

MINOTAURTEAM

Manhattan Hearts

We Were Just Kids Until Love Made Us More

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*For the dreamers, the writers, and the musicians —
and for anyone who's ever fallen in love in Manhattan.
You are the melody that never fades.*

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The First Bell

The morning light over Manhattan felt like music. It slid through the tall glass windows of the **Manhattan Arts and Language Program**, scattering across polished floors and echoing in the faint hum of piano keys from somewhere down the hall.

Valentina Palefox stood just inside the entrance, clutching her violin case with one hand and the strap of her bag with the other. Her pulse matched the rhythm of the city outside — fast, uneven, alive. She'd dreamed of getting into this program for years, and now she was here, surrounded by people who lived and breathed art the way she did.

Posters lined the walls — *"Where Words and Music Meet."* She read the slogan twice, smiling softly. That was exactly what she wanted: a place where the music in her head could finally make sense to someone else.

"Hey, are you new too?" a girl with purple streaks in her hair asked, walking by with a guitar case.

"Yeah," Valentina said, smiling nervously.

“Welcome to chaos,” the girl laughed, disappearing around the corner.

Valentina let out a shaky breath and checked her schedule. Her first class: **Art of Expression (Room 204)**. The course everyone talked about — the one where writers and musicians were paired to create something together.

When she entered, the classroom buzzed with chatter. Posters of famous composers hung next to portraits of poets. Desks were pushed in pairs. The teacher, **Ms. Reyes**, a tall woman with glasses and a calm voice, was writing “*Harmony in Words*” across the board.

“Find a seat anywhere!” Ms. Reyes said.

Valentina scanned the room — every pair seemed to have already formed. She took a seat near the window, setting her violin case gently on the floor. Outside, taxis honked and sunlight bounced off glass buildings. She exhaled slowly, trying to steady herself.

Then, someone dropped a notebook beside her.

“Sorry,” a voice said. “Didn’t mean to startle you.”

She turned.

The boy beside her was tall, dark-haired, with an easy smile and a pencil tucked behind his ear. His notebook was filled with messy handwriting — entire pages of it.

“It’s fine,” she said softly.

“Justice Paone,” he introduced, holding out a hand.

“Valentina Palefox.”

“Nice name,” he said. “Sounds like someone who belongs in a song.”

She laughed quietly. “You sound like you write too many of them.”

“Close,” he said. “I write stories. And apparently, this class

is about mixing words with music, which means..." He tapped his notebook and nodded toward her violin case. "Looks like we're partners."

She blinked, flipping her schedule again. "Room 204, period one?"

"Yup," he grinned. "Fate. Or Ms. Reyes's cruel sense of humor."

Before she could respond, Ms. Reyes clapped her hands. "All right, everyone! You'll be working in pairs for the semester. Each team will create a performance piece combining music and language — something that expresses connection. You'll share your progress at the winter showcase."

Valentina's heart thudded. A *performance*? With *him*?

Justice glanced at her, reading her expression. "Don't worry," he said softly. "We'll figure it out. I'm better at stories than spotlights."

Something about his calmness made her breathe easier.

When the bell rang, he stood, slinging his backpack over his shoulder. "Hey, you free after school? There's a piano room I found — the sound's amazing. Maybe we can start there."

Her first instinct was to say no — she wasn't ready. But his eyes had that steady kind of kindness that made her want to say yes.

"Sure," she said finally. "After school."

As he walked ahead, she watched him — the way he moved like he belonged here, confident but not loud.

She looked out the window once more. The city shimmered in the morning light, and for the first time all day, she didn't feel nervous.

Something about this program — about this boy — already felt like the beginning of something she couldn't name yet.

But she could feel it, like the first soft note before a song begins.

The Assignment

The last bell rang, and the halls of the **Manhattan Arts and Language Program** came alive with noise — lockers slamming, laughter echoing, the faint strum of a guitar from somewhere upstairs. Valentina usually hurried home after school to practice in quiet, but today her steps slowed near the stairwell.

After school, she'd said.

She was really going to meet **Justice Paone**.

Her fingers brushed the cool metal of her violin case as she climbed to the third floor. Room 3B was tucked in the corner — one of the smaller practice spaces, with old wooden floors, a single upright piano, and wide windows that poured golden afternoon light onto the keys.

Justice was already there.

He sat cross-legged on the floor beside his open notebook, pencil tapping lightly against his knee. When he looked up, he grinned like she was the exact person he'd been waiting for.

"Hey," he said. "You made it."

“I said I would,” Valentina replied, trying not to smile too much.

“True,” he said. “I just wasn’t sure you’d want to hang out with the weird writer kid on the first day.”

“I’m the girl who talks to her instruments,” she said. “Weird’s not a problem.”

That made him laugh — a real, warm sound that filled the small room.

He stood and nodded toward the piano. “So, the project. Ms. Reyes said it has to ‘express connection.’ What do you think that even means?”

Valentina sat on the piano bench, opening the lid gently. “Maybe... it’s about how people understand each other. Even when they don’t use the same language.”

Justice leaned against the wall, thoughtful. “You mean like music and writing?”

She nodded, testing a few quiet notes. The sound floated through the air — soft and curious, like it was searching for something.

Justice flipped a page in his notebook. “Okay. So if your music is the feeling...”

He looked up. “Maybe my words can be the story.”

She met his gaze, surprised by how serious his tone had turned.

“What story?” she asked.

He smirked a little, then looked back down at his page. “I don’t know yet. But I think it starts here — two strangers, same room, same dream.”

Valentina’s cheeks warmed. She pretended to focus on the piano, playing a series of delicate chords that sounded a little too much like butterflies.

Justice began reading quietly from his notebook — half-formed lines and fragments that didn't rhyme, but somehow matched her rhythm perfectly.

The city hums like it knows our names,
and every sound feels like a heartbeat waiting for
someone to hear it.

The words floated over the melody, and for a few seconds, everything aligned — her notes, his voice, the low evening light turning the room golden.

Then the moment broke.

He cleared his throat. "Okay, that was either genius or super cheesy."

She laughed, a real laugh this time. "A little of both."

Justice closed his notebook and smiled. "Then we're off to a good start."

They stayed another hour, talking about favorite songs, dream colleges, and the weird comfort of being surrounded by people who cared too much about art. Valentina learned that he wrote for the school paper at his old school, that he lived near Washington Heights, and that he hated coffee but loved the smell of bookstores.

Before leaving, Justice picked up his backpack and looked at her again. "Hey, Valentina?"

"Yeah?"

"This —" he gestured around the room, "— I think it's going to be something good."

She nodded. "Me too."

Outside, Manhattan glowed with the colors of sunset — gold, blue, pink. The kind of evening that made everything feel like a

story waiting to be written.

And as Valentina walked home with her violin case in hand, she caught herself smiling for no reason.

Because somewhere between the notes and the words, something new had begun.

Practice Room 3B

By the end of the second week, Practice Room 3B had become *their* place.

Nobody had officially claimed it, but somehow, every afternoon, Valentina and Justice ended up there — surrounded by sheet music, coffee cups, and pages of scribbled notes.

Sometimes she played while he wrote.

Sometimes they just sat in comfortable silence, listening to the hum of the building — distant violins, muffled laughter, the city pulsing faintly through the glass.

That Tuesday, the air smelled faintly of rain. Valentina was tuning her violin when Justice looked up from his notebook.

“Okay, so I’ve been thinking,” he said.

“That’s always dangerous,” she teased, smiling without looking up.

He grinned. “Hear me out. What if our piece isn’t just about connection, but about translation? Like — how you turn feelings into sound, and I turn them into words. Two ways of saying the same thing.”

She lowered the violin slightly. “That’s... actually really good.”

“See? I knew you’d like it.”

He said it like he knew her already — her rhythm, her pauses, her way of thinking. It made her heart beat faster, in that strange, impossible-to-explain way.

Valentina started to play a melody — something slow and searching. Justice watched her hands move, his pencil hovering above the paper.

“You ever notice,” he said quietly, “how the notes sort of sound like breathing?”

She blinked. “I never thought about it.”

“Yeah. It’s like the piano exhales for you when you can’t.”

The words hit her deeper than she expected. She looked up, but he was focused on writing, his brows drawn together.

She tried to focus again on the melody, but his words lingered — *the piano exhales for you when you can’t*.

That was how it felt when she played, though she’d never been able to explain it.

Justice set down his pencil and leaned back in his chair. “Okay, Palefox, your turn. Tell me something real. Why do you play?”

She hesitated. “I don’t know. I just... always have.”

“That’s not an answer,” he said gently.

Her fingers traced the violin’s curve. “I guess because it’s the only time I don’t feel like I have to explain myself. Music gets it, even when people don’t.”

Justice nodded slowly. “Yeah. I get that.”

For a moment, the room felt too quiet — like even the city had paused to listen.

“Your turn,” she said, trying to deflect. “Why do you write?”

He smiled faintly, eyes on the notebook in front of him.

“Because I like catching things before they disappear. Conversations, memories, people. Once I write them down, they stay.”

Valentina looked at him for a long second. “That’s kind of beautiful.”

“Kind of?” he said with mock offense, and she laughed, the sound bouncing off the piano lid.

She didn’t notice the way his expression softened when he heard it.

They stayed until evening, their project slowly coming together — words and melody forming something neither of them could quite define yet.

When it was time to leave, Justice walked her to the subway. The rain had stopped, but the streets still glowed, reflecting the city lights.

“Same time tomorrow?” he asked.

Valentina nodded. “Yeah. Practice Room 3B.”

He smiled. “Our place.”

She didn’t respond, just smiled back — small, shy, but real.

And as she descended the subway stairs, she could still hear his words in her mind.

The piano exhales for you when you can’t.

Maybe, she thought, that’s exactly what this thing between them was —

a song neither of them had learned the words for yet.