

Nocturne

By Debra Milligan

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## DEDICATION

*To Ron*

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Chapter 1

The past unfolded like a series of nightmarish dreams, all tethered by that year of my life from 1888-1889. For a long time, those events unraveled wildly in my mind until my consciousness scarcely knew past from present, past from future, illusion from reality, fear from faith. Images, recollections, and sensations sloshed about my mind in a surreal and unexpected series of waves. My vision of things about me was fuzzy and unconnected. Living in the moment eerily felt as if the hands of the past were pulling me into a shallow quicksand from which I could not emerge. Then the retaining wall of memory simply gave way and I had to start erecting barriers in an attempt to separate past from present and to stop the past from intruding into the present, like foul groundwater.

Thirty years have passed since that singular year. I am now a happy woman, a wife and mother, after having enjoyed a career as an opera singer in Denver. My life has been joyous and fruitful, but it would never have come to any fruition without that year of upheaval, turmoil, and incomprehensible grief. Certain summers of one's life are pivotal. Those summers knew the lessons that I had to learn. Those summers formed the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega of an entire year whose reverberating memories would become, much later, a form of cathartic crisis.

Those experiences became imprinted on my mind with such severe accuracy, much like acid etching curvilinear designs into copper, that for many years, I possessed a terrifying fear of darkness, along with a painful sensitivity to any diminishment of light. Only now, through the rendering of those memories from the darkness of the past into the present illumination of understanding am I capable of accepting the chiaroscuro of that year, indeed of my life. That year, however, remains the lynchpin to all that preceded it and to all that followed.

If charity begins at home, then I can safely say that I grew up in a home without charity. My mother was descended from Russian immigrants, my father from a wealthy English family that came to America early in the history of the country and only became more wealthy. He met my mother at a time when his youthful exuberance was gone and, at the age of thirty, he married her. Most likely, he'd been spurned by enough females of his society because of his fecklessness and had chanced upon a beautiful but uneducated girl of twenty who was working in a milliner's shop. That he married down, he never let her forget. That he was unfaithful to her, she never let him forget.

One spring day when I was fourteen, my father left my mother for an actress and never returned. A divorce was arrived at in due time, with monetary arrangements that proved insufficient. My much older brother married a girl and moved to San Francisco. That summer, I was parted out to the house of my beloved paternal Aunt Charlotte. A widow, she lived in a white Italianate mansion in Georgetown in the northwest corner of Washington, D.C. She was sixty at the time, and in generally poor health. It was my job to care for Aunt Charlotte in the midst of my schooling and with the abundant love that she gave to me.

My father moved from the family home in a small town in Virginia to New York City. I was invited to see him and his glamorous mistress from time to time but I declined the offers. My mother sought refuge in other men: older men, younger men, men from her past, men who would never be part of her future. The family that I had tenuously known was shattered. I did not try to pick up the pieces. They were too splintered. Valiantly, I tried to live with hope and to dedicate my efforts to helping my beloved aunt. This tale thus begins with Aunt Charlotte, five years almost to the day that I came to live in the white Italianate mansion of this widowed woman.

I ran down the long curved staircase and saw my aunt sprawled on the black and white tiles of the vestibule floor.

“Remember me!” She rasped and looked into my eyes. She then closed her eyes and collapsed.

I clasped my aunt in my arms but I felt that it was too late.

I called for Miriam, the maid. She came upstairs from the kitchen and screamed. I then ordered her to ride in the calèche to the house of Dr. Blackthorn, the physician of my aunt. That Second Empire Victorian was located about twenty blocks away. Miriam left the house in a dither of tears.

I held my aunt for what felt like an eternity. I smelled the violet scent of the potpourri sachet that she carried on her and I felt the brooch on her neck press against my neck. Within that brooch was the hair of her deceased husband. It was a splendid silver and onyx piece of jewelry, a widow’s testament to love, but I hated the thing. It was perfectly ghoulish, I thought at the time, to wear hair, something that was already dead, of a dead beloved.

As I contemplated the morbid nature of the brooch, I prayed. I did not cry. I could not yield to the tears that were building, like water behind a vast dam, within me. It was the middle of June and the jungle heat of this region had overcome Georgetown in Washington, D.C. I felt very warm as I held the body of my aunt. I noticed that she felt very cool, almost cold. I waited for the doctor to arrive.

I began to whimper and I heard the voice of God whisper to me that the soul of this sweet, lonely woman was no longer there, within her.

Dr. Blackthorn barged through the double doors of the mansion. A young man followed him. Blackthorn gently took my aunt from my arms. He slowly and methodically raised her eyelids and then he checked her carotid pulse. With grim demeanour, he unbuttoned her blouse and rolled up the cuffs and sleeves.

I considered these actions somewhere along the lines of a violation but I said nothing. I was too shocked by the scene surrounding me. I stared at the young man whom I took to be the apprentice of this elder doctor. He was gazing in wonder at the painted white Rococo woodwork in the rather large vestibule.

“Dumont!” Blackthorn snapped. “Here is the patient!”

Dumont looked at the needle-scarred arms of my aunt.

Blackthorn sniffed the nostrils of my aunt. I felt that this action was yet another affront to her dignity, but I remained silent. The manner of this physician was detached and diffident and yet his gray eyes grew wild as he said, "Suicide. Morphine."

I passed out at this point. When I awoke, I was in the arms of Dumont.

He tenderly set me onto the staircase. I grasped the maroon rug that covered the stairs and I looked at my aunt who was still on the floor.

"Can't you move her?" I asked no one in particular.

Dr. Blackthorn walked to me. "Do you wish to authorize an autopsy?"

"No!" I spoke with indignation. Cutting up the body of this dear, sweet woman sounded like another affront to her. "There will be no more checking or cutting on her."

Dr. Blackthorn eyed me. I did not care what he thought of me. I'd heard enough stories about bodies stolen from graves and sold to doctors for use as cadavers. The entire medical profession, if one could have called it that at the time, more than mildly repulsed me. I stood up and walked down the stairs.

"I will arrange for her funeral. If you would please submit your bill to me, Amelia Prescott, I will see that this house visit is paid in full."

The cool gray eyes of Dr. Blackthorn widened only slightly. His broad mouth half-smiled, and he said, "As you wish, Miss Prescott."

Dumont stared at me. I stared back at him. I recall that his eyes were the color of brass coins, more bright than garish, but intense in their effect. His hair was black and shiny; his nose, hooked; his lips full and sensual.

I looked away from Dumont and sighed, "Please leave me alone."

He held my elbow and said, "If there is anything I can do."

"Dumont!" Blackthorn shouted. "We are doctors in the house of our patient."

Dr. Dumont, as I now knew him to be, nodded and picked up the black bag that he'd dropped carelessly onto the black and white tiles of the floor.

"Good day," he said with a charming smile. His eyes did not leave my face as he spoke.

"I regret this day happened at all," Dr. Blackthorn met my eyes. He pulled out a handkerchief and handed it to me.

It smelled of a masculine scent of some sort, perhaps cherry tobacco, but I cannot recall with certainty its precise nature. I only know that Dr. Blackthorn walked away from me without asking for the return of his rather expensive white handkerchief. Its embroidered letters, MB, in gold and dark green thread, still linger in my memory. The Victorian design was ornate but beautiful, similar to stitching that I'd sewn for napkins. I wondered what the "M" stood for.

The two doctors left through the double front doors as abruptly as they'd arrived. I fell to the floor, sobbing.

The funeral garnered many visitors and the contentious appearances of my father, the younger brother of Charlotte; his vain new wife; and his haughty but self-pitying first wife. My brother did not attend. All in all, it was a dismal affair. Even today, I recall it

more as the ending of a phase of my life than the laying to rest of the life of Charlotte Prescott Bennington. She was buried beside her much-beloved husband, and I felt that my duty toward this woman had been accomplished to the best of my young, untested ability.

There was no wake. I refused to arrange for one, and so the mourners, such as they were, left for their respective destinations. I returned to the mansion where I wept for an hour and then I wrote into a cloth-bound journal the following words:

She was such a sweet, stubborn, strong, helpless, thoughtful, self-determined woman. From the minute she held me, she embraced me and let me know that I was accepted by her. She had that way about her: you knew immediately if she liked you or she didn't, and I felt a strong affinity with that part of her. I felt honored and blessed that she decided that I was the one to receive her devotion and her love. By permitting me to take care of her, she showed me that she loved me.

Aunt Charlotte brought out the softer side of me, something that had been waiting for so long for someone like her to touch. I remain grateful for having known her, and I treasure the thousands of memories of a woman who knew how to give. Those last years of her life she gave to me as a rare, shining inheritance of her time, her love, her need to be loved.

In the weeks and months following her death, I tried valiantly to be comforted by those thousands of memories and by the knowledge that she would want me to be strong in carrying on after she passed away. But I was not strong enough to that test. God was leading me through a dark, horrifying passage. In those harrowing months after the death of Aunt Charlotte, the mere memories of that sweet woman did not provide me with the strength to deal with the aloneness and sense of isolation that began to consume me.

I looked at the gas lights in the parlor in the evening and was overcome by shivers of fear. I stared at the sunlight in the day and felt just as apprehensive. I silently but desperately sought the presence of the house servants, a maid; a butler; two gardeners; and a general factotum. Miriam, my personal maid, opened the windows of the house early in the morning, and I felt somewhat comforted by the light cascading into the rooms. But with the approach of evening, I trembled inwardly with anxiety.

I was grieving the loss of my aunt, but even more, I was grieving my life. I was unaware of the deeper meanings of this maelstrom of emotions. I felt too lost within the emotions to comprehend them. I felt drawn, steadily, ever more steadily, toward the final undoing known as despair. I prayed, but my prayers were filled with fear. I shook inwardly as faith and fear fought a pitched battle for my soul. I was acutely unaware that faith, true faith, even blind faith, can overcome fear and redeem me from the terrors that haunted my nights long into the day.

I attended the Presbyterian Church that was a few blocks away from the house of Aunt Charlotte in this part of Georgetown. The minister, who had performed the funeral service, spoke kindly and carefully to me. He even dedicated portions, if not entire sermons, to my current state of mind. I recall three verses from my favorite book in the

Bible, the Book of Psalms. I wrote them into my cloth-bound journal and they now look at me with the blessed assurance that they held then, but which at the time, I could only vaguely feel:

Psalm 9:10 - And they that know thy name will put their trust in thee: for thou, Lord, has not forsaken them that seek thee.

Psalm 18:28 – For thou wilt light my candle: the Lord my God will enlighten my darkness.

Psalm 27:10 – When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up.

I read the Bible each afternoon, and I wept openly during the reading of these and other Psalms. My fears abated but they did not fully recede. I believed that I was growing stronger, and I contemplated returning a calling card to Dr. Byron Dumont. He had paid a call and left his calling card upon the silver tray of Miriam. The right upper hand corner had been turned down, to indicate that Dr. Dumont himself had paid the visit and had not sent a servant with the card. He'd initialed "p.c." on the engraved card, which was abbreviated French to signify that the visit from this man was to express his condolences.

I was now wealthy. I'd inherited the white Italianate mansion in Georgetown from my aunt. As I write these words, I envision this large, cube-shaped house as a spectral fortress. In the evening, it was somber, almost silent. Pools of darkness formed around the eerie quaverings of light from gas lamps and candles. In the daytime, the spacious rooms were filled with sunlight, at least until the middle of the afternoon when the narrow, heavily curtained windows could permit no more sunlight into the inner chambers.

A rooftop cupola or widow's walk sat atop the house. This widow's walk maintained a watchful eye on the surrounding area, long after the end of the Civil War. During what the Southerners later termed "the War Between the States," my aunt, a Yankee to her dying day, converted the entire first floor of the house into a hospital for Union soldiers. She permitted wives of officers to use the widow's walk. I considered this favor both kind and cruel.

I also inherited the entire contents of the house, which included a sizeable inventory of antiques; highly valuable furniture; Wedgwood china; Waterford crystal; a few cases full of Reed and Barton silver, along with an ornate tea service dating back to the Federal period; and several bronze sculptures that were reputed to have been done by Auguste Rodin. I, however, never fully believed them to be Rodin's work. I later had them authenticated and they indeed are works by the French sculptor. These three pieces are

with me today; they are part of a material legacy that imparts a spiritual sensibility to me whenever I gaze upon them.

Aunt Charlotte provided for her servants from her considerable fortune, but the bulk of it was left to me. My aunt was a Yankee by birth, having been born into a wealthy family of old money in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She moved to Georgetown upon her marriage to George Bennington, a politician from Vermont who became a diplomat during the Presidential administration of Millard Fillmore. This only daughter brought into her marriage a huge dowry that joined financial forces with the wealth of her husband. They had no children and I was, as this decisive woman proudly stated, the daughter that she never had.

My mother could not tolerate the fact that I'd inherited a mansion and a fortune from a woman she'd despised. She'd been very much left out of the will. She cut off any further contact with me. I began to contemplate justifiable reasons for my father having sought comfort and the requisite pleasures with other women.

My father rejoiced over the news of my newly-found fortune, but it was a laughter that rang hollow in my ears. Arnaud Prescott was a tarnished example of the Gilded Age and I wanted nothing to do with him or his vapid divertissements.

My brother continued to be estranged from me. I began to lose any further hope that I might be of any interest to him, even if only for my money. It was a vain, cruel, self-defeating hope, if it was a hope at all. Ripe with self-loathing, the thought persisted for many years. I was not thinking clearly or well at the time, and so I believe that I deferred any healing from this abandonment until events in my life forced me to confront the awful truth about my brother. Decades later, other impulses of pain led me to purge my wounds of the savagery of his fecklessness. During those years of deferred clarity, I clung to the thought that I'd had a brother, but it was only a thought. This sibling had never truly loved me, and I think that I'd conjured up an ideal of love for him, but the ideal had sorely lacked a sound basis in reality, something which is not a wise or a lasting foundation for any ideal.

Aunt Charlotte had informed me that my brother had been the reason for the marriage of my parents; that possibility did not matter to me. It is not how you start out in life that marks you, but what you make of yourself from that point on. The mark that I tried for years to erase was the knowledge that I'd been abandoned, first by my father, and then by my brother, and then in the most heinous sense, by my mother. This last cut was the cruelest. Had it not been for the gentle but defiant and determined love of my Aunt Charlotte, I might have forever fallen into the pit of self-loathing that was truly the darkness I feared.

I instead fought courageously against the notion that there was something about me that warranted abandonment. The sorrow in this fight was evidenced by my defiance. That streak of rebellion would propel me into adulthood. Years would pass before quiet, willful resistance would replace bold defiance. I would learn to be at peace with my tormenting demons; and then I would become a woman.

Dr. M. Blackthorn had a first name, although I never learned it; it seemed that very few people did. This mysterious appellation was rumored to be something exotic like Mordecai, but it could just as easily have been something as simple and more meaningful as Matthew. This frank and distant man was known as Dr. Blackthorn to everyone. No closer step was allowed beyond his moat of detached indifference.

I found him to be a fascinating man. He was somewhere in his mid-fifties and had graying black hair, parted not quite on the side and always shaved on the sides, as was fashionable at the time. He was clean-shaven to an incredible degree. I'd heard of a five o'clock shadow, but this man must have arranged to be shaved at three o'clock because I witnessed him at this time of day, and, unlike other males in the dining room, his face was devoid of stubble.

His gray eyes usually looked very apathetic, even cold, but they could grow wild and nearly ferocious whenever he spoke a mere statement of fact which he wished to emphasize. He possessed a thin, almost cruel mouth that was capable of repugnant disdain. His large, pointed nose added to the sense of silent aggressiveness. He frightened me, but only a little.

It was Byron Dumont who caught my fancy. He was apprenticed to this older surgeon and lived in a Second Empire Victorian with Drs. Blackthorn and Meyer. It was a cozy arrangement, or so I thought, for this young doctor who wanted very much to become a surgeon. There was much more money to be made in this growing field than in general practice. Dr. Dumont had told me that he wanted to achieve financial security before a commitment to marriage and a family. You see, I returned my calling card, and not his, to his address, thereby agreeing to meet with him.

In the middle of August, we met at a park that was adjacent to my house. It still sounds strange to call the white Italianate mansion my house. I referred to it as "my mansion," and still think of it in that way. At the time, I found it difficult to inhabit one room in it, much less the entire mansion. I remember that the dogwoods were in bloom, and their white petals looked so pristine against the grayish blue sky.

We talked and walked for the better part of an hour. I learned that Byron, as he wished to be called, was almost twenty five years of age. He'd come from Albany, New York. A wealthy aunt had financed his schooling and his further medical training in Vienna. There was not much else that he revealed about his life, other than his quest for financial security and stability, so as to suitably provide for a wife and a family.

As we passed by a stand of linden trees, we stopped at a brass sundial and ascertained the time. It was not quite two o'clock. I needed to return to the mansion for afternoon tea. I was about to request that Byron accompany me to this destination when he inquired about my state of affairs, a phrase which I took to mean my emotional state.

I was hesitant to disclose anything about my state of mind, but his smile was so charming and his soft voice so assuring that I calmly stated that I was despondent. Dr. Dumont declared that any experience such as the one I'd been through would jeopardize the well-being of any person. Being a female, I might easily fall into a depression, even a clinical depression, something which was known at the time as melancholia.

I already feared such an eventuality, and so it was at the kind urging of Byron that I decided to study voice. I'd indicated to him my love of opera, and he immediately suggested the name of a professor of voice. He enthusiastically encouraged me to pursue this opportunity. Byron had referred several patients to this professor for the express purpose of treating what he termed "neurasthenia." I did not concur with this immediate diagnosis of my mental and emotional states, but I did agree that singing would help to relieve me of some of my anxiety and tension.

And so it was that my walk in the park with Dr. Byron Dumont in late August 1888 led me to meet with Dr. Galen Burke in early September.

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## Chapter 2

My first voice lesson was an experience long to be remembered, for good and for bad, but also for its comedic aspects, most of which were completely lost on me that bright, sunny afternoon in early September 1888.

I wore a dress of black silk that had a rosebud print of red, green, and ivory. It is possible that I was attired in mourning for my aunt but, as I recall, I simply adored that dress. Unlike my widowed aunt who wore a corset every day until the day she died, I could not tolerate the feel of the boning about my torso. I'd tried to find looser-fitting vises, but I was clearly in rebellion against the mainstay of the well-dressed, properly outfitted Victorian woman. It was far more important for me to be able to breathe, in general; and, in particular, to breathe for singing. I therefore refused to be trussed up by my maid or by anyone. It was not a matter that I announced; I did it without any fuss and feathers. My undergarments were binding enough; I did not need the whalebone constrictions around my body.

And my body was unremarkable; at least to me it was. I was at that time about five and a half feet, of medium, sturdy build, but I'd become slender because of weight loss from the death of my beloved aunt. Exercise at the time was not en vogue for women but I managed to walk a great deal and so my physique was healthy, in spite of the dictates of the era that females not exert their bodies.

Thus, without corset, and dressed in a sumptuous but prim dress, I entered the Victorian townhouse of Dr. Galen Burke. I took off my burgundy velvet bonnet and hung it on a brass hook of a massive, dark hall tree. Glancing tentatively at the large, carved mirror, I saw that my light brown hair, which fell in waves to the nape of my neck, had been flattened by my hat. I fluffed my hair and turned to the butler who now wore a face of impatience.

"Amelia Prescott," I said softly. "I am here to see Professor Burke."

"Dr. Burke," the presumptuous butler corrected me. "Follow me."

I walked with measured step from the vestibule to the doorway of a large parlor. The butler announced me, and I entered the room.

Dr. Galen Burke stood up from his piano. He walked over to me and as he moved toward me I noticed that he possessed a hideous limp. One leg seemed to be shorter than

the other, thereby causing his entire body to tilt to one side. I believe it was the right side, but it could have just as easily been the left. I did not memorize the orientation of his deformity; I was too stunned at the image of a rather handsome man, splendidly attired, walking like a hunchback.

“You are Amelia Prescott?”

“Why, yes, I am.”

He eyed me suspiciously. I’d made arrangements for these lessons through Byron and so I believed it possible that some incorrect information had been passed on to this professor.

“Did not Dr. Dumont properly inform you of my request for your services?”

“Yes,” Dr. Burke said abruptly. “But I had no idea that you,” his face slightly trembled as he looked away from me, “You are an exact likeness of a former pupil of mine.”

He then looked daringly at me in a way that sent a shiver through me. “Please, Amelia,” he stated, “Sit down in that chair.”

I walked to an arm chair that was set beside a window, about fifteen feet away from the piano. My hands stroked the thin padded arms as I listened to the first installment of the romantic misadventure of this man.

Dr. Burke informed me that his Civil War injury at Gettysburg ended his singing career; he then went to the Boston Conservatory and trained to become a voice teacher. After receiving a Ph.D in music and classical voice, he journeyed to Italy. In Florence, he garnered employment with aspiring opera singers. Among his students was “Arabella.” She was sixteen at the time; he was forty.

Dr. Burke was a man of about fifty when I met him; thus the harrowing episode in his love life had taken place a decade earlier. He did not tell me the full story all at once; it eked out over the course of the next few weeks during my voice lessons. It seemed as if by speaking to me of this girl, he was draining his sorrows through a small hole in the filled bucket of his heart

During the ensuing decades, I thought long and hard about this tale of lost love with a young brunette pupil in Florence, Italy. This girl possessed the charms of a woman, and beguilingly flattered her teacher with them. She was a coloratura soprano of impressive talent who achieved fame because of the fierce instruction of this manly professor of voice; then, having achieved her goal of operatic success, she left him, cruelly breaking his heart. For decades, I could not determine whether that tale of agonizing heartache was a fiction of intense woe to endear me to this wretched man in his own wretchedly beguiling way; or if indeed it was true. The fact that my middle name is Beatrice, the appellation of the muse of Dante Alighieri, did not assist me in sorting fact from fiction from fantasy from farce in this matter. I now believe that the tale was both fact and fiction, a real heartbreak as well as a ploy to flatter me.

The arrangement (I dare not call it a relationship or even a liaison, lest I condone it) was scandalous to be sure, but in the world of music, especially operatic music, this situation is neither shocking nor scandalous. It is far more common than one would suppose, given the climactic nature of the music being performed. How much tragedy

can a person exude in voice without needing a respite of some sort? My respite, however, would not come from learning heart-rending arias; or performing bel canto; or dedicating my time and energies in the rigid practice of focused discipline to master Schubert lieder; or from music at all. My respite would only come from leaving the East and journeying West, to the place where I would build my future. There, I would joyously live until this unexpected crisis of my subconscious stopped me, halting me shrilly and rudely in my tracks three decades after these musical notes had supposedly died within me. At last, the music demanded: Speak, memory.

I stared at this older man and I felt my pulse quicken. I see him now through the shadowed veil of time, but I am certain that during those minutes I perceived him accurately and fully. He was handsome in a slightly haughty but dignified way that masked an inner restlessness, perhaps emanating from his aggrieved heart. His eyes were large, wide-set, and blue, the color of a cold wintry ocean churning upon the shore. There was a constant demand within those eyes, a command that he be obeyed, a seizing of the object upon which those eyes focused. They were not kind eyes or even polite ones. I felt insulted by the impertinence of his stare.

His forehead was strong but it bore the wrinkles of frustration. His long nose was proud and straight, his mouth determined. His golden brown hair had begun to thin and lose its luster. I believe that as a younger man, he must have been magnetically appealing to any female. On that day, however, I felt attracted and repulsed at the same time. He sensed my ambivalence. Indeed, he seemed to relish it.

“You have recently known loss,” the baritone of Dr. Burke grew soft, even as his eyes were bold.

Byron had informed him of my circumstances in seeking these lessons. There was no escaping discussion of my motive. I quietly said, “My aunt died in June.” I looked away from his imploring eyes. “The doctor said it was a suicide but I have my doubts.”

“Why?”

I widened my eyes at the question. His steely blue eyes took on an amused look. I, however, was not amused. His question was curious but imperious. It then occurred to me that the direct but formal approach of this man was natural to him; it had nothing to do with me. I felt suddenly warm as I pondered my vital need to trust someone, and the possibility of confiding in this man. I was, after all, about to entrust him with shaping my voice.

He looked nonchalantly away from me and limped to the piano stool. I noticed that his one shoulder was misshapen and I felt horrified by the deformity.

He sat on the stool and planted his feet firmly on either side to steady him. The determination of this man to prevail over his war injury and the contortions that it had created for him, personally, physically, and professionally, deeply moved me. He was a hero; he had valiantly worked to piece together a life after the Civil War. His townhouse was modestly decorated. Baubles and objets d’art did not adorn this parlor. I knew that this man had not engaged in the conspicuous consumption of material goods as a palliative for his wounded body and deprived soul. He’d not become part of the vulgar

rich, giddily busy with gaudy purchases and displays of luxurious objects to declare wealth and disguise moral rot.

I decided to trust Galen Burke.

“I believe that my aunt had helplessly become addicted to morphine. It was prescribed to her by Dr. Blackthorn for severe back pain. I think that she died of an unintended overdose of her medication.” I bit my lip. The sin of suicide haunted me; it haunted me enough that I feared it as a possible fate for myself.

“Then your aunt died without any stain on her soul. She is now in the arms of God.”

I lowered my head. I could speak no more of my aunt with a stranger. Frankly, I’d been unable to speak of my aunt publicly.

Dr. Burke was suddenly at my side. I stared first at his daring face and then down at the rose and leaf design on the brocade tapestry of the tufted chair.

“There is no need for you to feel alarmed,” his voice was assuring and soft. “I shall teach you to transmute your grief and your pain into art.”

I looked up quickly at Dr. Burke. He smiled sadly and continued,

“Yes, I too have known great loss and suffering of the soul. And I have created art out of that profound sorrow. You too shall,” he cupped his large hands and placed one over the other, repeatedly, as if to show to me how one turns an emotion into another one, “Transform pain into art.”

I stared at this voice teacher as if he were mad. I believe it was at about this time that I began to mentally refer to this professor as “The Mad Burke.” Nevertheless, mad artists were not unusual, and so I humored myself with this thought for quite a while.

He smiled warmly and took my hand. I stared at his hand holding mine, but I did not flinch or remove my cold hand from the warmth of his grasp.

“The music that I will teach you will free you from the savage hold of those painful emotions.”

I nodded slowly. I did not disbelieve him, but neither did I believe him. This cathartic process sounded too fast, too easy, too certain. Nothing that magical and that miraculous, a rarified rending of the raging beasts within myself, could be attained within mere months of the assaults that had occurred to my heart. This man was unaware of the ruptures within my childhood, and I had no intention of telling him. But I sensed that even if he knew of the neglect, abandonment, and careless disregard that I’d suffered in the home of my parents, he would insist even more that art, and especially the art of music, was the single sure pathway to alleviate my sorrows and to heal my wounds.

I believed that time was the more certain and reliable healer, but I did not have faith in the passage of time. Each day and every hour within the day, along with every hour that passed through the night, were redolent with uncertainty, confusion, and anxiety. If the art of music could save me from the relentless tension wound within me by the ticking of the clock, then this man was the doctor. At least he believed that he was.

Dr. Burke let go of my hand. He dragged his body back to the piano stool and sat down on it, facing the upright piano. He played some notes, and then he turned to me.

“Let us begin with some scales, Amelia.”

I walked to the piano and stood beside him. The proximity between us was keenly felt. I stepped back and smiled. I noticed that the upright piano was dark brown and of a stately majestic design. The gold engraving, "Steinway & Sons," impressively caught my eye for a few moments.

"There is no need to be afraid of me, Amelia. We shall become much closer as these lessons progress. We must!" he commanded. "Professor and student must share a bond of trust if any real progress is to be made."

My eyes suddenly widened.

Dr. Burke smiled broadly. "It is rather Shakespearean, that look of yours when you widen those blue eyes."

I half-closed my eyes. "I was not aware of it."

"Therein lays the charm, and the effect." Dr. Burke eyed me. "Yes, it is a decidedly powerful effect. The gesture is very Shakespearean."

I vowed to never widen my eyes again in that manner, but I continued to do it, and do it to this day.

Dr. Burke then played an octave, beginning with middle C. His fingers left the ivory keys of the piano and he ordered, "Begin first with the diatonic scale and then you shall perform a chromatic scale."

I stood up straight, relaxed my shoulders, and slowly inhaled, using diaphragmatic breathing. I then slowly sang the entire octave, ascending and descending, in whole notes. I took a step back, inhaled, and sang the chromatic scale which consists of semitones.

Dr. Burke looked me up and down. "Hmmm. Very good breath control. Beautiful tone. Good intonation." He tilted his head and eyed me suspiciously. "Where did you learn to sing in this way?"

"I sang in the church choir and in a choral club in school."

"Ah! You are a natural singer," Dr. Burke nodded slowly. "I shall write down the titles of sheet music that you can purchase at the G. Schirmer store on G Street in Washington." Dr. Burke looked cautiously at me. "You have a mode of transportation?"

"My calèche is presently outside with the coachman."

Dr. Burke pursed his thin lips. I sensed that he was now well aware of my affluence. "Then you are an independent woman."

I felt neither independent nor womanly, but I said, "I have means of my own to live my life comfortably."

"That is good!" Dr. Burke softly laughed. "You have a beautiful voice, Amelia. I shall enjoy working to hone it to perfection."

"Perfection?"

"Ah!" He smiled and then grew somber. "Perfection is an ideal, but we can aspire to it."

"Yes," I agreed. My laced Victorian boots were beginning to hurt my feet. I shifted from one foot to the other.

Dr. Burke eyed my boots, and then he stood up from the stool. Forcefully, he scribbled with a pencil onto a piece of paper atop the piano.

“You may take your leave now,” Dr. Burke handed me the piece of paper. “I shall see you in one week.”

I’d not considered another lesson that soon, but I asked, “At the same time? Two o’clock?”

“Yes,” Dr. Burke almost hummed, “Tuesday at two shall be our appointed time.” He paused, and then announced, “We shall begin our first lesson with ‘Tu lo sai.’”

I looked down at the paper. I noticed the handwriting, which was florid and large, more than the titles of the songs. His cursive did not match his stern face or boldly intrusive eyes.

He held out his hand and I allowed him to shake mine for a brief time. There was a subtle spark within that handshake that I tried to ignore. I bade him goodbye and left the room with the piece of paper. Seated on an upholstered ottoman bench in the vestibule was a large, buxom female. As I entered the vestibule, she stood up, exhaling with impatience.

“Come in, Hortense,” Dr. Burke appeared suddenly in the doorway. “Good day, Amelia.”

“Good day,” I stated and retrieved my hat from the hall tree.

I put on my bonnet, tied it swiftly, and walked out of the townhouse, thankful that the butler was tending to Hortense. I scampered down a flight of eight slate steps. Arthur, my coachman had been seated in the carriage, waiting for me in front of this residence. He helped me into the calèche and then he assumed his place in the front of the carriage.

The Cleveland Bay horse pulled me away from this encounter with a professor who was not what I’d expected.

My physical and emotional attraction to Dr. Galen Burke was noticeable enough to me that I contemplated not returning for that second voice lesson. I felt a potential for passion that caused me to want to run away from this man while still being drawn to him. The conflict was not on a fully conscious level, but not much of what I was feeling was on a conscious level. I was still very much adrift in a turbulent sea of confusion, loneliness, grief, and churning emotions. Decisions are better off being put off during such a time, but I felt the urgent need to take action to deal with the sense of isolation that was closing in upon me each day.

I was not comfortable living in this exquisite mansion without my aunt. I no longer felt at home in her home. At times, I invited the girl next door, Moira, to stay the night because of my fear of being alone, especially in the dark. She slept on the opposite side of the huge four-poster bed that had been mine to sleep in, alone, for almost six years. The thought of my aunt not being down the hallway filled me with anxiety. Moira was kind and sweet to offer to help me with my fear-filled nights. She knew that merely her presence was a soothing balm. In the morning, she would fill the wash basin for us on the washstand and watch over me until I was dressed and ready for the day.

For relaxation and a sense of purpose, I tried to do some sewing, but I broke down in tears whenever I took the sterling silver sewing tools out of my tufted sewing box. My

aunt had given that box and the tools to me when I was fourteen, shortly after I came under her care and tutelage. I still own those items, and I now use them with a comforting sense of treasured memory. At that time, however, I could only weep while I stared at these precious objects: a silver slipper pin cushion, lined with maroon velvet; small scissors in a basket-shaped sheath; scissor Chatelaine; and an ornate bow-design needle case.

In terms of running the household, I gave orders to the servants in a brave imitation of my aunt, but I lacked the force of authority. The mansion was situated on a grassy slope that was set back from the cobbled street. The property was a half an acre of lush grounds. I recall stating that the mimosa and magnolias tree needed to be shaped, and the hydrangea and roses pruned, but the gardeners knew more about what to do with the gardens than I did. The red and purple rhododendron seemed to glare at me and create within me stark, fast-moving images and acute sensations. As the weeks passed, sentimental reminders harshly invaded my inner sanctum. I'd feel an overwhelming sense of loss and retreat in flight to my bedroom and cry.

I was very much a child within; there was no one to hold me and comfort me. I craved the strong protective arms of a father and the loving embrace of a mother. I felt detached from my Heavenly Father, even though I prayed for solace. I dared not contemplate the hideous pain caused by my birth father. In the midst of my desolation, I yearned to become a forceful, confident adult. The woman in me was gasping for air, and suffocating. I lacked the ability to give her much breath. Singing at least forced me to breathe. Singing was the only thing that helped me to feel alive, and staying alive was very much my objective during that year.

The immense concept of being a woman frightened me, but it also thrilled me. I was aware that males liked me, and I liked them. It was quite difficult for me to assess their motives, but I was willing to trust them, at least on a limited level. I did not realize that trust, like love, must be complete and without fear, or it will invite fraud and deceit. Too much trust likewise invites treachery, but I was trapped in the realm of pitifully small trust, a deficit that could prove deadly.

I did feel somewhat assured of my femininity. I knew that I was pretty and charming in a calm, quiet manner. Because of my disjointed upbringing, I haplessly avoided the major psychic pitfalls of the American Victorian female. I owe this debt to my Aunt Charlotte, who was born during the era that preceded the Victorian sense of grim purpose and joyless intimacy. Her womanness was the template upon which my female self was drawn and sketched. I thus avoided some perils, but I accrued others. Nevertheless, I am grateful, heartily grateful to this day that I was so abruptly placed in the care of a loving woman who was born in 1828, long before the frigid claws of Victorian female sensibilities intruded into the hearts and minds of young girls such as myself. Many were the females who failed to ever reach full bloom as a woman.

In my bathroom there was on a shelf a small, square, framed cross-stitch that I sewed when I was about sixteen. A garland design of ribbons and rosebuds was done in various shades of pink, gold, and green. This garland surrounds the sage advice: Gather Ye Rosebuds. I was determined that year to gather some rosebuds.

It is much easier to creatively untangle the Gordian knot of one's own misconceptions than to flail away at unleashing the stranglehold of faulty understandings of misinformation that is obstinately, brutally, even silently handed down through the generations. Removing the emotional logjam of fear and pain in one's mind is arduous, but it is a far more pleasant task than chipping away in confusion at rigid barriers that were constructed to confine passion, ecstasy, and joy.

The Victorian woman loathed males; within her hostility was a severity of emotion that handily built a psychic jail for women as well as for men. Revenge against the male of the species was carried out by the Victorian woman who adamantly denied the fact that she, or any other female, could feel passion or indeed any sensual sensations. I was well aware of the bitterly cold hatred of my mother toward my father, but I'd thought that the poisoned well of their marriage had been filled with jealousy and the pain from treachery and betrayal.

In fact, my mother was an early feminist who abhorred men. She resented their supposed power in the world. She yearned not for female achievement and womanly fulfillment but for male dominance, male achievement, and masculine power. For my mother, hostility toward men was as close as she ever came to enacting a natural law. It was a miracle and a benevolent gift from fate and from God that I was sent to the house of my widowed aunt at the age of fourteen.

Charlotte Prescott Bennington was a woman who knew the awesome power of a woman, and she derived pleasure and intense satisfaction in the knowledge that she was needed as a woman. Her profound sorrow in life was that she never gave birth to a child of the man she loved. She told me that had she done so, she would have felt like a complete woman. She would have fulfilled her destiny as a woman.

I deeply believed and accepted these truths from my aunt. She was a woman of profound dignity; faithful emotion; and intuitive, clever, but patient thought. I did not doubt her passion for living was a result of her acceptance of herself as a female. She did not engage in civil war within her self and against men. She inspired love because she gave love. And she gave to me, her only granddaughter, the love that she'd been unable to grant to a child, particularly a daughter.

From an early age, I recall her holding me and permitting me the affection and devotion that I would never receive from within my family of origin. She taught me the womanly arts of needlework, sewing, and managing a household. She confided to me that the duty of a wife was to provide her husband with the calm, stable, abiding, and passionate love that inspires him to go out into the world and provide for the woman that he has made his wife.

I was thus spared most of the pernicious aspects of the Victorian feminist. There were, however, bits and pieces and residue of the antagonism toward men and the corrosive depreciation of femininity which clung to me, like a dark shroud. That shroud became entwined within my terrifying grief during that year. The shroud hid my festering sore, the rage over having been abandoned. I hid my shame within that shroud. The shame was the belief that I was not loveable because a cold, selfish mother had cast me aside after she no longer had any use for me as a pawn to foist revenge upon her



husband, my father. The shame also was born of the rejection that I felt at the hands of, first, my father, and then my brother.

Many years would pass before I acknowledged the truth about these males and, more painfully, the woman who gave birth to me, this female that was my mother only in a biological sense. It was only much later, in wretched sorrow and with stinging tears, that I saw the complete vision of this tragic woman who, filled with self-loathing, projected that hatred upon others. She thus recklessly abandoned her own self. She viciously cast away her womanness and, in its place, tried to substitute a male-female creature of immense grotesquerie. She wished to supplant this male, her husband, who appeared so superior to her that she deemed him her oppressor. She despised her husband and believed that he exploited her. He betrayed her; it is true. But he never exploited her. She tried to exploit me, but Aunt Charlotte put an end to it.

The person she most exploited was her own self. She did not find happiness as a wife or as a mother, and she privately yearned to exchange roles with her perfidious husband and be just like a man. Resentful of his “freedom,” she secretly craved to be the sexual profligate, and the breadwinner. She detested having to serve the bread that he worked to purchase. And then, once she’d served the bread, she wanted to eat all of it.

Preposterous, you say. And yet, it happened, in a pervasive, insidious manner during my formative years, during the heyday of the strident, ardent feminist Victorian. It continues to this day.

So while I did not fully absorb the distorted information and appalling, self-defeating attitudes that became ingrained in far too many other Victorian girls, I nevertheless arrived, by the age of nineteen, at a frighteningly naïve conception of womanhood. My ignorance was not a double-edged sword. It was not bliss; indeed, my naïveté would cost me dearly. I had, however, as an unintended result of the chaos, disorder, and cruel neglect of my childhood, become free to create much of my own identity of “woman.”

I therefore watched and scrutinized many other females, old and young. I chronically felt ill at ease with the idea of becoming like many of my contemporary females. I did not want to become part of a new generation of young old maids. My solution, therefore, to my anxieties and self-doubt was to obstinately take my time in entering womanhood. My experiences of this singular year of 1888-1889 would function like a door slamming shut upon my girlhood. They would terminate my reluctance to become a fully adult woman. I would come of age because of the shocking lessons of that timeless year.

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Chapter 3

Before I returned to Dr. Burke for my second lesson, I visited the office of Dr. Meyer, the physician who shared his practice with Dr. Blackthorn. As an apprentice to Dr. Blackthorn, Dr. Byron Dumont also lived in the elegant, refined Second Empire Victorian that was located about twenty blocks from my mansion. It was unconventional for the relative of a deceased patient to visit a doctor who had not attended the patient, or even the doctor who had attended the deceased patient. However, I did not think that Dr.

Blackthorn would be forthcoming in answering my questions about my Aunt Charlotte. In fact, I believed that he would refuse to even meet with me.

The calèche slowly came to a stop in front of the very large, stately, gray house. I peered out at the mansard roof and felt immediately dwarfed, if not intimidated, by the height of this structure. Three dormer windows projected from the patterned slate roof, much like the eyebrows of a three-headed beast. Each window was successively set back from the first, creating within me a sense of tiptoeing backward from the front of the house. I momentarily gave thought to that action, but my duty to my aunt and an imperative need to know what had happened to her compelled me out of the carriage, through a simple wrought iron gate, up the sidewalk, up the flagstone steps, through the columns of the small entry porch, and to the high, double, beveled glass windows of the front door.

I firmly tugged on the bell pull. A minute later a short, unsmiling man opened the door.

“Your name?”

I announced my name with purposeful emphasis and then stated that I was to meet with Dr. Meyer. The butler offered me a wan smile and held out his small hand. I entered the dark hallway. The butler pointed to a pair of closed pocket doors to the right.

“The doctors are in conference,” he said with a bored sigh. “Please wait in the drawing room until I am ready to announce you.”

I am sure that I must have looked peeved. My butler was a friendly, gracious fellow. I’d just recently met two butlers who seemed to feel that it was a grandiose favor for them to announce your existence, no less your presence in the house of their employer.

I walked into the drawing room, a chamber which was dark in a funereal way. The butler thankfully vanished from my sight. I sat down on one of those hideously dark walnut trimmed sofas that typified Victorian furniture. It now occurs to me that part of my sense of gloom and doom might have been the result of all of that dark American Empire furniture that surrounded me, everywhere I went. Dark rosewood and black walnut were incapable of reflecting even the hazy gaslight in this room. A white marble-topped oval coffee table looked like a beacon of hope to me as I placed my bonnet on it.

As I eyed a fern on a tall plant stand in the murky distance, I heard a voice, loud and sharp, echo from the hallway. Perhaps it was the foreboding lack of light in this room or just a restive yen within me, but I grabbed my bonnet and left the room. I tip-toed toward the closed pocket doors of the front office of these doctors. The voice that was so strident was that of Dr. Blackthorn. I felt suddenly nervous and out-of-breath. My appointment with Dr. Meyer had been scheduled for a time, that afternoon at three, when Blackthorn was supposed to be occupied elsewhere. Where, Dr. Meyer did not say; he merely stated that Dr. Blackthorn made it a point to be somewhere each Wednesday at three o’clock.

I imagined an assignation of some sort, but it truly did not matter to me where this supercilious surgeon went or what he did. What mattered was how my aunt, in a valiant attempt to cure her severe back pain, became addicted to morphine. Like many people during that era, I was unaware that this analgesic and anesthetic drug was so potently and highly addictive.

I contemplated leaving this place and foregoing my inquiry. Once again, the insistent sense of duty and compulsion to know held me in my place. And I committed a most shocking faux pas: I eavesdropped.

Dr. Blackthorn barked, “Dr. Dumont, negligence and sloppiness are cardinal sins in my book for any surgeon, and you are guilty of both of them!”

There was an awful silence. I then heard the calm, cheerful Bavarian accent of Dr. Meyer fill this silence.

“He is still learning—”

“He does not learn, especially from his mistakes. Therefore he will not last as a doctor. And he is a careless surgeon! Just the other day, he did not wait long enough for the ether to take effect. Luckily, I was there to inform him, yet again, that ether requires many minutes before inducing sleep!”

There was another stark silence. Byron obviously did not wish to speak. This lack of response on his part troubled me. I wondered if it was possible that one simply does not contradict the stated opinions of Dr. Blackthorn, even if they are wrong. I wondered if Dr. Blackthorn was unfairly harsh. I wondered why Byron was not saying a word in his own defense.

Dr. Meyer sighed, “His medical training has been incomplete. Yes, it is true. We cannot expect miracles of this young man.”

“I do not expect miracles of anyone,” Dr. Blackthorn declared. “Not even of God. But I have informed this foolish young man countless times that a surgeon dries his hands from the more sterile area to the less sterile.” Dr. Blackthorn enunciated these body parts with disgust: “Hand, forearm, elbow last, not first. Asepsis is a rule in my operating room! Dr. Dumont has been assiduously taught to use the carbolic acid treatment of Dr. Lister.”

Another tense silence followed. I recall gazing up at the copper ceiling. At least the shiny metal afforded me some illumination while the words of this surgeon probed the darkness in my soul.

“This young man cannot even determine when to perform surgery. I avow that the only real difficulty comes in knowing when to amputate, shall we say, a gangrened limb. But once the decision is made, the rest is fairly simple. He is incapable of making a calm, clear, rational decision and then carrying it out!”

I believe that I sighed at this point, and that sigh, with all of its carbon dioxide being exhaled, formed a cleansing breath that brought to me some clarity of thought. I realized that Dr. Byron Dumont would never be a surgeon. My next thought coincided with the statement by the kind, portly Dr. Meyer:

“Perhaps we can train Dr. Dumont for general practice.” The soothing sound of that Bavarian accent rings within my memory even today.

“General practice!” The words were spat out with acrid disdain by Dr. Blackthorn. “I have no use for a practitioner. What I thought I was getting was an apprentice to train for surgery.” His voice lowered suddenly. “It is well known that I no longer can operate, due to my impaired eyesight. Teaching anatomy and physiology -- the art of healing -- is now my profession, and I intend to pursue it to the best of my very capable ability.”

Dr. Meyer softly laughed, “Yes, Dr. Blackthorn. We did seek an apprentice for surgery. But since Dr. Dumont has already been trained as a physician, why not permit him to continue with non-surgical cases, the ones that I chose not to treat?”

Another silence followed this gentle question. I looked up at the ceiling once more. The engraved designs on the copper began to look blurry. I realized that I was feeling faint. Breathing deeply and slowly, I left the house.

My aunt had owned a Siamese cat. It was as finicky as it was fancy, fine, and unfriendly. Named Penelope, it now belonged to me. I am not what might be considered a “cat person” but I tolerated the bleary, blue-eyed creature for the sake of my dearly departed aunt. To bring the feline down a notch or two from her overly elevated perch of status within the household (and this cat did like heights), I called her “Penny,” or “Henny Penny.” At the time, I was unaware of any irony, insight, foreshadowing, or even a clue about what was to befall the little world I was endeavouring to construct in the midst of my grief. I was only aware that the cat always had a meowy complaint about life in general and any lack of comfort in particular.

Every morning during the summer, Miriam opened the windows of the mansion very early to let any cool breeze into the stiflingly hot house. It was still warm enough at the beginning of October for Miriam to perform this daily duty. As she opened the windows in my bedroom chamber, her cheerful voice rang out,

“That cat sure do like to scratch.”

It was the morning routine of Penny to scratch the white picket fence, and then claw some railroad ties that had been placed as a retaining wall for a hydrangea garden. The cat then quickly, almost frantically, returned to claw the wood of the picket fence. The white paint was nearly totally gone on some areas, and I knew that had to arrange that day for the fence to be repainted.

I smiled and said to Miriam, “She must be happy.”

Miriam shook her head and shrugged. She left the room, and I looked out of the window at the gleaming white coat and Seal Point coloring of this Siamese cat. She was a lovely creature. Suddenly, she leaped atop a large rock.

I smiled, which was something I’d not done for months. Two bluebirds flying by the wisteria caught my eye. They dipped their little heads into the bird bath by the blooming vine, and then bobbed their heads up. Their animated joy felt infectious as I watched the bluebirds and their lively motions.

A black butterfly flew in between them. The birds flew away and I turned away from the window. For the briefest of moments, I’d felt pure radiance, the sensation of being alive.

It is because of singing, I thought. I walked to a large, heavy dark oak dresser and glanced at my young face in the attached huge mirror.

I must be happy too, I thought. I felt like clawing something.

The first song that I learned to sing for Dr. Burke was “Tu lo sai” by Guisepppe Torelli, an Italian violinist, teacher, and composer of the late 17th century. It is notable that the man played and taught the violin because the human voice was expected to imitate that stringed instrument in the singing of this song. This feat I could not or, more accurately, would not perform. My voice is not reedy or string-like. My voice had been explained to me thusly during my second lesson with Dr. Burke:

“You are a coloratura soprano with a distinct but pleasing and controlled vibrato. Your voice is quite warm and soothing. It is velvety, almost tactile, as if I can touch it.”

He’d smiled with slow contentment.

I recall those words because his eyes looked boldly amorous while he was stating them.

“When you are a mature woman, you may become a lyric soprano,” his eyes went up and down over the curves and angles of my body. “Your shoulders are small but I’ve noticed that you have a strong, large back which is amply suited for superior breath control.”

My eyes widened even more in their Shakespearean way.

“Come now, Amelia, surely you do not anticipate remaining the same size your entire life.”

“I’d not contemplated it.”

“Why, when you are a thirty-year-old woman, you shall attain your full bloom of maturity.”

He smiled. I silently shivered within.

“Now, let us go over the song once more.”

He began his gentle piano accompaniment and I entered on cue, on key, and in proper tempo. However, I did not like this song and it showed throughout the entirety of my performance.

“Tu lo sai” expresses a pleasant, somewhat bland series of repetitive requests for a lover to ask his heart and know how much he is adored by the songstress. Even at my young virginal age at that time, I was profoundly bored by this type of vocal entreaty. My voice and heart yearned to express drama, far more complicated dynamics, and lyrical desire. I believe that Dr. Burke understood my yearnings. We nevertheless clashed swords over my performance; he criticized me severely for my unintentional “bad habits” which became apparent whenever I sang a song not to my liking.

“The tongue! *Your* tongue! It must lay flat in the mouth and not arch up, thereby blocking the tone!”

I stared with disinterest at this professor. I aware of blocking the tone, but I did not truly care if it came out of my mouth or my ears.

“This song bores me.”

“Do you think that you shall sing only songs that thrill you!?”

“Yes.”

For a moment, Dr. Burke chuckled. He then grew fierce. “Any professional singer shall accept whatever is given her to perform. Without complaint or comment. And she

shall sing to the best of her ability. It is part of her professionalism, and her discipline as an artist.”

“How can one sing when one does not enjoy the song? It rather defeats the purpose of expressing the enjoyment of the music.”

Dr. Burke glared at me. He did not have an answer. I suspect that he agreed with me, but his rigorous passion for discipline did not permit him to permit me to regard singing purely on the basis of pleasure. I wanted to state my belief that my joy in singing would be instantly communicated to the audience if I sang a song that I loved and truly enjoyed, but I held my tongue which, at this point, rested quite flatly in my mouth.

He sighed and closed the sheet music. “This song is not intended for your type of voice. You have too large a voice. Your style is too direct, your tone too resonant.”

“Too resonant?”

Dr. Burke smiled. “Your voice is a gift. It possesses a natural, clear, pure, brilliant sound. It is quite resonant, without much effort, and highly placed in the head, no doubt due to the bone structure of your face.” He eyed me. “We therefore shall leave Torelli and move on to Scarlatti.”

I was too ignorant of music theory and voice training to know that this song was fairly advanced in technique for a moderate beginner like myself. I’d mastered the little operatic ditty in technical terms, but I felt very indifferent as I sang it. To save face, Dr. Burke advised me that this song had been a diagnostic tool to indicate the level of my vocal abilities and preferred proficiencies. I took these terms to mean, “I wanted to see how well you sing.”

He opined again that I was a natural singer. “We do not want to train all of the natural ability out of your voice, but we can train far more discipline into it.”

The use of the “majestic we” was, I thought at the time, dignified, almost endearing. I did not realize that Dr. Burke had aligned his ego with my ego, an entity that was struggling to survive. Perhaps this man instinctively sought to bolster my fragile ego, but regardless of his motive, I would eventually discover that my vocal fate had become perilously entangled with his fate.

Three weeks later, I performed the next song on the list, “Se Florindo è fidele, io m’innamorerò,” If Florindo will behave in loyalty, I’ll fall in love with him.

The composer was Domenico Scarlatti, an innovative genius who influenced later innovative geniuses such as Chopin and Brahms. The music was Baroque; my voice did much better with this form. I now consider the lyrics laughable and quite ironic, but at the time, considering my life story, I did not laugh at this comic relief. With each new song, Dr. Burke went over the lyrics and the pronunciation of each language with me. When he taught me the lyrics of this song, I refused to confess the embarrassment that I felt over a subject so acutely painful.

Dr. Burke played the accompaniment in a very careful, attentive way. His music followed me, and not the other way around. It was one way in which he was a very caring, giving, and accommodating instructor. The song ended, and he sat, staring at me. While I felt nervous, he visibly gave thought to his opinion or review of my performance.

I was informed that my tone was unwavering and pure; my vibrato was perfect, and well controlled; the trills were excellent: precise, even, clear, not pushed. I was, however, unable to roll my r's. I tried numerous times. After much frustration on both of our parts, Dr. Burke suggested that I flip them. I disliked doing it, but I did my best through a second performance of the song. This time, however, I struggled to keep up with the fast tempo of the song.

I instantly devised my own breathing techniques to sustain my tone with the swiftly flowing, open vowels of the Italian language. With the flipping of the r's, I developed a problem of maintaining adequate breath.

"You were slightly off-key at times. It is probably due to nerves, Amelia."

"I was slightly off-key because I ran out of breath."

Dr. Burke glared at me. He then grew calm. "It is good, yes, that you can recognize your own problem. I am pleased to say that you neither slide nor scoop on your notes, which is excellent. Most students struggle not to commit such blunders. However, with your small ribcage—"

I looked, appalled, at this professor. "My ribcage is not small."

"It is too small for you to easily support your rather large voice."

I felt dismayed. My face undoubtedly showed my chagrin.

"Your problem can be remedied by a more disciplined approach to the notes. You attack your beginning notes; you then lose breath, and too much of it, early in the song."

I nodded thoughtfully. This comment was constructive criticism that I would always remember.

"And yet," he said with intrigue, "You always sing the most lovely legato. I am trying to understand your lack of consistency."

I said nothing. My inconsistency in singing was, at the time, totally emotional in nature. Sometimes I felt the music to the point where I became one with it and the lovely legato simply flowed from me. At other times, the music assaulted my inner wounds and I could not express any tone, save one of muted despair. And then I ran out of breath.

I had been taught by a choir teacher not to think in terms of a horizontal line in music, but to think of a pebble being dropped into a pond. The tone expands out from that place. This concept served me well when I was in control of my emotions and could render them into the art of singing. At many other times, however, sensations and muted feelings welled up in me and I could not release them through song. My voice then was not free and it was reliably half a note flat. Aware of this awfulness, I would then lose my breath.

I was hoping that Dr. Burke could and would diagnose and treat this musical malady, but he was not observant enough to take note of the nearly predictable consistency of this problem of this student.

"I do not know what the key is to freeing your voice to master a song like this one," Dr. Burke sighed. "Your pronunciation and enunciation of the Italian are superb, but you must learn when to take breaths with far more subtlety." He grew grim. "One must never gulp for air."

"I do not gulp!"

“No, Amelia, you do not. I was thinking of a student of long ago.”

Not Her, I thought.

“She was a diva in her mind. She had the audacity to try to pretend it was a sob and not a gulp that she was taking so as to conceal her wretched breathing! That ghastly female even broke Bellini’s beautiful line! All that saved her during her performance of ‘Casta Diva’ was her splendid tone.”

I looked with envy at this professor. To sing that aching beautiful aria from Norma, there was a goal I dared not express to anyone.

Dr. Burke, however, saw the desire in my eyes. “If you work hard enough to master the fundamentals, and if you train with discipline for enough years, perhaps a decade, you would triumph in singing that sublime aria.”

Indeed, when I was thirty, I did.

“Perhaps you have a finicky artistic temperament,” Dr. Burke eyed me, “And this lively tune by Scarlatti is not for you.”

“Perhaps Scarlatti is not the composer for me,” I meekly suggested.

Dr. Burke held up his hands and eyed me. “It is possible that Baroque is not well suited to your voice. You see, during the Baroque era, the text ruled the music. During the Renaissance, the music ruled the text. I shall give some thought to music of the Renaissance for you.”

My eyes opened wide in horror.

Dr. Burke laughed. “Ah! To be young and so full of emotion! When one is young, one dreams in poetry. When one is fully mature, the dreams are of drama.”

I lowered my head. My dreams at the time were filled with neither poetry nor drama but with terrible phantoms.

The hour of instruction had nearly come to an end that chilly afternoon in late October. As I stood by the piano, my stomach growled and I began to feel faint. The Brown Betty I’d eaten as a snack had been digested long ago. I normally sang on a fairly empty stomach but that afternoon I’d sung a bit longer and with far more vigor than usual.

Dr. Burke took me by the arm and walked me over to the love seat across the room. I reclined on it and felt even more dizzy.

I can still see the love seat and his face in the flickering hazy glow of the gaslight in the room. The love seat was of muted colors in tufted brocade and in the mirror-back design. His eyes looked upon me with infinite tenderness. He appeared almost boyish as he said in a low, calm voice,

“I shall get you a proper tea.”

I closed my eyes and heard him almost soundlessly leave the room. Ten or fifteen minutes passed and then I heard the rolling of a wooden cart across the black decorated walnut floor.

“Now we shall have some tea and scones.”

I sat up from my reclining position. I stared across the room at the gray and white marble surround of the fireplace and the gray marble mantel. The fire looked about to go out.

“Can you put some more wood on the fire? It is so dark in here.”

Dr. Burke tended to the fire, and then he poured me some tea. I believe that he asked me about cream and sugar and I believe that I took some of each. I was in a bit of a daze, and it was not merely from hunger. The tender affection of this man was enveloping me in a gauzy shawl of loving sentiment, an emotion that I’d not ever experienced.

We ate, side by side, on the love seat. He behaved with exquisite restraint and with such kindness that I nearly wept. I wanted to leave and I wanted to stay.

He set down his cup, saucer, and plate, and limped over to the piano. Slowly, with almost rigid dignity, he sat on the stool and began to play. He was a sensitive, peerless, breathtakingly magnificent pianist. He always anticipated my next note when I sang. He followed me; I never had to follow him.

“I play my Nocturne now,” he said with tears in his voice. “I composed this for her, but I play it now for you.”

His large, strong hands almost caressed the ivory keys. I listened with a quickly beating heart. The song was sad; wistful; somewhat dark; evocative of night, a time that my soul feared to inhabit. At the time, I’d not ever heard “Piano Sonata No. 14 in C sharp minor, Opus 27, No. 2” by Beethoven. The composition is popularly known as the Moonlight Sonata. This Nocturne was reminiscent of the beginning of this piece, but it was far less funereal, less slow in tempo, a bit more forceful. I listened and wept. The music still plays in my heart.

Dr. Burke left the piano and limped in his grotesque manner to me. He softly touched the gigot sleeve of my blouse. He looked into my eyes. He saw the tears flow from those blue eyes down my cheek. Weeping, he took a handkerchief from his vest pocket and he dried my tears. In so doing, he entered the chasm that my heart had become.

“It then has touched you too, my Nocturne.”

“I am moved by more than your sublime music, Dr. Burke.”

He held my hand, and I told him about my life, my childhood and abandonment.

“You are a motherless child,” he said in voice that caused a shiver to run down my spine.

I lowered my head and cried. I must have wept for a long time because his handkerchief was rendered useless by the time that I was done with it.

He held me and stroked my cheek.

“You must live now with no regrets for the past and no fear of the future. You must live in the present moment.”

“I seem unable to find the present moment. The past invades it and I become lost.”

“There is no turning back,” he whispered in a deep voice. “You can only go forward.”

“I do not where is forward.”

“It may be away from here. It may be away from all that you have known. You cannot know today the destination that your life must take. But take it you must, or you will become sick, very sick.”

My eyes undoubtedly expressed my fear and trembling.

“From your vantage point of youth, you cannot know the truths that I speak. But surely there is a part of you that is coming to life, whether you are aware of it or not. You dare not stop that part of yourself from coming to full bloom. You must face the future. You must surrender to it.”

His eyes met mine and I felt a surreal sensation of being lifted from my gloom and then tossed down into it. I mentally clambered my way back up the side of this deep pit, but I needed a hand to help me. I did not know which hand to reach for; I only knew that I could not climb from my pit of despair alone. The voice of God at this point was calling to me but I heard only my own needs and desires.

“I shall teach you to transmute this pain into art. And I hope,” his voice trembled, “That you prove worthy of your art.”

He released my hand and stood up. “It is dark. The butler is off for the day or I would ask him to accompany you home in your carriage. I now ask your permission to ride home with you.”

He saw the doubts within my eyes. “I shall take a Hansom cab back to my house.”

“Yes,” I said quietly, “You may accompany me to my mansion.” I had yet to call it home.

He retrieved my limerick gloves, my bonnet, and my long black cape. He pulled on his Inverness, a dark green great coat with a deep cape. We left the townhouse and entered the calèche. Within twenty minutes the calèche had traveled the mile from the townhouse to my mansion. Dr. Burke walked me to my door. He’d held my hand during the carriage ride, and he then held my hand as he walked with me up the concrete steps.

“Good evening, Amelia,” he said sadly and softly tipped his black derby hat.

“Good evening, Dr. Burke,” I replied.

He touched the leather tips of my gloved fingers. I walked into the house, aware only of the fingertips that had sought more than his touch.

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## Chapter 4

By early November, Dr. Byron Dumont had been visiting me at the mansion every week since our first rendezvous in the park in August. I’d initially taken a fancy to him but that tender ardor had cooled during the ensuing weeks of our polite meetings in the parlor of the mansion. He was a dapper, charming young man, filled with notions of the future and smiles for everyone, but I thought that he was a cold fish. I’d not ever been courting, having been under the watchful eye of my Aunt Charlotte, but I was now experiencing courting without sparking.

It was an odd sensation to be sure, but my attraction to Dr. Burke prevented me from any true romantic inclination toward this young doctor. He was courteous and attentive, and very much interested in what he called my “Italianate mansion of exquisite design.” Moira, the girl next door, thought that he was a fine “catch,” but I was not sure that a cold fish made a good catch. The thought of marriage at that time scared me. I knew that marriage would be a union of my soul with the soul of another. It was difficult for me to

ascertain the soul of this pleasant young fellow. And alas, my soul felt too threatened for me to permit much closeness to anyone.

Byron certainly was intelligent, and well-read. He knew far more about literature, music, and world events than I cared to know. I often contemplated the true motives of this young doctor. He'd been more or less forced to accept general practitioner cases from Drs. Blackthorn and Meyer but he'd not ever spoken to me of this disappointing development in his life. In fact, Dr. Dumont never spoke to me of either doctor.

I did have that discussion with Dr. Meyer about my aunt, a few weeks after the truncated visit to the Second Empire Victorian. I sent my calling card to Dr. Meyer; he came to visit me with his calling card. A lengthy discussion took place in the parlor of the mansion.

Dr. Meyer explained that Aunt Charlotte had been prescribed morphine for about a year. She'd become addicted to it and Dr. Blackthorn had endeavoured to limit her consumption of the drug.

"Then Dr. Blackthorn knew that she was addicted to morphine?"

Dr. Meyer seemed to withdraw physically from my question. His face grew stern and sad. He quietly stated, "Dr. Blackthorn knew the risks to his patient, but she was experiencing very severe pain. He suspected that the condition was consistent with a form of atrophy."

I said nothing. I felt greatly sorrowed and horrified. I recollected the last year of her life. She'd always been a sweet, stubborn, independent, forthright woman. Somehow during that last year I'd sensed the transformation of her basic personality from her true, authentic self into a shell of a person.

At the time, I'd not understood the prison of addiction or the emotional embalming that was taking place within this kind but vulnerable widow. I only recall that I'd felt helpless to help her during that year before her death. And she'd probably felt helpless to help herself. Her fatal dependence on morphine was complexly linked to her need for Dr. Blackthorn as a doctor. I realized what a hideous, insidious process she'd undergone and I felt sick to my stomach. I contemplated the myriad ways in which my aunt had slipped not only from my grasp and my devoted love, but also from reality and from the safety and security of the world she'd known. The haven of love that she'd created as part of living must have felt appallingly unsafe to her.

I looked carefully at Dr. Meyer. His dark eyes were filled with anguish. I'd presumed the anguish was for my aunt. I would one day discover the full story of his intense distress.

I thanked this doctor for his time, his honesty, and his professional courtesy. I promised him that I would not say a word to Dr. Blackthorn about this matter.

Dr. Meyer looked relieved.

I added with some measure of scorn, "It is not difficult for me to not say a word to Dr. Blackthorn about anything. He is an arrogant, unkind man."

The dark eyes of Dr. Meyer grew tender and sad. "He feels far more below the surface than you'd ever know, Miss Prescott."

I looked cautiously at the pudgy face of this physician. Doctors were an odd bunch; they stuck together like pack of thieves or a phalanx of warriors. I did not know which of the two groups included Dr. Blackthorn, and I did not care to find out. In my naïve opinion, he'd permitted my aunt to enslave herself to an evil drug.

I then took the liberty of inquiring about the death certificate. It pained me to know that "Suicide" had been listed as the cause of death.

"Could not the cause of death be changed to accidental overdose?"

"It is difficult to determine such things," Dr. Meyer now spoke with the mock formality of a surgeon. His Bavarian accent sounded more marked and less friendly.

"I would not be concerned about words on a public document," he said quietly. "It is what is in your heart that forms the truth."

I lowered my face. In my heart, I knew that Charlotte Prescott Bennington had been led blindly to her death by an accidental overdose of a drug that was meant to help her. I looked up and bravely smiled at Dr. Meyer.

He firmly shook my hand and then showed himself out of the parlor and out of the mansion.

I took several deep breaths, letting each one out slowly and fully. I then made several command decisions. I'd avoided taking action regarding these concerns for nearly five months, or since the death of my aunt. I now knew that the time had come for resolution, or an attempt to finally finalize some of these matters of mourning.

I personally cleared the closet and dresser drawers of my aunt and donated half of her immaculate and beautiful clothes to the Salvation Army; the other half was boxed and sent to The Government Hospital for the Insane, an institution founded by Dorothea Dix and popularly called "St. Elizabeth's." I wryly hoped that I would not be following these exquisite garments to that location.

I did save the green, brown, and yellow tartan bathrobe which Aunt Charlotte had worn. The robe was a cherished souvenir, a tangible memory of the love that she and her husband had shared. It had been his robe, but after his death a decade earlier she'd saved it and clung to it. It had been in her dressing room closet all of those years. During the last year of her life, my aunt began to wear it. It was a perhaps a sign, however eerie, that she was coming nearer, ever nearer to her beloved in Heaven.

I packed the mementoes, trinkets, and decorations of her bedroom chamber. The furniture, with all of that dark walnut wood, was left in its place. I decided to simply leave this spacious room unused. It remained that way until I sold the mansion two years later.

Armed with the carrying out of these decisions, I felt stronger about the future, at least for that afternoon. Come the waning hours of the autumn day, the Parade of Horribles marched relentlessly through my mind. Nightfall brought with it anxiety and the repeated request for more gas in the lights and fire in the firebox. Bedtime became a time of prayer for the Lord to help me through this darkness. Oftentimes, I fell asleep during my entreaty.

Sunrise brought hope that the Horribles would not return in their macabre procession but by teatime during that cold month of November, the shortening rays of light would bring their assault upon my mind. I felt hoarfrost lining my heart.

It was with this trepidation of the soul that I began to learn a song which to this day I consider to be one of the most moving lieder by Schubert, one which also contains lyrics of infinite beauty.

Franz Schubert composed sixteen songs, or lieder, in September 1815; eight of them were set to poetry by Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock. "Das Rosenband" was easily the most popular and one of the most profound of all of the lieder by this prolific composer. I was at that time completely ignorant of the works of this Romantic Austrian composer who lived only thirty-one years.

I did not know German but I learned it quickly from Dr. Burke during my first lesson in this song during early November. The music of the Renaissance had unexpectedly been postponed for instruction in this lieder. The lyrics in German and then in English translation are as follows:

*“Im Frühlings Schatten fand ich sie.  
Da band ich sie mit Rosenbändern.  
Sie fühlt' es nicht und schlummerte.  
Ich sah sie an; mein Leben hing  
Mit diesem Blick an ihrem Leben.  
Ich fühlt' es wohl und wußt' es nicht.  
Doch lispelt' ich ihr sprachlos zu  
Und rauschte mit den Rosenbändern.  
Da wachte sie vom Schlummer auf.  
Sie sah mich an; ihr Leben hing  
Mit diesem Blick an meinem Leben.  
Und um uns ward Elysium.”*

“In the spring shade I found her  
then with a garland of roses bound her;  
she did not feel it and slumbered on.  
I looked at her; within this glance,  
My life hung upon her life;  
I truly felt it, and knew it not.  
But speechlessly I whispered to her  
and rustled the rose garland;  
then she awoke from slumber.  
She looked upon me; her life hung  
upon my life with this one glance  
and all around us was Elysium.”

Dr. Burke read the lyrics to me in German; he then translated them into English. I felt the quiet rapture of these words and the depth of emotion that this professor imparted to them. Our eyes met and I knew that he was falling in love with me. As for me, I'd never heard such poetic beauty or felt it within the eyes of a man.

He trembled slightly as he played the introduction to the song. He sang it first and though I'd heard his baritone many times during his demonstrations of certain techniques and passages, I'd never heard him sing with this much tender emotion and beauty, restrained passion and innate dignity. This song was the first I'd heard him sing, and he was singing it for me.

At first, I felt frightened. I wanted to run away. The fear must have shown in my eyes. I dared not look at him, but then I glanced upon him, and I knew that I too had begun to care deeply for this man, in a way that I did not understand. We said nothing. Our eyes understood that here was a song that spoke to the soul. It had just spoken to our souls.

Dr. Burke then grew serious in a forceful way. He was adamant about the correct and precise pronunciation of my German. I learned it so well that afternoon that to this day whenever I hear German I can detect faulty pronunciation. Moreover, when I sang the first few lines, we joyfully discovered that I had found my composer.

The singing of German is not easy. It requires consummate breath control and the ability to sustain a tone within very closed vowels and rather ugly sounding consonants. Done properly, however, Schubert lieder can be spell-binding. I was fortunate enough with my natural resonance to master this form of singing quickly. However, the problem of repressed emotions becoming overwhelming once again reared its ugly head. I went flat during the most emotion-laded times within the first three lines.

Dr. Burke slammed his hands on the piano keys and shouted, "Why!?"

I felt ashamed and unable to explain the source of the chronic problem. I knew the reason, but I dared not say that I was there, in front of him, singing so that I felt life flowing through me; singing so that life forced me to live, but, sadly, once again, to cry. Attempting to restrain my tears, my voice quavered and went half a note flat.

I began to cry. I ran from the room. Dr. Burke limped quickly as he followed me. Gently, he took my hand in the vestibule and led me back into the room.

At this point, he ought to have held me, but he restrained his emotions and quietly asked, "Does the feeling well up within you?"

"Yes."

"That is good!"

I gave him my Shakespearean look. He smiled.

"I shall teach you technique, and you shall train yourself to use the technique to control those profound feelings to perform."

I stared at the Mad Burke. Surely he could not believe that I would master both music and emotion so facilely.

"You feel what you are singing. That talent is rare, Amelia. It is not merely hearing the beauty of your voice that brings pleasure: it is the sensation of the emotion coming

from within you. You are a very soulful person. But you must always remember, Amelia: heart of passion, head of ice.”

I listened to those words and I have never forgotten them. My real training as an artist began that afternoon.

Dr. Burke took my hand and I walked while he grotesquely limped to the piano. He sat down on the stool and played the accompaniment with such exquisite delicacy that I nearly wept once more. But I wanted to master my emotions for him; I wanted to prove that I could transform my pathos into artistic expression. I vowed to learn vocal technique that would help me to control my churning feelings. I keenly understood that any true singer had to feel the song deeply with heart-rending passion many times and long before she was capable of performing it for an audience, a group of strangers to whom she would grant the gift of her emotions through music. I knew that I had to shed tears before I could transform them into the art of singing. I thus endeavoured to learn how to create mystery out of emotion through the magic of music.

Dr. Burke paused a moment, and then took hold of a pencil from atop the piano. “Look here, Amelia. During these two passages, because your voice delights in ornamentation, we shall add these grace notes.”

I studied the changes and silently agreed. The appoggiatura would be certain to evoke tears, particularly mine. I then sang the first three lines with heartfelt emotion but with greater composure and with the focused tension in the line that I’d been attempting during the Italian arias.

“Good! Good!” Dr. Burke smiled and raised his hands from the piano. He looked at his timepiece on his arm. “Your lesson is over for the day, Amelia, even though it is only two-thirty. You have worked hard this afternoon!”

I smiled sadly. The hardest work had taken place within myself. I would one day learn that such effort compels the creation of an artist and the creation of her work.

Dr. Burke busied himself with sheet music and I concluded that he was occupied with other matters for the remainder of that hour. It did not dawn on me that he was purposely ending the lesson because of his repressed emotions that threatened to become overwhelming.

I bade him a fond goodbye and left the house. The sunshine was delightful on my face as I walked to the calèche. Only a fierce wind marred my sense of elation. That wind would grow in intensity throughout the night, forcing me to call Miriam into the room.

I did not sleep that night. I prayed for solace from God, but the howling of the cold swift wind brought shivers within me. When the dawn came, I knew that I’d survived a terrifying night, and I wondered if the emotions released during the lesson on “Das Rosenband” were piercing the tissues of wounds that were still raw and quivering with pain.

The majority of the students under the instruction of this professor were being trained in attaining what is known as “head voice,” a resonance of the tone that is felt within the

upper regions of the head (a buzzing sensation occurs there), and not in the throat or the chest. Probably because of the bone structure of my face (broad, high cheekbones; strong jaw and forehead), I quite naturally sang with resonance in the “head” and I rarely deviated from it, except with lower notes which tended to emanate from my chest.

Dr. Burke assured me that proper placement of those notes would come in time, with the maturing of my physique. He did not believe in the dividing of the voice into three “registers” (head, middle, and chest), and he blithely assured me that since I was a natural singer, with “head” resonance that rarely varied, I was to therefore graduate into the upper echelons of learning legato technique, various dynamics, and gestures. I was breathing rarified air indeed.

Once a month, the half a dozen students of Dr. Burke met in his parlor to perform their latest musical achievements. I thus met the other students of this professor. They included a large, busty female, slightly older than myself, with a stated name of Hortense de Honoré. I completely doubted this name was truly hers. I pictured her more in the realm of Agnes or Florence. She had mousy, wavy brown hair that she wore up in a bun. The effect was intended to create an aura of respectability; however, coupled with the velvet and brocade low-cut dresses that she usually wore, the bun succeeded only as farce. I suspected that she’d adopted this stated appellation of Hortense de Honoré as a stage name for her stage career, something that I also completely doubted in terms of realization. This presumed future career was also something that came across as farce.

The simple truth was that Hortense could not sing. She also lisped, badly. She’d been provided by her Maker with an ample body: a large, broad ribcage and long, thick throat. But she sang with her chest, her well-endowed chest which she used more as a weapon than a piece of vocal equipment. To be sure, she refused to accept the fact that proper singing is accomplished through the use of diaphragmatic breathing, using an area well below the bosom.

I was embarrassed by her lack of modesty. I found any woman who chose to reveal cleavage in the daytime, or at any time, publicly, to be tasteless. Such behavior was unbecoming a lady. But Hortense was not interested in being a lady. She flaunted the rules of dress and etiquette, and she not-too-secretly enjoyed her vulgar rebellion against Victorian society. Every time that I saw Hortense, the word “wench” came to mind.

What annoyed me the most, however, was her basic inability to sing and her utterly sordid insistence that she could master even the most difficult aria. She believed without any doubt that she was the supreme soprano in our small group of novices. She deemed herself the queen of coloratura. She informed me once that her voice could achieve “squillo” almost effortlessly. This term is applied to a rich, resonant, almost trumpet-like sound that is used to project a lyrical tone over lush, thick orchestration. Indeed, squillo has that unmistakable piercing sound in the timbre of the voice, most notably in the high tessitura or range. Done well, it is effective and tolerable, though, in my opinion, rarely beautiful. Done poorly, it is an annoying screech.

In reality, whenever Hortense performed in her tightly corseted red velvet and brocade gown, her thick voice cracked, repeatedly. Her overly large, protruding brown eyes then grew even larger and protruded even more. Unmercifully, Hortense would then



continue with the aria, as is expected of any professional performer. No matter what happens, the singer carries on.

Unfortunately, one could not carry on and laugh at this operatic fraud. Direct insult is very bad form, and the imperious eyes of Dr. Burke were on the other students not to deride, ridicule, or mock this conceited female. I understood that his reputation was at stake, far more than her reputation, something which was very readily being accomplished through coarse and common behavior that was outfitted in a low-cut, ostentatious gown. During any of her tortured performances, I could not, however, restrain my eyes from rolling, quite in time with the bulging and widening of the horrified eyes of Hortense. Even Dr. Burke was forced to lower his head and sigh. Hortense paid him quite well for his precise instruction and rigorous training. I am certain that he felt far more compromised by her unprofessional performance and conduct than she could ever conceive of feeling about them.

The other vocal student of note was a tall, thin male of twenty five. He was ethereal in face and polite in mien, but supercilious to all. His name was Pieter. His pale brown hair was already thinning but he seemed not to care. He possessed a quavering, thin, high-pitched voice that was unpleasant but not offensive. He informed me shortly after we met that his goal was to learn to sing and then to perform the entire “Winterreise,” or “Winter Journey.” This song cycle for voice and piano was composed by Franz Schubert. The composition was originally written for tenor voice. Dr. Burke was adamant that the original intent and musical arrangement, including all dynamics, of the composer must be respected, a dictum with which I concurred and still do.

Even though Schubert himself transposed this piece, as well as others, to suit other ranges, Dr. Burke was of the firm and fierce opinion that even Schubert did not wish to do so; the need for money forced him to make those changes. Indeed, Schubert was known to have submitted to being fired from a position rather than lower the key of a song whose notes the soprano could not reach. Dr. Burke was in full agreement with this anecdotal decision. “Singers,” he declared, “Are not their own composers. They cannot revise music at will to suit their whims, their needs, and,” he sneered, “Their deficiencies.”

In the case of Pieter and “Winterreise,” his tenor was so high that it equated to an alto and he had difficulty with many of the lower notes. His voice cracked at times that I began to anticipate. I was fascinated to discover that a voice can crack on either notes that are too high for the singer, or on notes that are too low. It is basically a matter of supporting the tone with adequate breath, and breath that is evenly and steadily released. The skill is known as “breath control.” In the case of Hortense, the air simply rushed out too fast, albeit at predictable intervals for she then gulped some more air to repeat the atrocious experience. In the case of Pieter, his breath control was good, but fear of not being able to reach down to the note caused him to falter and lose his breath and the note appallingly cracked.

Pieter was a very withdrawn but supercilious young man. He was not unkind but his concern for his fellow students or even his fellow man did not exist. It was, I learned, an erudite, self-absorbed world, this studio of young singers trying to be serious and adult

and artistic before they had truly matured into adults. The claim of being artistic I found preposterous, presumptuous, and somewhat indecent. I was not employing Dr. Burke for such egotistical purposes. I was desperately trying to lift myself out of grief, gloom, and an ever-encircling darkness that I feared would soon engulf me. So while I sang with abandon, and with the quiet intensity that caught the eyes and the ears of Dr. Burke, I was very alone in my talent and my soulful desire to sing away my heartache. A student such as Pieter was wealthy and bored. He'd chosen to pursue a nearly impossible dream. I supposed at the time that the squandering of money and time neither bothered nor disgusted him. In fact, the concept of wasting precious moments and fortune probably did not enter his rarified mind.

I, however, was disturbed and alienated by the insouciant attitudes and the carelessness of Pieter, and by the vulgar conceit of Hortense. There were a few other students with whom I could converse, but they, like Pieter and Hortense, were not truly enraptured by the music. They were interested only in how they could use the music, and in what the music could propel them to: fame, money, attention, recognition, applause, world travel. I merely wanted to become one with the notes and to express an inner torment so that this force was no longer within me. Little did I know that music would only heighten the sense of that torment. Music, in and of itself, at that time, was minimally cathartic. It was creating an agonizing journey into my soul, a deepening of all that resided there, untouched, unhealed, unspoken.

At times when I sang, I felt the clutches of this fearsome force and I inwardly tried to run away from it. Dr. Burke saw the flight within my eyes, and he determined that I, Amelia Beatrice Prescott, would not run away from this overwhelming force. I would transmute this force, this abyss of emotions, into art, and use it to sing. I knew that he sensed that the wounds were still raw; the scars had not even begun to form; the blood was still wet on the ravages of my psyche.

He bade me come, sing, and all will soon be well. I, the master teacher, will be there, in the audience, watching you, and you will perform majestically because of all that I, your devoted professor, have taught to you and elicited from you.

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Chapter 5

In two weeks, Thanksgiving would be upon me. This holiday was not celebrated or even observed during this era by many folks in Washington, D.C. They tended to be Southerners who considered that “day” to be yet another foul imposition by Abraham Lincoln. I was oft reminded by acquaintances who, filled with Confederate sympathy, maintained that “the Woah is not ovah.”

I invited Moira, Byron, and Mrs. Rutledge to this dinner. Mrs. Rutledge was a widow who lived down the street. My aunt had been on good terms with her, although in private she'd referred to Mrs. Rutledge as a “scrubber.” This derogatory term was used for a “Northerner” female who, lacking good family, good breeding, and good manners,

takes to scrubbing her house with a mania. In the case of Mrs. Rutledge, she ordered her servants to perform the mad cleaning for her.

The day passed uneventfully. I devised a suitable menu of roast pheasant and vegetables, and a dessert of rum cake, even though I detest it. It was a favorite of my aunt and I could not bear to break with her tradition. For me, this holiday was the first without her, and I dreaded the next holidays to come: Christmas, Boxing Day, and New Year's Day.

I focused on my singing even more. The progress that I was making in "Das Rosenband" was patchy. I believe that I truly was driving the Mad Burke even madder.

It was now early December. Snow blanketed the ground, and I felt the chill of the day within me. My lesson that week was particularly tense. Dr. Burke was impatient with me, almost to the point of rudeness. I withdrew within myself, a trait that he'd quickly noted early in his instruction of me; he then had to work to subtly pull me out of my shell.

I sang the entirety of "Das Rosenband" without particular emotion. He looked annoyed and insulted, as if I were purposely going through the motions of singing but withholding my feelings. The truth was that I was beset by too many feelings.

In a rigidly calm voice, Dr. Burke said, "Today, Amelia, I shall teach you how to veil the voice for the ending of this song." He raised an eyebrow while he eyed me. "You must stay within the note – that means you do not close the mouth but you allow only a portion of the tone to leave it. Here, I shall demonstrate."

He tenderly sang the last two lines. The tone was indeed veiled, soft but clear. I marveled at the rich timbre.

"It is not difficult to do but you must permit your throat and your mouth to be fully open. Only then will the tone be free and then you can soften or veil it."

I tried but did not succeed.

"Hmmm." Dr. Burke crossed his arms over his vest. "You are tense. I can see it in your shoulders. They are somewhat hunched. Now stand up straight and allow the shoulders to fall naturally into place."

I did as he said and tried the technique again, but my mood was too somber to permit me to surrender with joy to these lyrics, especially to these words about Elysium.

"Do you not know?!" Dr. Burke spoke with vehemence. "Do you not know the exquisite joy and beauty of which you are supposed to sing?"

"Yes," I said quietly. "I know, but I do not feel those sensations."

"Ah!" He grew quiet.

He stood up from the piano stool and limped in his grotesque manner toward me. I was standing only a few feet away from him and the piano. Even though his shoulders were askew, he placed his arms around me, and he embraced me. I permitted him this liberty. Everything within me, and outside of me, my emotions, my eyes, my posture, my mouth, my beating heart, wished for him to hold me. It was a tender, sad, pitiful moment, this yearning of my heart and body to be held.

I knew that I was compromising my position as a student to receive this sensation of being embraced. I was an emotional orphan, begging for the love that he'd been withholding from me.

He pressed his cheek against mine and sighed. It was a manly sound and yet it partook of youth and desire.

"We must not," he said firmly.

"We must," I said calmly.

He stood away from me, afraid perhaps that here was another Arabella. I could not assure him of my intentions because at the time I did not know them. He had enraptured me and I helplessly sought his love.

He limped away from me, and sat with rigid dignity on the piano stool. Gently, he played the introduction to "Das Rosenband." He sang the song and I learned once again how to vocally express the sensation of surrendering to an aching rapture.

Dr. Burke finished the song with his veiled voice. He wiped a tear from his cheek, and then he turned to me.

"It is a paradox," he smiled, "But only by relaxing can you achieve the arching tension that pulls your voice through the phrase. It is like those ever-widening concentric circles of tone, moving outward, and growing in intensity. Sometimes, the sound diminishes, as in a diminuendo, but you keep the tone full and bright. Never, I repeat, never allow breath to enter the tone. A tremendous sense of pathos is thus achieved. Especially in these middle passages where you must maintain the *sostenuto* and in those notes where you must maintain *legato*."

Sostenuto is an Italian term that means "sustained." This direction to the singer sometimes means a slowing of tempo, but it generally refers to a very *legato* singing, often holding the note just a bit beyond its normal value. Dr. Burke had indicated two endings of lines in the middle section that I was to perform in this manner, as well as two lines where I was to perform *legato*, or sing without taking any breath between the note at the end of one line and the note at the start of another.

"Now," Dr. Burke smiled sternly, "Let us begin once more."

He played the accompaniment in his usual patient, gentle manner. I tried my best, but I was not able to fully perform the *sostenuto* or the *legato* that afternoon.

"Amelia," Dr. Burke said harshly, "Today, your voice lacks its usual warmth and fullness. *Bel canto!* You can and shall master it! Always remember that there must be a flow of tension throughout the entire phrasing of the line – and you can only achieve that tension by relaxing and allowing the voice to move through the breath."

"I run out of breath," I said in frustration.

"Take a larger breath."

"It is not a matter of the amount of breath that I take. I am weary."

"And what did you do to become so fatigued? Have you not been practicing and studying?"

His eyes were suspicious. One eyebrow became raised imperiously.

"I have been taking walks in the afternoon. And," I said emphatically, "I took a sleigh ride."

“A sleigh ride? With whom?”

Something inside of me warned me not to answer this impertinent question. It was none of his business. Yet I simply stated, “Dr. Dumont.”

“Who is this person?”

The look of jealousy in his eyes frightened me. I took a step back and said, “He is a friend.”

Dr. Burke narrowed his eyes. He assessed me in a way that was harsh and I felt for the first time his superiority over me. I felt chastened but fought this feeling.

“Amelia, the art of singing, especially the opera, demands work. It is hard work for the performer to learn her craft. You must burn the midnight oil. There can be no compromises. You must be willing and prepared to surrender to your art. Or else you will be nothing but,” he sneered, “An amateur.”

I imperceptibly shrugged. At that point in my life, I was not willing to surrender to anything. And I did not mind being an amateur. Everyone has to start somewhere in a pursuit or endeavour of anything; the singing stage demanded more than I was willing to give to it during that year of extreme grief.

“My other students shall be ready for their recitals in January, but I do not believe that you will be.” Dr. Burke took the sheet music from the piano and placed it atop it. He turned to me and said, “By June, you shall be ready. There are other songs that you still must learn.”

He stared implacably at me and knew by the look on my face and in my eyes that he’d wounded me. His voice remained serious, almost grim, but the tone softened and his steel-blue eyes were tender as he looked upon me.

“It is of no consequence, Amelia. I demand more of your voice than I do of the others. It is because you have far more talent. There will be adequate time for you to return to this song and to more fully master it. You must, however, discipline your talent. You must become ever more dedicated to your art.”

“I shall,” I promised. The unspoken portion of the promise was: One day, I shall, but not as quickly as you demand.

Dr. Burke slowly smiled. “I have decided that Purcell, the unique Baroque composer of the Renaissance, the English Renaissance, will bring out the best in you. And you shall fully employ that Shakespearean look of yours.”

That look is precisely what I fully employed at that moment.

Dr. Burke smirked. “Purcell was an English composer. He combined both Italian and French elements of style into his compositions. His songs are pure delights. Quite bawdy as well, very Elizabethan.”

I took a breath, or perhaps it was a gulp.

“The hour is over now, Amelia,” Dr. Burke dismissed me.

I’d no doubt that Hortense was waiting outside of this parlor. I took the sheet music from Dr. Burke and walked out of the door, uncertain of this Purcell fellow and his Elizabethan bawdiness.

Dr. Blackthorn came to visit me quite unexpectedly the next day. He'd not sent a calling card and had not brought one with him. The doctor simply showed up at the door and pulled the bell.

I was both provoked and pleased by his lack of courtesy and dispensing with social convention. It was somewhat akin to my dispensing with the corset so that I could breathe. This arrogant, mildly abrasive surgeon saw no reason to employ a rule that hampered his success in pursuing a goal. I suspected that he knew there was a possibility, if not a probability, that I would not greet him. And so he blithely tossed away any calling card, albeit with dignity and decorum, and arrived at this white Italianate mansion in a Hansom cab.

It was two o'clock on Wednesday, one hour before the appointed time of the day that this mysterious physician was occupied each week at an unknown destination. I was in the drawing room, seated at the grand piano. I accompanied myself while singing various passages in "Das Rosenband." Usually, I stood while vocalizing or singing, but playing the piano necessitated that I sit on the bench with perfect posture.

James the butler entered the room.

"Miss Prescott, Dr. Blackthorn has arrived to see you."

My fingers collapsed suddenly on the piano keys. "Please show him in, James."

I remained seated on the piano bench. Dr. Blackthorn walked swiftly into the room, as if on a mission. He wore his black frock coat and clutched his black doctor's bag.

"Please be seated, Dr. Blackthorn."

"I prefer to stand, Miss Prescott."

I stared at this detached, dismissive man. It had been months since I'd seen him, although I'd seen him almost monthly during the final years of the life of my aunt, his patient. There was, that day, an ominous presence about him, almost as if his physical form were in pain. I peered at his cool gray eyes. They were dazed, or glazed.

My seated position placed me in a subordinate role and so I stood up, walked over to him, and noticed that he was hunched slightly beside a sepia-toned, floor standing globe. I found this posture quite out of character with this surgeon who maintained a rigid form. Far more than a posture, his bearing was an announcement that he would not be moved.

"I have come to discuss with you the matter of the young Dumont."

My eyes immediately gave their Shakespearean look to this doctor whose speech sounded slightly lethargic. This feature was highly out of round with the normally clipped, emphatic language of this scholarly surgeon.

"It has come to my attention that he has been visiting you on a regular basis."

My eyes widened once more. I felt insulted by his attempted interference in my personal affairs. "I hardly think that this matter concerns you."

He looked at me in a sadly imploring manner. The emotion within his glazed eyes was haunted. I saw that this surgeon was slightly trembling. For the first time, I saw this physician as a person. I realized the essential truths about him: he was hostile, cynical, vulnerable, shy, and prone to feel that he had to prove his worth daily to himself, far more than to others.

"Will you please sit down?"

“I cannot stay. It is a matter of grave concern to me, Miss Prescott, this association of yours with the young Dumont.”

“Dr. Dumont is my friend.”

“Dumont is no doctor, and he is a friend to no one!” The broad mouth of this surgeon grew tight with derision.

I studied the intense but detached face of this surgeon. I realized that he blamed himself for the death of my aunt. I too had been blaming him, but I now knew that the invective of guilt that he’d been administering was nothing short of punitive. Far from luxuriating in his guilt, he was thrashing himself with it.

I did not feel sorry for Dr. Blackthorn, but I no longer felt antipathy. I achieved a completely neutral position, a state that placed me closer to the triumph of faith over fear. Faith had become the arena of supreme struggle for me; thus, a stance of neutrality was huge step in the right direction toward hope and then, ultimately, faith. My refusal to further judge this surgeon was a victory for me over fear, doubt, and skepticism.

“I appreciate your concern, Dr. Blackthorn,” I gently said.

He wiped a bead of perspiration from his cheek. I tried not to notice his distraught condition but it easily perplexed me.

“That wastrel is not to be trusted,” he said in a low, menacing tone.

I stared at the globe which stood between us. I fully believed his words, but I wondered what had transpired between him and the young Dumont to warrant such a display of rudeness. Direct insult is appallingly vulgar. However, Dr. Blackthorn was known to jettison propriety when his purpose was impeded by it. And his purpose that day was to warn me away from Byron Dumont.

“I shall take your advice into consideration,” I stated.

“Please do so. To not is to invite peril.”

Dr. Blackthorn tipped his bowler hat. “Good day, Miss Prescott.”

He left as swiftly as he had arrived, and I stood at the globe, staring at the Pacific Ocean. Something was not right with this surgeon and I wondered if he was in the throes of a malady of which he dared not speak. The proverb from the Book of Luke came to mind: “Physician, heal thyself.”

It was all very confusing to me, and I decided to invite Moira over for tea. A young attorney who worked in D.C. had begun to court and even spark her, and this green-eyed, red-haired beauty was all aglow with the excitement of young love. I longed to hear what a fine romance was like.

I’d begun to bring Penelope the cat into my bedroom chamber at night. She slept at the foot of the bed, forming a warm, soft puddle of fur and bleary blue eyes that looked up at me whenever I bolted suddenly upright out of bed and fumbled to light a candle. That night she was awakened several times as I thrashed about in the bed sheets and comforters.

The wind howled fiercely through the Chesapeake Bay estuary. The chestnut tree outside of the windows of my bedroom chamber swayed viciously. The tree was

massive, over one hundred years old. It lost many branches that night as well as a major limb while I slept fitfully. Funereal visions stalked my night and haunted its sleeping moments. By break of dawn, however, I felt as if a fever had broken and I was released somewhat from my demons.

Within daylight, my mind apprehended the windows of illumination from the deep pit of despair. When I sang that afternoon, my voice achieved a brilliance and a clarity that I'd long strived to attain. I wanted to prevail over the darkness of doubt and the agony of grief. Within my tortured mind and tormented soul, a dream began to slowly flicker and form. A candle of hope burned within, maintained by the vigilant desire of who and what I could become.

The first song by composer Henry Purcell that was introduced to me by Dr. Burke was "Man is for the Woman Made." I can still recall the obviously witty, slightly smutty ditty. The first three of four verses appear as follows:

*Man, man, man is for the woman made,
And the woman made for man;
As the spur is for the jade,
As the scabbard for the blade,
As for digging is the spade,
As for liquor is the can,
So man is for the woman made,
And the woman made for man.*

*As the scepter to be sway'd,
As for night's the serenade,
As for pudding is the pan,
And to cool us is the fan,
So man is for the woman made,
And the woman made for man.*

*Be she widow, wife or maid,
Be she wanton, be she stayed,
Be she well or ill array'd,
Whore, bawd or harridan,
Yet man is for the woman made,
And the woman made for man.*

In a mercifully bold and gracious decision, Dr. Burke decided that the fourth verse added nothing to the song. Indeed it did not. The lyrics were replete with enough ribald images that the audience likely could not keep track of them.

During my introduction to this Purcell gem, Dr. Burke was quite cheerful. He failed to comprehend my dislike and distaste for this song, one which he intended for me to sing for my spring recital.

I was a virgin but I was not a prude. I was profoundly bored by these Elizabethan references to, as Dr. Burke put it, things that fit inside one another. He asked me if I understood. I looked with steady eyes at him and said, "Quite."

The truth is that I did not even vaguely know how these things fitting inside another correlated to the gentle art of seduction. I did not intend to state my ignorance, but the Mad Burke was probably well aware of it anyway. I'm now quite sure that he reveled in my innocence and the humorous incongruity of a naïve maiden singing this bawdy Elizabethan tune. I did perform it well, enunciating each syllable expertly. I also enjoyed the lively, quick flow of this Baroque tune, but I was farcically unaware of its double entendres, or even the single ones. In this instance, my ignorance was his bliss.

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## Chapter 6

There is no Christmas like a Victorian Christmas. It was, in fact, this type of celebration that made Christmas in America the joyous, festive event that has in more modern times lost its joy due to commercialization. I was fortunate as a child to have experienced the simplicity of this sacred holiday marking the birth of the Christ Child, even though in the house of my parents there was little else to celebrate. Life in the white mansion of Aunt Charlotte transformed this somber religious occasion for me into the wondrous festivity of glittering lights; Christmas tree adorned with candles; wreaths, garlands, ribbons, paper chains; humble home-made gifts; cookies; delicious food; gingerbread; caroling; mistletoe; and the warm company of friends and acquaintances. The Adoration of the Magi was combined with adoration of beauty, light, and jubilation.

That Christmas of 1888, however, was a day that I dreaded with the weight of the weary world. I felt guilty about my lack of enthusiasm, and I felt even more fear about the coming year. Moira, my friend next door, was twenty years of age, a year older than me, and she volunteered to help me with the preparations and arrangements. She assured me that her three younger sisters and one brother would assist their mother in making ready their Christmas celebration. She wished to be of assistance to her friend in need. I shall never forget the kindness and the quiet comfort that this young woman bestowed upon me during that holiday season. We remained friends throughout the years and I am happy to say that she did marry that young attorney and built a family and a blessed life with him.

The Presbyterian Church that I attended in Georgetown was decorated with splendour and with many candles. I only vaguely recall the songs and the sermon, but I do remember the minister assuring that a light shines in the darkness because of the birth of our Saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ. This message felt personal and indeed it was. The minister had been ever watchful of me during that year, and I fondly recall his spiritual guidance and concern.

I returned to the mansion in the calèche and spent an hour in my bedroom chamber, praying and reading the Bible. I still have the piece of paper on which I wrote these two verses of Scripture that I repeated throughout that day to strengthen my resolve and to battle my fears:

*Psalm 27:14 – Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the Lord.*

*Psalm 56:3 – What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee.*

I invited the doctors Dumont, Meyer, and Blackthorn, as well as Mrs. Rutledge, and two female acquaintances for a Christmas dinner at five. By the time that my guests arrived, I was composed but quiet. I was courteous and gracious but my heart was not fully in this formal dinner which was nonetheless a glowing success. I recall goose being served and I vividly recall asking Dr. Blackthorn to carve the bird. He insisted on sharpening the knife and, as he sharpened the tool on a whetstone, his eyes were focused with vehemence on Dr. Dumont.

I also remember gingerbread being served, but the rest of the bounty of food escapes my memory. There was plenty of it, but I ate sparingly. The absence of my aunt was still keenly felt, but I also felt the presence of her memory. The surroundings of her mansion had begun to soothe me. The lowering of the gas in the gaslights, however, and the crunching down of the fire in the firebox still filled me with acute apprehension.

Dr. Blackthorn noticed the trepidation in my eyes and the anxiety that must have been viewed as somatic tension. He kindly asked if he could dance with me during the performance of Christmas carols by a string quartet in the parlor. I agreed, hoping that activity would dissipate my nervous energy.

I wore a forest green silk gown with gigot sleeves and a train of black lace. My hair was in a chignon, and I looked pretty. It was one of the first times that I'd danced with a man, and I am afraid that I did not follow his lead very well. I cannot say that he did not lead well because he did. The stiffness of this surgeon melted away once the cheerful strains of "Deck the Halls" began. And the scent of cherry tobacco on his skin was enticing, to say the least.

He laughed, and I watched his face as it grew mirthful.

"It was gracious of you to come to my celebration," I said quietly.

"It was gracious of you to invite me," he cordially replied. "I thank you much."

We smiled at one another, but spoke no more. The subject of Dr. Dumont was latent on our lips. This young man waited in the back of the room for his dance with me. This song ended. Dr. Blackthorn released me from his gentlemanly arms and "the young Dumont" came and took me by the hand. The elder physician bowed to me, scowled, and walked out of the parlor and into the drawing room. Suddenly, my interest was more in what Dr. Blackthorn would be doing in that room than in dancing with Dr. Dumont in this room. I soon discovered that Byron was a mediocre dancer at best. The carol was now "Good King Wenceslas," a song that I neither understood nor liked.

At the end of this dance, Byron bade me a “Merry Christmas” and a pleasant goodbye. He stated that he had business to attend to in D.C., and I did not question him. He wore a secret smile, and I wondered if he had an amour elsewhere. This young man had spent many hours with me alone, in the parlor, and he’d never once kissed me. He would stroke my hair and whisper, “I love you,” a statement that I highly doubted. His interest was more in the white Italianate mansion than in holding my hand.

Dr. Meyer joined his colleague in the drawing room. Mrs. Rutledge was already seated there, eating gingerbread and drinking coffee. The two female acquaintances had been ridden back to their houses in my calèche. I walked slowly into the room, pleased to see a roaring fire in the firebox. The white and gray marble mantel and surround appeared to be ghostly in the flickering illumination.

I sat on a large, tufted, brocade sofa and turned my ears toward the two surgeons. I was not technically eavesdropping because these men were in the same room as me and Mrs. Rutledge did not wish to engage me in conversation. She was busily eating her second piece of gingerbread.

Dr. Blackthorn was holding court with his fellow physician. I listened intently.

“In the olden days of surgery, if shock and hemorrhage didn’t kill the patient, gangrene did. Or infection. That was another certainty!” Dr. Blackthorn burst out in sudden laughter. It was a habit of his, to erupt in an almost hilarious vocal merriment from his usual detached, aloof, reticent self. I’d much more often witnessed this physician behaving in a prim, proper manner that was as cold as an ice cube.

Dr. Blackthorn continued in a cheerful tone: “We all are well aware that surgery was once known as the ultimum refugium. It is now a means by which to end disease. A surgeon cures with his knife.”

Dr. Meyer then pronounced in his pleasing Bavarian accent, “Surgery is still a grim, brutal, bloody business, even with our attempts at asepsis. But the art is not nearly as foul and fatal as it used to be. My uncle was a surgeon. He was very proud, highly proud of his surgical coat. It was stiff with dried blood and hardened with pus. He even admitted to me that his scalpel was wiped twice onto that coat – once before and once after cutting into the patient.”

“Asepsis remains a novel idea nowadays,” Blackthorn sighed, “But it’s one of the most effective. You know how strongly I insist on it.”

I contemplated speaking with Mrs. Rutledge but this older woman was now falling to sleep on the sofa. Too much gingerbread and excitement might have done her in.

Dr. Meyer, with its lulling accent, lured me back into listening to him.

“The amazing feat in the olden days is how many patients survived being under the knife, not how many died!” Dr. Meyer rolled his eyes.

Blackthorn spoke in a diffident tone. “Quite a spectacle surgery was too. At Presbyterian Hospital in New York City, students and visitors crammed the surgical amphitheatre of the most eminent surgeons. Of course, I was among that worthy group!”

Dr. Meyer softly laughed.

“When I was a young doctor, there were times when the operating table was completely surrounded by observers.” Blackthorn paused and then he stated in the

measured voice of a lecturer: “The anatomic approach of course led to the physiologic era. And physiology remains the foreground of all considerations. Above all else, and first of all, function is to be considered by the surgeon.”

The dark discerning eyes of Dr. Meyer caught my glance. He smiled and motioned with his plump hand for me to join them. As a courteous hostess, I checked on the slumbering Mrs. Rutledge. She’d begun to snore. I left the sofa and walked to the doctors.

Tall tapered lit candles in the candelabrum on the piano lit up the faces of these men. They appeared to be far more serious, almost phantasmagoric. I quietly asked Dr. Blackthorn how he was able to cut with a knife on the body of a person. The question was rather forward, but his steely blue eyes showed delight in hearing it, and he smiled in answering it.

“A surgeon is an artist who works in flesh. He is much like a musician and his instrument or,” his eyes glanced away from me, “A singer and her instrument.”

The analogy was gory but I understood it. I looked at the candles and felt the soothing voice of Dr. Meyer.

“Perhaps the surgeon is not quite as lovely as a trained singer,” he smiled, “But he tries to apply his craft just as artistically.”

Dr. Blackthorn suddenly laughed. It was a giddy sound that went through me. I wondered if he’d had too much to drink at dinner, but all that I recalled serving was apple cider. There had been some sherry before dinner but that alcohol had been served in small amounts hours earlier.

This tall, aloof man then became solemn. “The tools of the surgeon are knife, scalpel, scissors, needles, thread.” His voice grew more intense and as I watched his diffident face, I thought that he looked very lonely.

“To cut is to cure. A surgeon must never wound or injure the tissues surrounding the incision. They are vulnerable. They must be protected from harm.” He stared at me. “There are surgeons who do more harm than good through their rough treatment of tissues. Gentleness is a means of healing.” Dr. Blackthorn observed me, as if he understood that I possessed gravely injured inner wounds, tissues that were in peril of forming scars. Once again, the matter of the young Dumont formed a silent thread between us.

“It is a fascinating subject,” he said to me in a low voice. “The way in which wounds heal. A physician who injures tissues cannot heal them. Caution and gentleness are paramount for the patient. There is great strength in gentleness.”

Dr. Blackthorn eyed me during that final pronouncement. The subject of the young Dumont again remained unspoken and potent between us. He then bowed, and said, “A Merry Christmas to you, Miss Prescott. I enjoyed the evening with delight. I must take my leave, but I thank you kindly. The house looked splendid, splendid indeed.” Looking around him, he seemed to suddenly see Dr. Meyer. “You sir, I shall see in two days hence at the office.”

He left the drawing room and, I presumed, exited the front door of the mansion.

James the butler walked swiftly to me. “Miss Prescott, is it time for me to extinguish the candles of the tree?”

“By all means, yes, do so.” The enormous Christmas tree in the parlor had been left unattended.

I stood, bewildered, for a minute or two, and then I asked Miriam to please check the gaslights. They looked as if they had dimmed suddenly in the room.

Mrs. Rutledge awakened from her post-prandial nap. She walked to me and shook my hand, and then she embraced me. “May you have a Merry Christmas,” she said and then she suddenly wept. “Charlotte would be so proud of you, my dear.”

This tall, thin woman walked much like a stork out of the room.

I was left now with Dr. Meyer. He looked at me and said, “It was a gracious and brave thing that you did, inviting Dr. Blackthorn here today. He has no family.”

“I was not aware of that fact.” Neither do I have family, I thought. We had that grim fact in common.

“I must take my leave, Miss Prescott. I thank you for a delicious dinner and your beautiful celebration,” Dr. Meyer took my hand and kissed it.

His gesture was small, almost bashful, but it endeared me to this gentle, portly doctor. I wished for a few moments that he had been the physician of my aunt, but then I realized that his prescription would likely have been the same as that of Dr. Blackthorn.

Dr. Meyer left the house and I was all alone in this room. That night, I’d felt the pull of the past but I’d also sensed the future pulling me toward a brighter day. It was now nearly nine o’clock and I was very fatigued. I went to the piano and played a hymn that was a favorite of mine. It had been much beloved by my aunt. I dedicated this song, “Amazing Grace,” to her that holy night.

“Amazing Grace” was written by John Henry Newton, the British sailor and Anglican clergyman. I’d been taught in Sunday school class about his life and his inspiring journey to faith. Involved with the slave trade, and enslaved himself, Newton was saved from further sins of cruelty and plucked by God from his miserable life as a slave-ship captain. He then wrote this hymn which never failed to bring tears to my eyes.

As I softly played the song, the music brought more than tears to my eyes. It began the process of amazing grace that continues unabated to this day. My life was, is, and shall forever be in the hands of God.

That night I slept not the sleep of angels, but during the silence of the midnight I was gently saved from the clutches of the demons who had so often robbed me of the solemn solace of sleep.

The day after Christmas is Boxing Day. I greatly enjoyed this English custom which had been taught to me by my aunt. I’d made an embroidered lace doily for Miriam, my maid; and had purchased a lovely tartan scarf for James, the butler; a pair of woolen socks for each the two gardeners; a burlwood pipe for the general factotum; and a pair of fur-lined leather gloves for Arthur, the coachman.

For Dr. Burke, I'd baked drop scones. I wrapped them in a tea towel and placed them into a large wicker basket along with a meat pie and half a ham. He'd often spoken longingly of what he called fine Irish eating: a nip of whisky and a meat pie; drop scones and some ham. I decided to forego the whisky. I did not drink liquor and I was not about to encourage this professor to do so during the Christmas season.

That morning, I'd sent my calling card to Dr. Burke whose townhouse was located a mile from my mansion. I then instructed my coachman to conduct me there at three o'clock. When I arrived at this residence, I saw a wreath with cranberries and red ribbons adorning the front door. It was a gay sight and I smiled.

Dr. Burke answered the bell pull. He showed me into the drawing room. There, a Christmas tree of immense size had been decorated with delightful finery and countless candles.

"Do you like the tree?" He asked with a hint of excitement.

"It is beautiful," I said gently.

"I've not decorated for years, but this year I felt jubilant."

His eyes met mine in a tender entreaty. I handed the basket to him and he softly smiled. "I too have a gift for you."

He limped in his grotesque manner to a large dark walnut sideboard. A rectangular box wrapped in pink moiré silk sat atop this massive piece of furniture. He carefully took hold of it and brought it to me.

We sat on a large, plush sofa and exchanged the gifts. I opened my box first. Inside were Matryoska dolls, Russian nested dolls that were very new at the time. I softly giggled at the faces of these adorable peasant girls. My eyes are slanted, like those of my Russian mother who was descended from peasantry. Dr. Burke knew this fact about me and he often commented that I sang with my voice, but I spoke with my blue, slanted, almond-shaped eyes.

I was touched by his attempt to lessen my sense of being a motherless child, especially at Christmas. I touched each of the seven colorful, cute dolls, each an object within an object, a concept that somewhat hearkened to the delightful bawdiness of "Man is for The Woman Made."

Dr. Burke lifted the tea towel covering the contents of the basket. He laughed with pleasure, "Fine Irish eating."

We thanked one another for the thoughtful gift. An awkward pause followed. We looked at each other and soon we were in each other's arms. There, in the arms of Galen Burke, I felt the unimpeded flow of life. I wanted more of it. I placed my face closer to his lips.

He kissed me so tenderly and yet passionately that I began to weep. He dried my tears and we embraced once more. The scent of his cologne filled my senses with an intoxicating blend of scents that were manly and soft at the same time.

I'd been under the loving watchful eyes of my Aunt Charlotte and thus had only been walking, with her along as a chaperone, with a young man. This kiss from Dr. Burke was my first kiss.

This first kiss was followed by a far more passionate one, and I turned away from Dr. Burke.

“Have I offended you?”

His voice was deep and hurt. I looked at him and saw tears in his eyes. I sensed his need; it was a far greater desire than mine, a richer, deeper hunger for love. I needed the love I’d not received. He needed and craved to give love and then to receive love in return. His heart ached with the fullness of emotion; my heart ached simply to feel emotion.

“You have not offended me, Dr. Burke.”

This formal appellation now sounded absurd, and yet it was the only name that I would ever call this man.

“We have opened a Pandora’s box,” he said with misery.

“I shall never look upon those moments in that way,” I said tenderly.

We looked upon one another and felt the veil that had just been rent between us.

“You must leave now,” he said firmly but quietly. “I am still your professor, and you are still my student. There are lessons of the heart that I cannot teach you in this way.”

I said nothing. I was too naïve and too ignorant of all that I did not know. I left the drawing room and rode to the mansion in the calèche. The scent of his cologne and the feel of his lips upon mine were now a part of my heart.

The first opera composed by Henry Purcell was “Dido and Aeneas.” It was a monumental accomplishment in Baroque opera; it was also one of the earliest operas in English. The story is based on Book IV of the *Aeneid* by Virgil. It tells the love story of Dido, Queen of Carthage and the Trojan hero, Aeneas. He abandons her. She experiences despair to the point of death. Her lament, “When I am laid in earth,” is her swan song.

It was a bitter cold, windy day in late January 1889 when Dr. Burke introduced this aria and its story to me. I was not a student of music or even of opera, and I had never heard this dark, overwrought dirge. Dr. Burke sang it, transposed to a key for his baritone. I instantly fell into a state of abject horror. The lyrics are as follows:

*Recitative*

*Thy hand, Belinda, darkness shades me,  
On thy bosom let me rest,  
More I would, but Death invades me;  
Death is now a welcome guest.*

*Aria*

*When I am laid, am laid in earth, May my wrongs create  
No trouble, no trouble in thy breast;  
Remember me, remember me, but ah! forget my fate.  
Remember me, but ah! forget my fate.*

Dear reader, you can only imagine the fear and trembling that this song churned up within me. It made my flesh creep. The Mad Burke had struck again, only this time he'd struck like a thunderbolt through my grieving heart.

In retrospect, a process which took place many times over the course of many years, I concluded that this aria is one of the most dark, complex, and exquisite of vocal compositions that I have ever heard. Henry Purcell created a masterpiece in simplicity that defies description or explanation; it must be heard and felt. It possesses a haunting, sorrowful beauty which, at that time, terrified me to the point of numbness.

The opening recitative is entitled "Thy hand, Belinda." It is performed *secco*, meaning that the lyrics are sung rapidly but with emphatic pronunciation to minimal accompaniment. The accompaniment to this song is called a *continuo*, or a *bass continuo*, which was a ubiquitous component in music during the Baroque era.

The auditory effect is word painting. This musical paint is applied stroke by stroke over the words, "darkness" and "death," and especially, "laid." In 1889, with the use of only the piano to accompany the lyrics, I was unable to experience the lush fullness of the deep dark ominous tone of this aria; a symphony orchestra, however, can provide the most complete aesthetic effect. Even with the lone piano, however, the song was eerie to the point of causing me to shiver. The lyrics were not only symbolic of death; the music reeked of it.

A descending chromatic line of a ground bass opens the aria, much like a ghost appallingly descending a staircase. This line is repeated eleven times throughout the aria. The structure is in the form of the Baroque *ciaccona*. To me, the song was an inescapable dirge, an harmonic inevitability that seemed to accompany my nightmares.

The meter is 3/2 in the key of G minor. It is, in short, not an easy song for anyone to sing, but at nineteen years of age, I highly doubted my ability to capably and believably carry off this invocation of agony and the inevitable fate of death.

I flatly stated, "I cannot sing this song."

"You can," his eyes burned into mine, "You must. And you shall. It will be the signature song at your recital in June."

June. The very name of that month frightened me. I stared at this man and suddenly comprehended that his insistence upon my singing this song would not be brooked, short of my refusing to sing at all. I did not understand what role I was to play in the private, intimate, tormented drama of this man, but I sensed that I had to play it. I had been led by him to this song, and I could not back out of it, no matter how coerced and unwilling I felt in singing it.

Ultimately, this man was asking me to yield my will to his will and my needs to his need through the instruction and performance of this intensely dramatic, mournful song. At first, I would fight him, but then I would learn the meaning of surrender, the art of music, and the art of love, true love in my gift to this solitary, sad man.

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Chapter 7

My voice lessons over the next four months consisted of rigorous training in the recitative and aria of “Dido’s Lament,” as well as practicing previously learned songs that would be performed in my recital in early June. I also learned a new Elizabethan ditty, another jewel of boldly suggestive lyrics, most or all of which totally bypassed my comprehension.

Dr. Burke had arranged for the use of a small concert hall in Georgetown for me exclusively. None of his other students would be performing. Their recitals had taken place in January.

I encountered difficulty in reaching the high notes toward the end of the aria. These notes were for the lyrics, “Remember me.” These words were the last ones spoken to me by Aunt Charlotte before she died. I did not tell Dr. Burke of this ghastly coincidence; he would most likely have believed that this macabre situation would help me to purge my demons through the catharsis of musical expression.

The major problem for me was that those notes leaped in register, along with a sudden crescendo. Although my voice is large, I lacked the emotive force to yield to the agony intended in this all-out vocal cry. The cry was to express the desperation and the urgent agony of the Queen of Carthage before she dies of despair over her abandonment by the Trojan hero, Aeneas. In essence, Dido is getting ready for her fate of death. In essence, I’d come to this professor of voice to learn the art of singing so that I felt that I was escaping a fate of impending doom.

It was all too much for me to comprehend, no less perform. Dr. Burke appeared to be preparing me for some kind of apocalyptic performance. I tried various ways to escape the fate of singing “When I am laid in earth.”

“The high notes are so hard to reach and hold,” I complained.

“Yes, indeed, at your age, they will be. Do not be intimidated by a high note. It will come to you; you need not go to it. Simply breathe your way to the top of the note. You will float there and your technique will show you how to sustain it.”

I followed his suggestion and, to my joyful surprise and utter dismay, I was able to voice the cry of agony and hold it for the required period of time.

“But I start to cry whenever I reach this part,” was my more sincere disclaimer.

“You must use your technique and the hand gestures that I taught to you. Then you can focus on these rather emotional passages. Your skills within the singing will get you over those inner tremors. Technique has never failed a professional singer.” He eyed me, “And you will transmute those tremors into art.”

Lest I remain an amateur and not transmute these trepidations into the ecstasy of art, I diligently practiced the techniques of legato and breath control, as well as several other skills that get a singer over emotional rough spots. And I succeeded in allaying my emotions to the point of being able to transfer those energies into singing. The result was not abundantly professional, but I was no longer an amateur. The notes were sung well, not shrieked.

Dr. Burke instructed me to sing very softly while opening up my throat and mouth to voice those grotesquely familiar words, “Remember me.” That dire request, or demand,

was repeated twice just after being sung very loudly and very suddenly on those high notes. I experienced difficulty with my tone during these pianissimo passages.

“Your pianissimo must be just as round and full as your fortissimo. Open your mouth much more and keep that tongue flat.”

I obeyed his orders and the results were impressive. I excelled in spite of myself. I then declared during one lesson, “I am far too young to sing a song of such emotional complexity and depth. How can I not be nervous with a song such as this one?”

Dr. Burke considered my complaint for one minute. He then explained in a reassuring tone that completely contradicted the stern look of his eyes:

“All great singers learn to mask their nerves with technique. The full-bodied expression of the voice will come in time. You are very adept at using your head voice, but I agree that you must more fully master the technique of legato during the aria. Let us rehearse the entire piece, recitative and aria, once more. It must be seamless. Toward the end of the recitative, your vibrato is not free on those low notes, and I want you to hold the last note just a bit longer.”

I sighed. I then sang the recitative. My mournful rendering of the last line, “Death is now a welcome guest,” was much improved, but I could not sing the following lines as one in the aria:

*“When I am laid, am laid in earth,
May my wrongs create
No trouble, no trouble in thy breast.”*

I tried several more times to connect the notes. Dr. Burke told me to try again. Frustrated, I announced, “I will not try to do something that I know I will fail to do.”

“You can do it,” Dr. Burke glowered at me.

“I cannot and I will not try.”

Our eyes met. His hands left the piano and he reached out and touched my hand. He then stood up and embraced me. “You need not if you cannot. We shall practice taking a small breath somewhere in the line.”

His voice was tender, his eyes no longer harsh and demanding. I left for the day, aware that this professor was grooming me for a performance that perhaps was not intended for me, but for the lost love of his past. I wondered if this man even heard my voice amidst the echoes of his past.

In my bed that night, I wept, but I was able to sleep undisturbed for the first time in a very long time.

Hippocrates, the ancient Greek physician who is deemed the Father of Western Medicine, is quoted as having said: “To know is one thing; merely to believe one knows is another. To know is sincere, but merely to believe one knows is ignorance.”

When it came to Dr. Byron Dumont, I neither knew nor believed I knew his intentions. He continued to visit me at the mansion on a weekly basis, and he shared his thoughts with me about the music that I was studying. He was encouraging and

enthusiastic about my course of study. I sometimes wondered if a lucrative career for me was part of his encouragement. He professed words of love often, to the point that I did not believe any of them. In early May, he asked me to marry him.

I refused him on the basis that I was not ready for a commitment to him or to any other man. I was not quite twenty years old, an age that was not considered young for marriage at the time, but I could not devote myself and my life to another person when I still felt suffused with gloom, anxiety, and sadness, all weighing upon me like an albatross.

He looked crestfallen, but he continued to visit me, now on a semi-weekly basis. I also saw Dr. Blackthorn from time to time. He made house calls to Mrs. Rutledge who was suffering from a problem with her gall bladder, and he then stopped by the mansion to chat, sometimes outside in the rose garden. This older doctor was always courteous in speaking to me, except whenever he'd ask if I'd terminated my association with the young Dumont. I stated that I'd not, and he would brusquely state that there was no good reason to associate with that fraud.

I found Dr. Blackthorn intriguing, but I still felt that he was somehow culpable in the death of Aunt Charlotte. The fundamental rule of the art of medicine is "Primum, non nocere." First, do no harm. Dr. Blackthorn had, in my biased opinion, done harm to my vulnerable aunt. He'd even advised me once that whenever there is more than one explanation for a phenomenon, chose the simplest one. The simplest explanation was that Dr. Blackthorn bungled the treatment of my aunt.

The beginning of June arrived and so did my recital. I'd rehearsed diligently the following songs:

Das Rosenband
Man is for the Woman Made
Dido's Lament
Come Again, Sweet Love Doth Now Invite

This last song was composed by John Dowland, a prolific Elizabethan composer. This tune was sweet even though it contained the typical Elizabethan bawdiness that Dr. Burke adored. The mention of things such as "dying again in sweetest sympathy" annoyed me. In my peeved opinion, there was a bit too much dying within these lyrics. I wanted to sing to forget death and dissipate my grief, not trill about sensual delight in weeping, fainting, and symbolically dying in deadly pain and endless misery.

I firmly concluded that Dr. Burke enjoyed these smutty Elizabethan ditties far too much. I humored him, but the idea of singing not one but two of these witty lascivious songs at my recital did not bring me much delight. I focused on the Schubert and the recitative and aria from "Dido and Aeneas." Those songs were sublime.

Dr. Burke used the lesson before my recital for complete and ardent preparation of my gestures, my posture, my breathing, and my appearance. I was to wear a simple dress

of yellow silk, not too frilly, and not too showy. The music is the thing, not the performer. I agreed fully with this dictum.

He taught me how to bow. He told me that I must always think of someone, a special person, whenever I performed a song. He said that it would be our little secret, and I agreed. Dr. Burke also promised me that he would be there, at the piano, accompanying me, with complete confidence in my abilities. He told me not to fear the audience. "If you make a mistake, just continue. Carry on as if nothing amiss has happened."

I'd learned this rule often enough by watching Hortense. I was nervous but I also knew that I'd sung these songs so often that they'd become a part of me.

Dr. Burke then told me quite a few basic truths that I still believe to be true about any singing artist:

"You must always hold something back. Leave the drama in your voice, your instrument, in reserve for later moments in the song. The dynamics will show you how to float to that place where you give nearly all – and wait until the moment is ripe to surrender to the music."

"There will always be a sense of awe and apprehension within the excitement."

Armed with those passionate pieces of advice, I waited for my recital on the first Saturday night in June. I practiced the songs the day before but not the day of the performance. One never rehearses on the day of a performance: it tempts fate with extremely bad luck.

On that Saturday morning, I peered gaily from the lace curtains on the window of my bedroom. Penelope was clawing the white picket gate. A rosebush nearby had just burst into bloom with reddish-purple flowers that were round and huge. They were the first roses of summer. Two sparrows frolicked in the bird bath. I realized that June had arrived and the terrors of the past year were nearly over. Sunlight streamed in the window. When a cloud temporarily blocked its bright white rays, I did not feel anxious or alarmed.

I arrived at the small, brick concert hall an hour before the recital, which is to say at six o'clock. I'd eaten a small dinner at five and so my stomach would be fairly empty by the time that I sang. As I walked past the rows of seats to reach the stage which would lead me to the door to the backstage area, I saw Dr. Blackthorn sitting in a chair that was several rows back from the stage.

I looked squarely at him, and said, "Good evening, Dr. Blackthorn."

He stared straight ahead, thereby ignoring me. He turned his head slightly away from my stupefied eyes.

"Dr. Blackthorn, thank you for attending my recital."

I waited a few moments for him to turn his head to acknowledge me, but his stiff jaw and abrupt manner told me that I simply did not exist. For a fraction of a second, he tilted his head toward me and I saw his steely blue eyes. They were glazed and sad, callously staring ahead at nothing.

A shiver ran down my spine. I felt wounded more than insulted and I walked away. I had to "warm up" my voice with scales, thus preparing it for the onslaught of notes and emotions that was to be my recital.

That experience proved to be a series of sensations: sublime sweetness, tension, joy, soaring elation, and the thrill of achievement. Dr. Burke played the piano with the same exquisitely patient, attentive diligence that had marked his accompaniment of my voice for the past nine months. I was jubilant over my performance. No mistakes, only a slight waver in the voice as I attempted too much legato in that passage of “Dido’s Lament.” A quick breath ended the waver and I proceeded with aplomb.

Many hours of scrupulous but ardent practice had granted me and my professor a triumphant night. I felt especially proud of the way that I sang “Das Rosenband.” It nearly brought tears to my eyes, and I believe that some of the twenty people in the audience wept as well.

Byron Dumont did not attend my recital. I was sorely disappointed, but only for a brief time. Dr. Burke met me backstage with a dozen red roses. He kissed me on the cheek and joyfully suggested that I celebrate with him at a restaurant in D.C. I wanted simply to return to my mansion. Boldly, I asked him to return there with me in my calèche.

He hesitated to answer, and then he gravely said, “Yes, Amelia. We shall enjoy a toast to your triumph.

As I entered the calèche, I felt the hand of Dr. Burke touch my waist. He sat beside me and held my hand. My other hand clutched the bouquet of red roses. Tenderly, this professor kissed the inside of my palm as we awaited our arrival at my mansion.

Memories of the remainder of this evening unroll like billowing waves through my mind. These events occurred quickly, too quickly, and yet they are recollected in slow hazy motion, like an unearthly specter that stalked me that night.

I arranged the bouquet of red roses in a Waterford vase and placed it on the dining room table. I’d dismissed the butler and Miriam from their duties for the night. Dr. Burke and I sat adjoining each other at the dark walnut table which was located in front of a large paned window. He’d asked me to sit in the final rays of the early summer sunlight. The glimmering illumination touched my face, like a heavenly aura.

Dr. Burke watched me with a gentle smile, and then he poured the wine into two crystal goblets. With a trembling hand, he accidentally spilled some wine onto the tablecloth. Softly he gasped, “Look what trouble I have caused.”

“There is no trouble,” I said tenderly as I watched the spreading stain of amaranthine. I use this unusual word because it means eternally beautiful; unfading, everlasting; deep purple in color. I then stated, “I shall save this tablecloth with this stain forever.”

Dr. Burke stared at me and then his hand trembled as he set down the bottle of wine. He and I raised our goblets.

“To you, Amelia Prescott. Always to you. *Only* to you.”

We sipped the dark wine. Dr. Burke falteringly set down his crystal goblet. Suddenly, he held his head.

“Is something wrong?” My voice was slightly shaky.

“I have a most vicious headache,” he said softly. He held the goblet again and took a sip. “Odd,” he laughed in a lazy, almost lethargic manner, “It is difficult for me to swallow.”

I set down my goblet. I’d taken only a few sips of the wine. I walked over to him and said, “Should I summon the doctor?”

“Oh, it is nothing,” Dr. Burke intoned. “I must see about getting some glasses, however. My vision of late has become blurred.”

I took his hand in my hand. “It was a magical night.”

“Yes,” he slurred his speech. “You sang the way I’ve dreamed of you singing.”

He smiled slowly, sadly, and I felt a pang of desire for this man. He stood up and sighed, “Please excuse me, Amelia. I must get some air.”

“Of course,” I watched him limp toward the doorway. “And I must go upstairs,” I quietly said in reference to my need to use the toilet. “I shall return momentarily.”

Dr. Burke held a hand to his head. “I shall wait for you, Amelia,” he whispered.

Several minutes later, I heard a thud. I remember running down the long curved staircase. Dr. Burke lay sprawled on the black and white tiles of the vestibule floor.

I took him into my arms. He looked up at me with a blissful smile. Tenderly, he told me, “I do love you, Amelia.” His eyes closed for a few moments, and then he rasped, “Remember me.”

Horrified, I placed my head to his chest and listened for a heartbeat. It was faint.

I gently placed this professor onto the floor. I held him for a few minutes and then, with mercy, I let him go.

Before I knew it, I was in the calèche. I directed my coachman to the house of Dr. Blackthorn.

The hooves of the Cleveland Bay made reverberating clip-clopping sounds that I shall never forget. I ran into the Second Empire Victorian house and barged into the drawing room. There I saw a spectacle of unspeakable horror. Dr. Blackthorn was bent over a female who lay in a pool of blood. Her face was bloodied and black-and-blue.

“Her pulse is weak; there must be internal bleeding somewhere.”

This doctor was talking to no one.

“Dr. Blackthorn, I need your help. Galen Burke has collapsed in my vestibule.”

The surgeon looked wild-eyed at me. He muttered something that I could not understand. We left the house and rode in the calèche to my mansion.

Dr. Blackthorn informed me during the fifteen-minute carriage ride that sometime during the morning the young Dumont had left that female on the wooden floor, bleeding, beaten, and miscarrying a baby. He, Dr. Blackthorn, had just discovered the dying woman ten minutes before I entered the house. He then stated that the young Dumont had been located through another female by Dr. Meyer who then had escorted this murderous fraud to a train bound for Johnstown, Pennsylvania. The railroad workers there needed a general practitioner. Thus, on the evening of 1 June 1889, Byron Dumont was ridden out of Georgetown on a rail after trying to abort his baby by brutalizing the

woman he'd impregnated after a liaison of many months. His train would be destroyed by the debris and deluge of the Johnstown Flood.

I did not respond, react, or even absorb much of this heinous news about the young Dumont. I was too panicked about Dr. Burke. When we arrived at the white Italianate mansion, we found him dead.

Dr. Blackthorn stared at me. "You? Were amorous with this voice teacher?"

"No," I wept. "We loved each other. But," I shook my head. His question and impertinence were vulgar to me.

Dr. Blackthorn quietly left the mansion. I arranged for the body of Dr. Burke to be removed and then I contacted his sister in Baltimore. Several days later, I attended the funeral. The other voice students did not. I then slowly set about to piece my life back together, like a huge jigsaw puzzle with some pieces that did not fit and several that were missing. I later learned that Galen Burke most likely died from an aneurysm or brain hemorrhage.

At midnight on that wretched night, Dr. Blackthorn was found dead in his bedroom chamber by Dr. Meyer. This kindly physician heard a high-pitched cry and he broke down the locked door. Dr. Meyer informed me of the circumstances of this death in a quiet, somber voice. He then told me the tragic story of this brilliant surgeon who had become savagely addicted to morphine five years earlier. His surgical career was destroyed; his practice a pretext for cases that he no longer could undertake, for patients on which he no longer could operate.

His renowned, greatly esteemed surgical days were behind him. He recovered from his addiction to the point of a rigidly measured intake of morphine that did not endanger his life, but he was still an addict. The mysterious absences on Wednesday were likely to procure more morphine.

"For this scholarly, talented surgeon, it was not a life; it was an existence," the Bavarian accent of this doctor grew sorrowed. The pain of the loss of his surgical skills nearly drove him to madness. Dr. Meyer, his admired colleague, had then convinced him to teach young doctors the healing art of surgery. Many young men learned from Dr. Blackthorn how to practice the art. The young Dumont was an abominable failure, but it was his perfidy and moral vacancy that perhaps undid the already tortured conscience of this tormented, overly sensitive surgeon.

Dr. Meyer would not state whether the death was by suicide or accidental overdose. It was too difficult to determine such things. What was in my heart would form the truth.

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## EPILOGUE

In retrospect, I saw the lives of these people and my life colliding, much like too heavy, over-ripe peaches falling from the tree onto the ground and forming a miasma of humans collapsing and clinging to one another. Though the duration of that time felt indeterminate, it was, in reality, quite brief, only the space of one year. Within me,

however, emotions echoed and images flashed and fluttered and raced throughout my consciousness for what felt like an eternity.

Grief is a terrifying energy which must be freed somehow or it captures and embalms the heart of a person. Thus, many years after those dreadful events, I was still in subtle ways gripped by fear and bound by grief. I found myself captured by the moment but unable to move forward because of fear. And fear is a horrible thing, an awful sensation. It distorts our vision and warps whatever we think and believe. We see things that are not there, and are unable to see the things that truly are there: people and faces and illuminations that might help us to see correctly become shadowy and darkened. A hideous black, oily dreck is poured over everything that we look at and try to see.

The darkness engulfs us and we know not why. We feel only the clutches of terror and panic. Blindly, passionately, we search within ourselves for the passage out of this long dark tunnel. We cry out to be rescued from the abyss. The only certain foothold, the only steady and secure solace, and the only saving grace come from the hand of God.

Initially, with the help of God, I believed that I'd wrestled free from these chains of emotion that held me captive within that pivotal year, 1888-1889. Decades later I realized that I'd become covertly and slyly ensnared by them. Life had moved on and I'd assailed valiantly to move on with it. I'd become unaware of the fears that silently and secretly confined me, even though I was subconsciously fighting fiercely and blindly against them. I then became cognizant of these forces within me. I felt a suffocating terror that I had to flee. Six months of nightmares and anxiety during even daylight hours led me to the memories and recollections of the passages which I have penned.

During this time, I was much like the magicians of Dante's *Canto XX* in *The Inferno*:

*They had their faces toward their haunches  
And found it necessary to walk backward,  
Because they could not see ahead of them.*

As I walked backward in my consciousness, I gradually felt embraced by the benevolent love of God. With His divine guidance and with the deep, enduring, devoted love of my husband, I found the light of truth. I began to put to rest my tormenting fears.

I performed a balancing act within the mind: some memories I had to hold onto to have faith in the future; other memories I had to relinquish to have faith in the future. It would take many months for me to come out of this dark tunnel and into the light. I realized that it was not a matter of leaving fears behind as much as it was their falling away and then I walked forward from them, into the future.

Within the fleeting moments of repose that came to me during those shadowy months, but also during my vivid re-experiencing of the frightful scenery of my past, I discovered the light of creation. Thus was born this story of my coming of age. I'd long believed that I'd lost the vestiges of a hurried, vanquished youth during that pivotal, long-ago year. I'd felt robbed of an innocence that had struggled to survive too many truths and too much awareness at too young an age. I felt dispossessed of this supposedly treasured time, this transition from childhood to young adulthood. I'd deemed both my



childhood and my coming of age as tarnished, tattered, torn, and lost forever. For many years, I'd thought of that era as "the lost years." I now know that youth, along with innocence and nascent maturity, are like hope. They spring eternal when faith has overcome fear.

I then experienced a profound surge of compassion for the lost, those individuals who had blindly and not-so- blindly injured me. I realized, somewhat sadly, somewhat comically, that I'd not even been a person to them. As Amelia Prescott, I'd not existed; I was merely an object for their greed, their hunger, their rage. I'd served as a pawn for them to attempt to procure as much of their savage needs as possible. My awakening to these truths was filled with pain and sorrow. Thus, this pathway to the healing power of forgiveness was slow and plodding. It contained many mountains and quite a few valleys. But I forgave, even if I could not fully forget. To forget would have been to negate my own self, and the bounty within the experiences which had become filled with wisdom and wonder.

Of Galen Burke, there was born a love that rang true, even truer than those crystal clear notes that I sang for him. I had truly been heard by him. I therefore had ultimately been to this man "Amelia Prescott," this young woman who had lost too much and to whom he sought to give the gifts of music, of art, of sublime joy, and the sacrifice of love. Despite our passionate kisses, and our transmuted desires for one another, we attained what is "eros" in Greek. We mortals aspired to attain the real object of love, as described by Plato in *The Symposium*:

*The real object of love should be the beauty of the soul, which is like a chariot with two winged horses. It is hard for humans to achieve the Platonic ideal of love, since they are weighed down by overly passioned thoughts.*

Thus, on the wings of love, in his final moments, all around Dr. Burke had been Elysium.

As I awakened to truth and to forgiveness, I surrendered to blissful sleep, a deep, slumbering sensation that put an end to the hourly clutching of the bed sheets with the terror that told me I would not survive this seemingly endless sleep. I left my hell and became transported to purgatory. There I created the visions for this tale and pieced together the patchwork quilt of past and present; fear and faith; terror and hope. Eventually and profoundly, I underwent the purification of ghastly sensibilities and macabre observations. Through this arduous, painful process I gained wisdom and I felt the light of love. I learned that "the abyss" can be light and heavenly as well as dark and hellish.

I trusted in the Lord and waited on Him to fulfill the powers of regeneration. I believed that He led me, day by day, to the healing power of faith. At times, fear would clutch at me, but I held firm to the desire to move past this rutted road. At the end of this creative process and spiritual journey, I felt healed and pure, real, and destined with desire for the future. Forever after would I recall the words of Luke 12:35: "Take heed therefore that the light which is in thee be not darkness."

Out of this cauldron of chaos, cruelty, and confusion, I emerged mildly scarred, but no longer did the scars contain the pus of melancholia, seeking inspiration. Gone were the intense sorrow and gloom that had, like an anchor, weighted me down with notes of solemn despair. The somber melancholy that had burdened my soul was released through the joyous sound of music. My will for profound self-determination had, at last, been viciously and violently forced to pursue its fulfillment. My many years of healing ravaged tissues were behind me.

No longer was I imprisoned within my white mansion. I now lived fully in each room of the mansion, and this place was my home. I sang with the truly sublime voice of inspiration, a sound that lifted my soul toward the angels. It floated above and within each note, and I felt radiant and alive. Darkness no longer shaded me. A restless tide bore me ever forward until I came into the light of pure grace and into the arms of love.

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