

# COFFEE SONATA

*by*

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## PROLOGUE

What do you mean, you want to cancel the tour, Vivian?" Malcolm Hayes said. "You're scheduled for concerts in Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Singapore. They'll claim damages and might damn well get them."

Vivian Harding turned from the window to her obviously stunned agent. "I don't care. I can't do anything about it, Malcolm." Impatient, she tapped the surface of the Venetian desk in her hotel room with perfectly manicured fingernails. "Just make it happen."

"But why so late? And so sudden?"

"I...I can't talk about it now. We'll discuss it in more detail when I'm back in the States."

"What's the matter? You don't have anybody to water your plants right now?"

"Don't be a smart-ass." Vivian pressed trembling fingers to her eyelids. "I fully intended to honor my contract, Malcolm. All I can say right now is that this is the only course of action."

"Dear God. You're serious, aren't you?"

Malcolm was also her friend, and Vivian watched with regret how utterly stricken he looked as he sank down on a chair behind the desk.

After a brief silence he cleared his throat and began again. "I'll take care of it, Viv. I promise."

## CHAPTER ONE

The bell above the café door gave a muted ping. As Michaela Stone glanced up from folding napkins behind the counter, she saw a woman she didn't recognize coming toward her.

Dressed in a casual yet elegant white and navy blue sweat suit, she looked like she'd just stepped off a yacht. Maybe she had. Her blond hair, kept in a loose twist, sparkled like it was alive. Mike found herself imagining how it would look if it were set free.

"Welcome to the Sea Stone Café," she managed, embarrassed to realize that she was staring. "I'm Mike. What can I get you?"

"Just coffee." The woman's voice was so rich and full it reminded Mike of a blend of espresso and smooth Belgian chocolate.

"There's no such thing as 'just coffee,' ma'am." Mike pointed at the blackboard over the counter with a grin. "We offer ten different beans, and you can have brewed coffee, boiled coffee, ice coffee, cappuccino, latte, macchiato...well, you see over there?"

"Ah...nothing ordinary will do, I see." Raising her porcelain blue eyes to the board, the woman read through all the coffee varieties. "Okay, a house blend cappuccino."

"Excellent choice. Coming right up." Mike abandoned the napkins and walked over to the espresso machine. While her hands automatically created the cappuccino, she thought about the woman waiting for it. It wasn't tourist season in New Quay, Rhode Island, and even then, she rarely saw anyone who looked like this woman just drop in. It wasn't just her clothes that suggested wealth and sophistication. The way the blonde carried herself, with ease and elegance, suggested a well-leveled self-confidence.

She placed an extra piece of chocolate on the saucer but stopped just as she was about to serve the coffee. “Would you rather sit at a table?” *Not just yet.*

“The bar’s fine, Mike. I’m Vivian, by the way.” She waited until Mike had put the coffee down before extending her hand and barely missed the cup. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise, Vivian.” It was surprisingly easy to call her by her first name. Vivian felt familiar. *People never feel familiar this fast. What’s going on?* Mike cleared her throat. “Just visiting East Quay?”

“Yes, for a while. I’m on...hiatus.”

*Interesting choice of words.* “Staying at the Marriott?”

Vivian didn’t appear to mind the third degree. She sipped her coffee and looked relaxed. “No, I’m borrowing my friends’ beach house with my two dogs. It’s their summer home, but I look forward to sitting by the fire this winter.”

“Ever experienced a New England winter? You may be surprised if you haven’t.”

Vivian laughed and the sound rippled down Mike’s spine. “I know they can be brutal. I grew up in East Quay, a thousand years ago. The town has changed a lot, but I’m sure the winters are the same.”

“We get snowed in all the time. As odd as it sounds, that’s good for business.”

“Yes, I bet people are even more interested in hot coffee when there’s a cold wind outside.”

“You got it.”

Mike caught herself staring at Vivian and grabbed a new pile of napkins. She neatly folded one in three, turned it over once, and attached the simple brass napkin ring.

“You work here alone?”

Unexpectedly happy she hadn’t bored Vivian, Mike shook her head. “No, I’ve got three part-time employees. One comes in for the evening rush.”

“You’re the owner?” A surprised smile revealed perfect white teeth when Vivian leaned forward, her fingertips playing with the rim of the coffee cup. “Well, I certainly admire what you’ve done with the place. It was already pretty run down when I was a child.”

“It was condemned when I bought it, been sitting empty for several years. I had to renovate for six months before I could get a license to serve food.”

“And look at it now.”

Mike warmed to the approval in Vivian’s voice, pleased that she appreciated Mike’s hard work. She watched Vivian sip her coffee, closing her eyes as she tasted it, and she looked so sensual Mike wondered if that was how she looked when she made love. Shocked at her thoughts and disturbingly aroused, she stared at the napkin she’d unconsciously wrinkled beyond recognition. *Damn, what’s wrong with me?*

“How long have you been in business, Mike?”

“Almost six years. I graduated from the University of Rhode Island, and then fate called me to this old marina. I fell in love with its beautiful vintage yachts and this abandoned building begging to become a café.”

“And you listened.” Vivian’s eyes sparkled.

“I did. It’s hard work, but I’ve never regretted that.” *What I regret is all the years I wasted before that.* Despite Mike’s best efforts, thinking about the past left her feeling naked and exposed. “This is also my home,” she continued, and tried to find the security that thought usually carried. “I live in the basement.”

“In the basement? In this old house? Is that...healthy?”

“Sure.” Pulled out of the mood she hated for a few seconds, Mike laughed, again warmed, this time by Vivian’s apparent concern. “I had it completely restored when the café started to make money. Before that I lived in a small apartment in town. Now I have lots of space. And it’s not as dark as you’d think.” *And there’s really nothing wrong with darkness. You can hide well if you stay out of the light.*



Vivian Harding couldn’t take her eyes off Mike’s face and the shadows flickering in her eyes. She felt like a voyeur as she sat across the counter and wondered what had caused such torment.

The young woman, or perhaps not as young as she’d first thought, was beautiful in the darkest of ways. Her hair was so black that the highlights were blue. They emphasized her blue-black eyes, set deeply under black, full eyebrows. Her features were strong, with sharp planes and angles—a face full of character. “So you’re like me, live and breathe work?”

“I guess that’s true, to some extent.” For a moment, Mike’s

expression lightened. She placed a new pile of folded napkins next to Vivian. “I watch a lot of movies and play the drums. Especially if I’m angry. That’s why I started—to get rid of stress in college.”

“Ever play professionally?”

“No. Except for the gigs at college where they paid us in free beer.”

“Beer?” Vivian couldn’t stand the stuff. The smell, the taste; it was all bad. She wasn’t about to insult Mike’s taste, though.

“Yeah, there was a lot of beer, but I stayed away from it. I don’t drink.”

More shadows. Vivian leaned forward so she wouldn’t miss any of Mike’s facial expressions. “I don’t drink much either these days. A glass of red wine on special occasions, that’s all. I’m on, well...some medication, and the two don’t play nicely together.”

“I’d say so.” Mike grimaced, making Vivian laugh. “I knew someone who mixed alcohol with a little bit of everything. Everything but food.”

“Sounds like a careless person,” Vivian suggested cautiously. *I bet that was someone close to you.*

“To say the least.”

They exchanged another long look, and again Vivian felt something indescribable happen, something she couldn’t grasp, but it was as tangible as the coffee cup in her hands. Mike’s mix of dark wildness, combined with an undeniable vulnerability, stirred something inside Vivian and induced a faint tingle in her stomach. She was amazed at her own interest, and it did take her mind off the issues she was battling. Vivian welcomed the change of focus.

“You said you have dogs.” Mike changed the subject, her eyes now black as thunderclouds. “What kind?”

“Great Danes,” Vivian replied, trying to sound cheerful. She wanted to assure her she had nothing to fear from someone who was almost hiding in East Quay. Mike’s look of relief and the disappearing tremors in her hands were worth the effort. “They’re brothers, six years old, called Perry and Mason.”

Mike laughed aloud and the irresistible sound produced goose bumps on Vivian’s arms. “Perry and Mason! You a Raymond Burr fan?”

“Not really, but somehow the names fit. They’re both nosy and

stubborn.” Vivian grinned. “They’re also sweet and well behaved, most of the time. Since I’m alone in that beach house, they make me feel safe.”

“Is your family still here in East Quay, Vivian?”

“No. I moved my parents to a condo near the harbor in Newport as soon as I could afford to. My mother always wanted to live near the water, and nowadays she loves to watch the ships come and go. Especially the QE2.”

“What do you know.” Mike sounded enthusiastic. “I went to Newport once, with a family I stayed with, and we toured the QE2. I was stunned, beyond stunned. I knew one day I’d travel on that ship and visit all the ports she went to.” Leaning forward, she placed her chin in her palms. “I still want to.”

“And you should, *cara*. You have plenty of time, but the sooner the better.”

“Have you sailed with her?”

Vivian nodded. “Yes, but it was a working voyage.”

“You don’t exactly strike me as a sailor.” Mike winked.

Laughing, Vivian shook her head, covering her forehead and feigning exasperation. “You found me out,” she huffed. “Honestly, I was part of the entertainment.”

“You’re a performer?”

“Yes. I sing.”

“How great. I play the drums and you sing—we have potential.” A fierce blush crept up from Mike’s neck and spread to her pale cheeks like wildfire. “Hey, I didn’t mean—”

“I know, I know. But I see your point.” Vivian smiled, charmed by Mike’s apparent confusion.

The bell pinged and a young woman poked her head in. “Sorry I’m late for work, Mike! I’ll just park my bike and be right in.”

The mood between Mike and Vivian broke like a dry twig, and they both pulled back. Vivian slid ten dollars beneath her cup. “Well,” she said with some reluctance, “I think that’s my cue. It was nice talking with you.”

“Thanks. The same to you. Do come back.”

A quiet longing in Mike’s voice made Vivian stop and turn. “Of course I will. You make excellent coffee, *cara*.”



“Hey, kiddo, drop what you’re doing.”

Eryn Goddard jumped when her boss’s loud voice sounded just a few inches from her right ear. “Why?” She pivoted on the chair, meticulously preventing her disdain for Harold Mills from showing. He was a short, stocky man, and if his nonexistent social skills weren’t enough, he wasn’t running the local paper very professionally. She resented his lack of objectivity and his obvious pandering to some of the local politicians and merchants.

“Get down to the Marriott, pronto. Hernandez was supposed to go, but his wife’s hatching their fourth.” Harold obviously thought that Mrs. Hernandez should’ve thought better of interfering with business than to expect her husband at her side for the baby’s birth.

“What’s up at the Marriott?” Eryn was already on her feet, eager to get out of her bully of a boss’s way.

“A press conference. The world press is there. Make sure you have your credentials. Security’s bound to be tight.”

“Are you going to tell me what kind of press conference, or will that be a surprise?” Eryn knew she sounded sarcastic and didn’t care. Harold glared, and she felt a little wave of satisfaction.

“Our only freakin’ diva is back for the first time since she skipped town some forty years ago. Do me a favor. Put East Quay on the map for a change. Ask a headline question. Anything.”

Eryn’s mind raced. Only one name came to mind, but was that possible? “Vivian Harding? The opera singer?”

“Bingo.”

Eryn hated when he said “bingo” in that smug tone. *Overbearing prick*. “All right, I’ll head over there now. When’s the press conference?”

“In forty-five minutes.” He checked his watch. “Make that forty.”

“And that’s cutting it a tad close.” With her teeth clenched around a juicy insult, Eryn headed for the door, pulling her shoulder bag over her head as she strode between the desks in the small office. *Nothing like a little pressure!*



Vivian applied her deep red lipstick with skilled precision. As she put it down, she leaned in closer to examine her reflection. It was important to look impeccable, today more than ever. She gently pressed a tissue to her full lips before applying a second layer.

Something stroked against her leg, and she looked down at the dog. “Do I look the part, Mason? Will I look enough of the homecoming superstar to fool the press?”

Mason sat down and tilted his head as if to ponder the question, making her laugh. His brother joined them and rested his large head on the dresser, reluctant as usual to take his eyes off her.

Vivian returned her attention to the mirror and made sure her hair was secure in its loose twist. She had chosen a red pantsuit over a white sleeveless blouse and her trademark three-inch-heel pumps. Colorful earrings and a matching necklace full of emeralds, topazes, and rubies glittered. *I dress the part, and they see what I want them to. So what? That’s how you play the game.*

When she heard the cabdriver honk for the second time, she threw a multicolored scarf casually around her shoulders and patted Mason and Perry. “I won’t be long, boys. Behave.” Looking once more into the mirror, Vivian took a deep breath. *One last time. Surely I can pull it off one more time?*



Eryn sat down in the first row, at the far left, and looking around, she realized she was lucky to get this seat. One of the more seasoned reporters, who’d been a close friend to her previous boss, had saved it for her since the conference room was packed. Media people lined all three walls in the large room.

The buzz from the audience rose and fell around her, but Eryn was busy opening her tablet PC and locating the files she needed from her wireless uplink. Many Web sites were dedicated to the world-famous mezzo-soprano, and she’d read reviews of Harding’s performances and recordings before. Vivian Harding was one of the few classic divas in the same category as performers like Birgit Nilsson and Maria Callas.

Eryn wondered how such a talent could have sprung from East Quay. Few people in America, let alone outside the country, had ever heard of this little town. And despite Vivian Harding’s fame, she hadn’t put it on the map. As far as Eryn knew, this was the first time the singer

had been back since she'd left East Quay immediately after Malcolm Hayes discovered her.

At the sound of applause Eryn glanced up at the podium, expecting the star of the media circus to appear. Instead a dark-haired woman in a dark blue skirt suit, her chocolate brown hair in a low, snug bun, climbed the few stairs to the dais.

She seemed familiar, and after a second Eryn realized why. Not only was Manon Belmont the owner of the venerated Belmont Foundation and considered East Quay's first lady, but she was Eryn's neighbor in the condo she'd inherited from her great-aunt. It was pretty mind-boggling to be living in the same building as the town's *crème de la crème*. They'd never actually talked; Eryn had only seen her from afar and doubted if Belmont would even recognize her. Not that it mattered.

Eryn settled back and prepared to take notes when Belmont placed some papers on the table in front of her and looked out over the audience. She had a commanding presence, Eryn noted absently.

"Hello, and welcome. I appreciate that so many of you could attend, and I know you're eager to meet the woman who made this possible. We're here for a very good cause, and having our town's most famous person on board is tremendously exciting." Her throaty voice easily carried throughout the conference room. Obviously Belmont was used to being in the spotlight. Eryn couldn't help but appreciate the confident way she carried herself. It was also hard not to notice how attractive she was when an inadvertent movement outlined her full, high breasts and the curve of a hip. "Please, welcome Vivian Harding."

Belmont clapped, initiating a new round of applause. The door opened again and Vivian Harding emerged, highlighted by the harsh spotlights aimed directly at her. She stopped just inside the door, her hand tucked over the arm of a man. She squinted briefly and hesitated, murmured to him, and he nodded. Then she joined Manon Belmont at the table on the dais, the spotlights dimming as she sat down.

Harding was not what Eryn had expected. She was taller than she appeared on TV and youthfully beautiful. Eryn checked the Web site she had just pulled up to confirm that she was actually fifty-four. She saw no signs of plastic surgery, and though Vivian possessed generous curves, nobody in their right mind would ever call her fat. Her red tailored suit complemented her full figure, and her brilliant blue eyes nearly outshone her dazzling jewelry.

“Thank you, ladies and gentlemen of the press.”

There it was. The voice. Eryn was no opera aficionado, but no one on the planet who owned a radio or TV set could mistake Harding’s voice for anyone else’s. Eryn knew she’d never forget hearing it in real life, if only speaking and not singing.

“This press conference isn’t just about me.” Harding waved off the applause. “While I realize you’re interested in my life and work, I’m actually here to support an extensive charity project, governed mainly by the Belmont Foundation.” She glanced sideways, a smile on her bright red lips. “Manon Belmont has come up with a plan to raise enough money within a year to build a new wing at East Quay Memorial Hospital. In fact, the construction company is making initial preparations.”

Everyone was silent for a few seconds, since the announcement had taken Eryn and her colleagues off guard.

“In what way are you involved, Ms. Harding?” a man sitting three chairs from Eryn asked.

“I will sing in a benefit concert at East Quay Hall, three weeks from tomorrow, with the proceeds going to the hospital.”

Eryn caught Harding and Manon exchanging a furtive glance.

“The concert will serve a second purpose as well,” Harding continued. “It will also be my farewell performance.”