friend**

**By**

**Carla D E Godfrey**

## **Prologue**

*Having lived a full life doesn't necessarily mean that you've "experienced" everything... maybe it does in the physical sense; but what about in your heart? What about going deeper than just superficial feelings? What about when your heart feels something that you didn't think was even possible? A complex melange of intellect and love; intellectual love if you will. They say love knows no boundaries - yet that doesn't stop people from judging. Sometimes you've just got to stop fighting and acknowledge what is there...whether it be illicit, unusual or both. Love is controversial and in some cases, can be more of a curse than a blessing...but then again...who said it was there to make things simple?*

## Chapter One

‘It won’t be long now.’

James stood by his mother and squeezed her hand tightly. He felt the familiar warmth as she squeezed it back - he turned to glance at his father who tightened his arm around her. Together...they watched as his grandmother took her last breath. It felt wrong somehow...like a sort of freak show; roll up! Roll up! Watch in detail how the human body expires. Suddenly there was a huge intake of breath...and it was all over. He squeezed his mother tightly.

‘Oh Mum!’

His mother didn’t reply...she just walked over, took her mother’s hand and kissed it.

James made his way out of the room and rested against the wall...he sighed. He looked around, what a place to end up in! Not that he could fault the care home - the staff were amazing - it was just the whole thing...it made him feel depressed. Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye...he noticed a woman glance at him...she was stood upright with a cane...a sharp look in her eyes...and, despite her years, was attractive. He turned his head and locked eyes with her - she was very intimidating and didn’t smile so he didn’t either. There was something interesting about her though...he couldn’t quite figure out what...suddenly he heard his parents come out, still talking to the manager he shook himself as if waking up from a reverie.

‘...Once again...I’m so sorry for your loss...Mrs Richards...rest assured we will do all we can to make things as easy as possible.’

‘Thank you!’ His mother smiled. ‘Ready to go Darling?’

James wrapped his arm around her and kissed her head.

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He watched in silence that evening as his mother prepared dinner as well as taking the odd phone call...offering condolences...he and his father had offered to help of course but she had wanted to keep busy.

‘Mum...I’ve been thinking...Would you like me to collect Nan’s things?’

‘Oh! Oh you don’t have to do that Darling!’

‘No...I know I don’t but I want to.’

‘But you’re so busy...’

'I'll make time...it's no problem...'

She looked at him, tears in her eyes. 'You're such a good boy! You really are!'

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James drove down to the care home - his phone rang but he ignored it.

Pulling up outside - he smiled as he was greeted by the manager. 'Hello...James isn't it?'

'Hi!'

'I'm so sorry! Your grandmother was quite a character...she was the life and soul! Especially at bingo!'

James laughed. 'Yeah! She loved her bingo.'

'Well...if there's anything you need...'

'Thanks.'

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He slowly placed her cardigan in the bag - stopping to smell it - he closed his eyes as her perfume filled his memory. He felt as if he was going to cry - except the tears wouldn't come.

'Comes to us all boy!'

Glancing up, he saw the thin, scrawny woman with a walking cane - she was very finely dressed and refined and looked as if she had been very attractive in her day. Her eyes were sharp and the way she looked at you made you think that you had done something wrong.

He nodded. 'Yes...'

'Your grandmother was she?'

'Yes.'

She just nodded.

'How long have you been here?'

'I don't see what business that is of yours!'

‘Quite right!’ He grinned and shook his head. ‘Well...I’d best be off.’ As he went to leave, he looked across the landing into her room. ‘Is that your piano?’

‘No - I pinched it!’

‘May I?’ She narrowed her eyes but stood aside and allowed him to enter. ‘This is nice!’

‘They allow you to decorate as you choose. Should do as well for this price!’

‘Touché!’ He slowly stroked the instrument. ‘Dear God! A Professional Grand!’ He muttered.

‘I worked hard and had a lot put by.’

‘Impressive!’

She narrowed her eyes as she watched this handsome young man slowly caress the keys as if he was politely getting to know the instrument - a thrilling chill suddenly shot down her spine.

‘You play?’

‘Yes! It’s my profession.’

‘Come and see me to-morrow...’

He looked up. ‘What for?’

‘It’s very rare that I meet someone of musical intellect who doesn’t crash their grubby, clumsy fingers down on the keys like it’s some common, electric keyboard. You, at least, seem to have a degree of respect for the instrument which is more than could be said for most of my students!’

‘You teach?’

‘Retired.’

James smiled, intrigued and excited. ‘To-morrow?’

‘Five pm sharp! Ask for Ms Mary Rutledge.’

‘Five pm.’

## Chapter Two

James opened his eyes the following morning - he thought about his impending engagement; he had arranged to see a retired piano teacher...how on earth had that happened? He thought about her - she did look attractive despite her years...he looked down at his hands - they were shaking slightly - it was how they normally acted just before he was about to touch a piano. He thought about the one in her room; beautiful. The phone rang.

‘Hello Sarah!’

‘Hey! I was just ringing to find out how you were...’

‘I feel better actually...like I’ve got some sort of closure.’

‘That’s good! Look - do you want to come out tonight? We could meet up with the rest of the gang or just go for a quiet drink.’

‘Errr...Normally I would love to but I sort of have plans...’

‘Oh...is this to do with your grandmother?’

‘Sort of yes.’

‘Oh...of course! So sorry about that by the way! How are things?’

‘Well...we’re getting there...there’s still a lot to sort out as you can imagine.’

‘Yes! Highly emotional! Well...another time then!’

‘Oh of course! It’s just tonight’s a bit awkward.’

‘Yeah! Of course! Well...take care...!’

‘Yeah! You too!’ He hung up and looked at his watch - there it was - that chill down his spine and it wasn’t unpleasant.

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The clock struck five as he headed towards her rooms.

She was sitting at her desk, writing. She didn’t look up. ‘On time...I’m impressed.’

‘I’ve always been punctual.’ He noticed a photo of a man and a child. ‘Your family?’

‘My brother and his daughter.’

‘What does she do?’

‘She’s a useless secretary.’

‘Oh I’m sure she’s very good at it!’

‘Well... she isn’t *physically* useless I suppose! She’s wasting her potential though! She could have been a brilliant musician herself! She was a dab hand with the flute.’

‘Music very much runs in your family then?’

‘Yes!’ They looked at each other. ‘Well...come on boy! Don’t stand on ceremony!’

‘May I?’

‘I just said didn’t I?’

He slowly sat down in front of the instrument - his heart was pounding. ‘What shall I play?’

She looked at him keenly. ‘Follow your instincts.’

Staring at her intently for a while; he slowly reached out and began to play.

Closing her eyes, she listened without saying a word, finally, the piece came to an end and there was complete silence. She didn’t say anything for a full five minutes then, she opened her eyes and looked at him - it was the first time that she had truly looked at him she realised - he was so handsome.

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So intriguing, James couldn’t help but be drawn in by the silence and the anticipation of her reaction, like a school boy waiting for an appraisal by his teacher.

‘That was...adequate.’

‘Thank you.’

‘I rarely have the opportunity to hear music of that level anymore.’

‘...Must be difficult...’

She turned and looked out the window, determined not to let him see her emotional. ‘I manage.’

‘Yes...’ Suddenly, his phone beeped. Shaking both of them out of their reverie. ‘I-I have to go.’

‘Of course...’

‘Thank you.’

‘Whatever for?’

‘For introducing me - it’s a beautiful instrument.’

She smiled. ‘You’re an adequate player.’

James looked thoughtful - she had such an attractive smile - slowly, he walked over to her side table and wrote on a piece of pad. ‘My number.’

‘Oh young man! I’m afraid I am not into all that mobile-texting lark or whatever it is that you do!’

He laughed. ‘You can ring me.’

‘Oh? So you youngsters do actually remember the original uses for a phone then?’

‘Oh yes!’

‘Why don’t you try and get out more?’ With that, she turned away from him yet he thought that he noticed the ghost of a smile.



### Chapter Three

‘Hello Sarah!’

‘Hi! Oh...so you *do* still exist? I feel as if I hardly see you!’

‘Yeah! Sorry! I know I’ve been busy.’

‘No worries! How’s it going?’

‘Yeah! We’re getting there! Fancy doing something Friday?’

‘Yeah! Why not?! Would be a good way to start the weekend!’

‘I’ll text you a time.’

‘Sure!’

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She was bored - there was nothing more depressing than sitting around just watching your life go by. She slowly sat at her piano and played a note - James suddenly popped into her mind - such an intelligent young man, it...attracted her somewhat. Suddenly there was a knock at the door and one of the carers popped their heads in and smiled.

‘Just thought I’d let you know - there’s bingo in fifteen minutes!’

She fought the urge to roll her eyes. ‘Thank you dear...when I have medical confirmation that my brain is incapable of processing anything else remotely intellectually challenging I shall join in!’

‘Suit yourself!’

Her eye fell on his number...maybe...just maybe...she confidently picked up the phone and dialled.

‘Hello?’

‘Oh Hello? Is that James?’

‘Yes?’

‘This is Mary - Mary Rutledge.’

There was a pause. Then. ‘Oh...Hello!’

‘I hope I’m not interrupting anything... hanging out with your friends or doing marijuana or whatever you young people do these days!’

He laughed incredulously. ‘No...no marijuana...interrupts the creative flow!’

‘Yes...Well...I’ve been rummaging through my music and I found some Chopin I haven’t played for years...I wondered if you would be interested...’

‘Really?’

‘...But you probably prefer doing things with your friends....’

He laughed again. ‘I’m not twenty anymore! I would be fascinated.’

‘Oh well...then you could come over one evening - it’s quieter.’

‘Yes! Yes I’d like that.’

‘Well...the weekend gets a bit busy... how about Friday?’

‘Friday?’

‘Is that a problem?’

He paused. ‘No-no, that’s fine...’

James felt light headed - he had plans Friday night - he couldn’t just cancel them...could he? Slowly, he got out his phone.

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‘Well...this is nice...’

‘Yes.’

‘Is this the music?’

‘Yes! I just thought you would be interested and I have nothing else to do with my time.’

‘I’m sure that’s not true.’

‘Well it certainly feels like it!’ She replied, a little heatedly. ‘I used to be a respected piano teacher - now I have had to retire and see out my days in this place.’

‘I’m sure that you-’

‘I don’t want pity for God’s sake! Can’t stand all that ingratiating nonsense!’

Before he realised what he was saying, he just came out with it. ‘Then stop complaining; I should think hardly anyone wants to hear about it!’

She stared at him, for a moment, unable to process because of the shock - no-one had spoken to her like that in a while! Her heart quickened, then she smiled. ‘Quite right!’

‘Oh god! I’m so sorry I-’

‘What for? I dish out cold hard truths all the time - it’s one of the reasons I hardly have any friends!’

He smiled. ‘You never married?’

‘An absurd idea! I would have to have stopped working!’

‘Oh of course!’

‘Now...shall we return to Chopin?’

Turning to the piano, he took a deep breath and began to play.

‘Oh for *god’s sake!* I thought you said you could play!’

He looked at her...startled. ‘I *can!*’

‘Oh *please!* The Mazurka in C minor? A monkey could play that!’

He stared at her for a while, before turning back to the instrument - he took a deep breath and played.

For a while there was nothing except the harmonious, emotional melody of the classical music that seemed to swarm and wrapped itself around them - they were lost in their own worlds...no...the same world as they share the melodic moment together. After he had finished - they both sat in silence. Then, she slowly and- to her surprise - somewhat nervously got up and sat next to him on the stool. His heart quickened as the feeling that he couldn’t explain got stronger.

She looked at his fresh handsome face and examined his slender hands that were still resting on the keys, slowly, she reached up a hand and stroked the air beside his cheek. ‘That was...very adequately played.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Why did you choose E Flat?’

‘Because I was sick of playing it in B...’

She laughed. ‘It is tradition to start in alphabetical order I think - it quickly transcribes into laziness.’

He smiled. ‘Well...I’ll say this...I’m glad that you weren’t *my* piano teacher. You’re a hard task master!’

‘If you call *that* being a hard task master...yours couldn’t have been very good!’

‘Have you ever wondered why people leave you alone?’

‘No – not really!’

‘Well...that’s something at least!’

‘Cheeky so-and-so! Tea?’

‘Yes please!’ He chuckled as he saw the china set. ‘Smart! *Very* English!’

‘Nothing wrong with old standards!’

‘True!’ He looked at his watch. ‘I’m going to have to go.’

She smiled. ‘Of course! Don’t want to hang around with an old woman like me!’

‘No...it-it’s really not that...’

‘Of course! You get off!’

He smiled and went to leave - pausing - he turned round. ‘They said you rarely laughed.’

‘I don’t!’

‘Must have just been lucky then.’

‘Maybe.’