

Mathilde Cognot

A MELODY
FROZEN OF
TEARS

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English translation of the original French edition: *Sa Plus Belle Melodie*

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*To everyone whose soulmate has ever forgotten
to hang out the laundry. It's a pain—
but honestly, they could have done much worse.*



PROLOGUE

Inspiration returned to me all at once. It didn't urge my fingers forward; instead, it let them wander across the keys at their own pace, grazing them with an almost enchanted lightness. He was listening. I knew it. I could feel it. My melody was soothing him, easing the turmoil inside him. I could sense his emotions, feel their energy gradually clearing.

He was hiding several feet away, in the bathroom, behind the half-open door. I didn't need to see him. My notes were meant for him. They were lifting the weight from his heart.

We both knew this melody. And yet I don't think I had ever played it with such melancholy—such bitterness. And hope, perhaps. The hope that he would open that door, let me lose myself in his eyes again, and finally say the words I would wait for until my very last breath, if I had to.

My throat tightened. My fingers tensed—but they didn't slow. I wouldn't let them. The wave of sorrow washing over us carried something strangely healing within it.

The music was splitting our souls open, bruising my heart, and yet...

I let myself drift—no, be carried away—by the storm of emotions churning deep in my chest. Even if I'd wanted to, I couldn't have stopped playing.

Behind me, a sob slipped from him. The muffled sound told me he'd tried to stifle it—and failed.

That small betrayal of his pain pulled me out of my trance. Another grip closed around my heart, sharper than a beast's claws: the urge—almost unbearable—to gather him in my arms. But I didn't move. I let the piano comfort him in my place. I knew him well enough to understand he would rather I kept playing. Besides, stopping now would only break the spell.

This release had to last.

He wanted to stay hidden; I wasn't supposed to know he was there. And yet, as the seconds stretched on, I felt him drawing closer.

No. That wasn't it.

Quite the opposite.

What was drawing nearer... was his energy.

Not him.



CHAPTER 1

Neiko closed his eyes. The horse was old. Very old. He doubted the poor thing would make it to summer. And yet, deep down, he still hoped they would share many more years together. His father had given him Honeymel so long ago that the memory felt almost like a dream now. One of those dreams that fill a young boy's head with wonder—until time slowly eats away at them. Sometimes because a dark cloud drifts too close. Sometimes because the moment comes when a child must take on responsibilities. A little boy wasn't enough to protect a family. Or what was left of it.

More than anything, Honeymel was one of the last tangible proof that his father had ever existed. His name still lingered on people's lips, in their memories, in a few old records. An illustrious name. Impressive. Respected. But in the end, just a name.

Seven years earlier, the disease had taken him during the pandemic that swept through every kingdom. No one ever discovered where it had come from, or why it had disappeared just as suddenly. One day, it was simply gone, and calm returned.

If only Neiko's grief had vanished with it.

Now the horse had become more of a burden than anything else. That morning, Neiko had decided to take him out for a ride, hoping for a quiet moment on his day off. He had expected the outing to be long—and he didn't mind that in the slightest. But he certainly hadn't imagined nightfall would be creeping in by the time the village finally came back into view.

The wind sweeping across the hill they were descending tugged at his black hair. It carried the distant sound of a bell with it—the one from the tall red-brick clock tower overlooking the village and the surrounding hills.

Oh no. The ball!

Neiko had promised his sister he would accompany her to the prince's ball. And this miserable horse was about to make him late—and earn him the full force of his little sister's wrath. As if that weren't enough, the thick blanket of snow winter had laid across the kingdom months earlier slowed their progress. Thankfully, the season was nearly over.

"Please, Honeymel..." Neiko pleaded, tugging lightly on the rope in hopes the animal might walk faster. Not only was time slipping away—his feet, swallowed by the snow at every step, were starting to ache.

Honeymel... At nineteen, Neiko found the name a little ridiculous. But when he had chosen it as a child, it had seemed like the most beautiful name in the world. "Stop daydreaming," he muttered to himself.

"Seriously?" Halea shouted as a gust of icy air rushed into the house. "I swear, one day we're going to cook that horse of yours!"

"In that case, don't be surprised if your jackalope disappears!" her brother shot back.

Her shriek answered him immediately. The entire house seemed ready to collapse as she thundered down the polished staircase. Neiko slipped off his leather boots and brushed the snow

clinging stubbornly to his trousers. When he straightened and saw his sister, he let out a long sigh filled with pure exasperation. “For the hundredth time, Halea, go put some clothes on.”

“What? You don’t enjoy admiring this perfect body?” she teased. “I’m getting ready! If anything, I should be the one complaining. But we don’t have time for that—you’re lucky we’re already late. Shower. Now.” Her accusing finger pointed sharply toward the stairs.

Neiko didn’t argue.

For all her beauty, he hated her habit of wandering around the house half-dressed. His friends and coworkers loved reminding him how lucky he was. They always forgot one crucial detail. She was his sister.

Alright. This one’s on me.

Eyes closed, head tilted back, Neiko exhaled slowly through his nose as hot water drummed against his face and ran down his chilled skin. Nothing felt better after a day in the winter cold. If it had been up to him, he would have stayed there a while longer. Unfortunately, etiquette did not encourage arriving late to an invitation issued by the king himself.

Every year since his son had turned fifteen, His Majesty had hosted a grand ball in the prince’s honor at the end of winter. Every unmarried woman in the kingdom—and even beyond—was invited. His Highness was expected to find a bride.

Neiko had only seen him once. He had been fourteen at the time. He still remembered watching a five-year-old girl being presented to the prince. Ridiculous. The prince was one year older than him—that much he knew. But he couldn’t even remember the man’s name.

Then again, it wasn’t surprising. Everyone knew the unfortunate status of the Barrely heir: a bastard, an illegitimate child tolerated only because there was no better option. Whether his father liked it or not, he would inherit the crown. Could Lord Barrely change

the law that forced this fate upon him? Probably not. Otherwise, he surely would have tried.

Halea's voice pulled Neiko from his thoughts.

"I found Dad's brooch! Can you tie your tie on your own?"

Damn.

Time was flying. Without answering, he shut off the water and grabbed the soap.

"*Hellooo?*" Halea called again, inside his head. "*Did you drown? You could answer when someone talks to you!*"

"I heard you. I'm coming."

Neiko rushed through the rest of his shower, repeating to himself that he needed to hurry. When he finally stepped out of the bathroom, his suit was already laid out on the bed. Halea had chosen it. Mint green—his favorite.

He had just finished fastening his black leather belt when the door burst open.

"You've got to be kidding me!" Halea squealed. "We're going to be late!" Seeing her brother half naked didn't bother her in the slightest. Privacy be damned—time was running out. She stepped inside and dropped a brooch and a ribbon onto the dresser before turning back to him. "Well," she whistled appreciatively, "fairy hunting really does wonders for your muscles."

Neiko rolled his eyes and placed his hands on his hips, waiting for her nonsense to end. Halea had already begun poking his abs. She took great pleasure in annoying him. This time, however, he decided he would simply wait her out. After all, he wouldn't be the one most upset if they were late.

His resolve lasted about three seconds. "Are you done?" he snapped. "We're running late."

"Then put your shirt on instead of standing there!"

He rolled his eyes again but obeyed, grabbing the garment. Halea took the opportunity to slip out of the room. She needed to fix her hair, weave a delicate string of pearls into her ebony curls,

and smooth the deep crimson dress that would have made any princess jealous. Luckily, the corset laced in front. Otherwise, what time would they have finally left the house if Neiko had been forced to help her with it? Still, she had one last request. “Can you help me with my belt, please?” she called from the bathroom.

“Sure—but help me with my tie.”

She returned to his room and rose onto her toes to adjust the pearly fabric at his collar. “By the way,” she said, “I’ve decided what I’ll ask the prince for as a wedding gift.”

“That surprises me,” Neiko replied dryly. “Something modest, I assume.”

“A griffin.”

Neiko could only return her radiant smile. It was a joke, of course. Though she would happily accept it if it ever became reality. Unfortunately for her, that fantasy had no chance of coming true—the prince hated those creatures.

After fastening Halea’s belt, draping a white fur cape over her bare shoulders, and slipping into his own jacket, Neiko added the final touch to his outfit. “What do you think—handkerchief or flower?”

“Dad’s brooch, obviously!” Halea protested. She grabbed it from the dresser and hurried back.

“Good idea,” Neiko muttered. “That way I won’t forget I have to go back to work tomorrow.”

He had never particularly liked the brooch. His father had received it from his employer to celebrate a hundred years of service. The fairy depicted on it—crafted from yellow gold, white gold, and black diamond—was a damned fairy. His father’s crowning achievement. Their rarity and fierce personalities made working with them nearly impossible. To negotiate with one, to earn its favor—was a true feat. A feat Neiko himself had accomplished at fifteen, only months after joining the company. For a long time, he believed the success was due to his name. His father’s name.

As he grew older, he realized he could just as easily have ruined it if he hadn't fought to deserve it.

By the time he returned to the present, Halea had already pinned the brooch to his jacket. The dark wings of the fairy matched his black shirt perfectly, standing out against the pale green suit.

Halea slipped her arm through her brother's and admired their reflection in the tall mirror built into the wardrobe door. "Don't look like that," she said. "We're going to have fun."

"You or me?"

"You might be surprised."

"I don't exactly have a choice, do I? Come on. Let's go."

Suddenly restless, Neiko headed for the door with quick strides. He wanted only one thing: for the evening to end as quickly as possible. A bad feeling twisted in his chest, his stomach—even his thoughts. If he'd had the choice, he wouldn't have gone at all. But since he had to accompany his sister, he might as well avoid arriving late.

"Hey! Where do you think you're going?"

"Changed your mind?"

"Not at all, idiot! But as long as I'm alive, you are not leaving this house with that haircut!" With that, she darted away again, disappearing into the bathroom. She returned moments later with a tin of pomade. Lifting her skirt carefully, she climbed onto the bed and immediately began taming her brother's unruly hair.

"This isn't even for me," he protested as she fought a stubborn lock.

"You never know."

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