

FMH Excerpt

As soon as the ovation had subsided, Paul leapt up onto the platform where the grand piano and his father stood.

“Thank you, father. As always, that was beautiful—one of my favorites, as you well know,” Paul said, placing his hand on his father’s shoulder. “Ladies and Gentlemen, friends,” he continued. “I have a bit of a surprise for all of you. Our dear Bailey Rogers has not always been a writer but has had a notable career in the past as a soubrette. Many of you may have known her as Bailey Anderssohn. Her sister Sonja Anderssohn is the celebrated mezzo at the New York Met. It may be an imposition, but would you be so kind, Bailey, as to favor us with an offering this evening?”

Oh shit! How do I get out of this?!

Bailey face froze into a grimace. She loved Paul and his family, but to come out of retirement on such short notice was nothing short of torture. And she would have said *no thank you* or something else to beg off, but then she saw a glint of joyful comeuppance surface on Bastien Steinholz’s half-smiling face. That did it! No way was she going to give that old fart a minute’s enjoyment at her discomfort.

Bailey softened her expression and stood. “I would be delighted. Although it has been some years since I performed, I accept your request, but only if the illustrious Herr Steinholz will accompany me on the piano.” The crowd clapped in unison and sang out, “Bailey! Bailey! Bailey!” And then “Bastien! Bastien! Bastien!”

Touché!

She had Mr. Grumpy Pants right where she wanted him. And from the look on Bastien's face, he knew it.

“It would be my pleasure, Fräulein.” He nodded and smiled. Well not exactly smiled, but allowed the corners of his mouth to rise ever so slightly as his forehead furrowed, and his feet made a strange and unfamiliar motion.

Oh my God! He didn't actually just click his heels, did he?

Bailey tried not to laugh but as usual had little success at squelching her sense of humor.

Paul met Bailey at the edge of the small stage and assisted her onto it. The women that evening had all dressed in their finest ball gowns, and Bailey was no exception. She was short and muscular, but the floor length pale blue dress gave her the illusion of being much taller than she actually was. That and the neckline which did not fail to show off her best physical feature—two full round breasts. Standing between the two Steinholz men made her more aware of her figure than she'd been in several years, particularly since it was obvious to her that Herr Steinholz senior was having difficulty keeping his gaze up and forward.

“Herr Steinholz, ...” she began.

“Bastien, please!” he interrupted.

“Bastien, might I trouble you to accompany me on “The Laughing Song” from *Die Fledermaus*? Somehow I feel the aria is most appropriate for this auspicious occasion.”

Bastien lifted his left eyebrow and took a step toward her. As he bent to place his mouth close to her ear, her body responded with a small shudder.

What the hell is this all about? I don't even like the man, let alone feel attracted to him. Do I?

“Fraulein Rogers,” he whispered, “are you sure you want to choose that particular aria? It isn't the easiest thing to pull off if you are no longer concertizing.”

Bailey placed her hand on his arm. The man's body warmed hers. “I was going to ask you the same question, Bastien. And by the way, my name is Bailey. Bailey, Bastien. Bastien, Bailey.”

Bastien immediately stood up straight. It was obvious to Bailey that he was trying his damndest not to look down her dress. And if she wasn't mistaken, he was aware that she knew his blush had more to do with his desire to take in her womanly charms than her most recent reprimand.

“Yes, *Bailey*, I am quite aware of your name as well as my own. And so, Adele's “Laughing Song”, as you wish!”

He turned and seated himself in front of the keyboard. He knew this aria backwards and forwards and so did not need the music in front of him. Bastien had trained himself over the years to watch every movement and nuance of his singers so as to support their performances as professionally and as personally as he could. Bailey would be no exception.

As Bailey internally prepared for her performance, Bastien could not help but stare at her standing alone in the curve of the piano. She was beautiful, he had to admit, in an American sort of way—independent, strong, self-assured. Except then he saw the slight twitch of her fingers—a sure sign of nerves—and his heart leapt into his throat. She was vulnerable after all, and not the nosey brassy busy-body American he had initially thought her to be. A world of discovery was

held in those fragile, child-like fingers of hers. Bastien knew the woman to be in her early thirties, if not a few years older, but in that moment Bailey seemed more like a lost child in search of a loving adult to love and be loved by. He could only imagine what she would feel like curled up on his lap hidden in the strength his arms.

Bastien shook his head in an effort to dismiss whatever his brain was doing to his male parts. He wasn't ready to fall in love again, for love meant but one thing—loss. And in his experience loss only brought self-reproach and pain. And he had had enough of that to last a lifetime. Bastien's only recourse was to push the woman away before he had the chance to destroy the two of them.

“Bastien?”

Huh?

“Bastien?” She softly called to him a second time and nodded to let him know that she was at last to perform the aria. Which he now wished he had not challenged her to do.

Gott in Himmel, get your head out of your ass and stop embarrassing yourself!

Once he got a hold of his bearings, Bastien's fingers flew across the keyboard as he skillfully played the introduction. Bailey came alive as she stepped into the character of the saucy maid, teasing then scolding her aristocratic master for misinterpreting her behavior.

It had been years since Bailey had performed this aria, let alone performed. For the first time in years she felt a freedom that she had not experienced since before the death of her child and her subsequent nasty divorce. It didn't take her more than a few measures to understand why. This audience had no expectations of her, nor did they demand perfection. They merely

wanted to experience yet another facet of the woman who had written about their beloved native son. They were listening not only for their pleasure, but for hers.

As Bastien played, Bailey danced around him, pretending he was the opera's Marquis. She teased him, provoked him, and sensually invited his attention to her womanly virtues. When she leaned in behind him allowing her breasts to push against his back, she sensed his sexual response as his breathing became more rapid.

The laughter in the aria brought Bailey around to the front of the piano once again.

“Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!”

Then as the end neared, Bailey seductively leaned forward over the keys. When she took his face in her hands, he grinned at her in return.

That rare smile momentarily caught her off guard. For a moment she actually slipped out of character, oddly shaken by the Baron's obvious attention. In that brief moment she felt as though the two of them had connected in such a way that they saw each other for the first time as who they truly were. Battered but not beaten survivors of great loss and pain. Instead of scaring her, that lightning bolt realization felt good, perfect. As if it was meant to feel when one meets the love of their life. The electricity in that nanosecond felt eternal—as if it had always been and would always remain.

I must be losing my mind. If that isn't the corniest thing I've ever ...

The sound of applause broke Bailey's attention. She inhaled sharply and spun out to face her audience. As if on autopilot she executed a deep curtsy. She then motioned for Bastien to

stand and take a bow. Later when he tried to recall this moment, absolutely nothing came to his mind.

And Bailey was no better off. She immediately recognized the connection between her and her host and fought against allowing herself to go there. Tomorrow she would be leaving Schloss Steinholz and Germany all together, probably never to return given her duties at the ranch. Especially now that her father had gone on to be with her mother. This whatever it was should not be happening now!

Before she knew what was happening Bastien pulled her into his arms. “You are something, Ms Bailey Rogers,” he whispered. “And not at all what I had earlier assumed. Please accept my apology for any rudeness you may have felt.”

He let her go, looking down her dress as he did. And damn, if he didn't again smile, this time with his entire face.