

Washington and Lee University

Song of Joy

A Novel

**An Honors Thesis presented to the English Department for
consideration of the completion of the University Scholars Curriculum**

By

Christina Griesemer

**Lexington, Virginia
May, 2006**

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank first and foremost Professor Conner for taking a chance on me and this thesis. The project was unorthodox, but you were unwavering in your support. I could not have even begun the project without your encouragement and guidance.

I would also like to thank all of my professors at Washington & Lee. This thesis is truly an interdisciplinary project, influenced by every professor and every class I have taken. Your classes have been my delight for the last four years.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents for being the first to read to me.

Ode to Joy

by Friedrich Schiller, as sung in Ludwig van Beethoven's Ninth Symphony

*O friends, no more these sounds!
Let us sing more cheerful songs,
more full of joy!*

Joy, bright spark of divinity,
Daughter of Elysium,
Fire-inspired we tread
Thy sanctuary.
Thy magic power re-unites
All that custom has divided,
All men became brothers
Under the sway of thy gentle wings.

Whoever has created
An abiding friendship,
Or a true and loving wife
Has won,
All who can call at least one soul theirs,
Join in our song of praise;
But any who cannot must creep tearfully
Away from our circle.

All creatures drink of joy
At nature's breast.
Just and unjust
Alike taste of her gift;
She gave us kisses and the fruit of the vine,
A tried friend to the end.
Even the worm can feel contentment,
And the cherub stands before God!

Gladly, like the heavenly bodies
Which He set on their courses
Through the splendour of the firmament;
Thus, brothers, you should run your
race, As a hero going to conquest.

You millions, I embrace you.
This kiss for all the world!
Brothers, above the starry canopy
There must dwell a loving Father.
Do you fall in worship, you millions?
World, do you know your Creator?
Seek Him in the heavens,
Above the stars must He dwell.

Prelude

The summer my grandmother moved in with us to die was the summer of the cicadas. They emerged from the ground in a swarm and littered Richmond with their black bodies and iridescent wings, filling the night air with the chorus of an entire orchestra. The males congregated in the trees and their song rose and fell in unison, singing to the females who waited to be wooed. The females responded with their soft rustling reply. I slept with my window open every night that summer. My mother would come in to close it after she thought I had fallen asleep, but as soon as she left I would crack it open again.

There was something visceral about their summer in Richmond. They lined the streets with their bodies and left their shells on the trees, perfect little impressions of themselves still clinging desperately to the bark. But they also sang us to sleep every night. After seventeen years of living underground, feeding and growing into adults, they emerged—an entire generation—for one summer to sing love songs to each other and leave their progeny in the ground before dying.

The funeral Mass for my grandmother was small. I was wedged between my parents in the pew, listening to the priest's homily.

"What we all remember about Georgina was her voice."

I sat stiffly, resisting the priest's words. I remembered more about my grandmother than her voice. I remember her lessons. I remember bursting in the back door, tracking cicada bodies through the living room and being halted in my wild path to the kitchen by her call from her bed.

"Michael! How are the arrow loops?" she would ask.

"They didn't work," I would reply, leaning against the love seat and end tables that were pushed aside to make room for her bed.

"Oh? Why not?" She would cock her head in surprise.

"I tried to cut the hole in the wall, but it kept falling in." I would sigh in frustration. "So now I have to rebuild the whole wall. I think I need a rope."

"Have you thought of stones?" she would recommend.

"Stones?" I would kick off my muddy sneakers and scratch the poison ivy around my ankles.

"Yes. Lots of medieval castles used stones for their foundations. An entire city was founded on top of a pile of rocks in Czechoslovakia."

I would look up from my feet. "Where's that?"

"In Bohemia. The city is called Prague. Bring me the record in the box by the bookcase. No—underneath that one. I have a picture of the city on the cover of one."

I would retrieve whatever artifact she requested as she put on her reading glasses.

"Here it is. 'Ma Vlast.' Look here. The castle and churches are on top of a rock—Vysehrad. It's a grand medieval castle set high above the city. This river cuts through just below. Put this record on the turntable. Smetana wrote a song about this river called 'the Moldau.' It's supposed to sound like the river as it goes through the country."

As the music issued from the record player, she would explain what it meant.

"Here it is several trickling streams just coming together. The clarinets are playing the warm stream, and the flutes are playing the cold stream. Now, the strings. That's the river Moldau forming. Here the river has reached a hunting chase, hear the

horns? Isn't it jovial? You can hear them riding their horses along the banks, chasing a fox. Now we decrescendo to the lowlands, and we're at a wedding feast with dancing. Don't you want to dance along? Dance for me Michael! One two, one two. But we're floating downstream from it, it's getting softer. This quiet music is the nighttime, but do you hear the river underneath the night? The strings are flowing slowly and softly. But it's getting louder, building to the rapids. Hear all those notes that don't sound right together? That's called dissonance. Hear the water falling? And now we're back to the river, bigger and faster than before, it's coming up on Vysehrad, your fort! You can hear everyone waving, cheering because you're at your castle! See it up there on the rock?"

I stared into my lap as I sat in the pew, seeing Vysehrad as Smetana had written it in the music. He knew the notes a river sang. He heard cymbal crashes in the waterfalls, clarinets in the trickling beginnings. Grandma would ask me to leave the music on, as I left in search of calamine lotion for my poison ivy. She would sing to it for the rest of the afternoon, her voice echoing through the house.

"Today we send our condolences to Georgina's family and we mourn the loss of such a beautiful voice and person. But we also rejoice. Georgina was a dedicated mother and wife for whom family was everything. We rejoice that she goes now to meet her loving husband."

I looked up from my lap with a start, hoping the priest would catch his mistake. But he continued, his features creased with sincerity.

"We rejoice in a full and happy life, a life lived well in the service of her Lord."

I peered out of the corner of my eye at Uncle John, blushing with embarrassment for the priest. He shifted his feet uncomfortably. Next to him, his sister stared ahead impassively.

My mother could have been someone if she hadn't married my father, Uncle John had said.

The summer my grandmother moved in with us to die was also the summer I learned that my grandfather killed himself. Before that summer, his absence had been the only presence in my life. The woman I knew as my grandmother was a different person than the woman my mother knew. My grandmother underwent a regeneration that was being perfected in my earliest memories of her, a regeneration that was initiated—and enabled—by my grandfather's sudden death. My mother was a mixture of the two; she was half Tidewater Aristocracy and half Allegheny mountains. And growing up in the Big House off Cary Street, the Tidewater Aristocracy was king. It was a dangerous combination, like kudzu growing on power lines.

At the burial, the family members crowded under the green tent as their suits and dresses wilted in the August heat. I sat in my plastic folding chair, staring at my feet. My mother leaned against my father, smiling wearily. I was horrified by one of Grandma's long white hairs was hanging out of her coffin, waving in the breeze. I considered my options. I could pull it out quickly as I walked by. Perhaps I could lift the lid and tuck it back in as I passed by. I squirmed, uncomfortably hot and unable to think of anything but that hair. It looked strange by itself, detached from the thick white mane that she always wore down. As the casket was being lowered into the ground, the locusts pinged against the shiny silver plates on the sides. I watched the hair sink below the

ground, until all that was visible was the top of her coffin. They left the dirt in a big pile by her plot.

We came back two weeks later to see her headstone in place and leave flowers. She was buried next to Grandpa, but they did not share a headstone. His headstone read:

Walter Thomas

June 2, 1926 – April 20, 1986

Hers bore an epitaph:

Georgina Thomas

March 14, 1928 – August 29, 1996

All who can call at least one soul theirs,

Join in our song of praise.

She chose the epitaph the month before she died. I did not think it had any bearing on me then, but I cannot rid myself of that summer of the locusts now, fifteen years later. What compelled them to act as they did, what ancient instinct flowed through their blood spurring them to swarm, sing, and expire generation after generation? I wonder these things now, as I remember that summer, but fifteen years ago, I was content to let the muggy August air and the seductive serenade of the cicadas bathe me as I lay in my bed at night.

My grandmother's story did not happen as the priest at her funeral said. It happened like this.

Chapter 1

Covington was a quiet town of three thousand people, nestled in Alleghany County at the foot of the mountains. Named after the great general of the War of 1812, few of its residents had heard of Leonard Covington and history was not certain that he had ever set foot in the small crook between mountains. Before 1900 when Westvaco bought the one and a half miles of the Jackson River for its paper mill, the community relied on farming. Like many factories, the paper mill was both a blessing and a curse to Covington, bringing jobs but restricting access to Falling Springs Overlook and polluting the river.

The Fitzgeralds were a devout Roman Catholic family. Every Sunday and on Holy Days of Obligation, Georgina's mother dressed the children in their Sunday outfits, the girls with their crochet handkerchiefs covering their heads and Robert in suspenders, and the family went to Mass. Late on Saturday afternoons, the family went to confession, where they each took a turn in the confessional. While they waited their turns, the Fitzgeralds knelt in the pews with their rosaries, listening to the choir practice for Mass the next day. The chorus of men's voices rose and fell like the predictable melody of Gregorian chants, flowing through Georgina's blood as though her very cells knew the tune. She would sing along with the songs, threading her green rosary beads with the blue veins running around them through her fingers.

Her mother listened to Georgina sing along with the choir. Georgina's young voice was strong and always on key. Her mother leaned over and whispered in Georgina's ear, "Why don't we go talk to Sister Cecilia after your confession and ask if

you can be in the choir? Such a pretty voice should be in front of the church on Sundays.”

Georgina looked up at her mother with surprise, then at the choir. Her heart quickened as she pictured herself performing, carrying the Hosanna high above the congregation. She admired the robes, their wide sweeping sleeves reminded her of the choirs of angels. She would swim in one of those robes.

“Will they let me?”

“I don’t see why not.”

Georgina’s first rehearsal with the choir came the next Saturday. The only other female in the choir was Sister Cecilia, the choir director, and Georgina quickly filled the void left by the absence of female voices. Lily and Robert sat in the back of the church with their father while their mother went to confession.

“Emma, I must talk to you about something. Your daughter’s involvement in the choir comes at the expense of the church,” Father Schneitzer said to her mother from behind the screen of the confessional.

“Expense of the church?” her mother exclaimed.

“There are certain ... a young girl at the front of the church, it doesn’t fit with church teaching.”

“Church teachin’ is that young girls shouldn’t sing? Father, surely not.”

“The Bishop would not approve. There are plenty of ways for women to give back to the church. There is the women’s council, perhaps Georgina could get involved with that. We cannot interfere with the Mass, it is not our place.”

Georgina's mother emerged from the confessional, her face flushed. She marched up to the front of the church where the choir was practicing and took Georgina by the hand, interrupting the Gloria.

"C'mon Georgina, we have to go."

Sister Cecilia turned around, her arms still raised conducting the third beat. "What is happening?"

"Father says it's not *appropriate* for a young girl to be singin' in front of the church. He says the Bishop won't *allow* it," Georgina's mother spat.

"Excuse me?" said Sister Cecilia. She was a small, thin woman with fiery eyes.

"He says her singin' the Latin songs is at the *expense* of the church."

Sister Cecilia narrowed her eyes, her jaw muscles flexing against her wimple.

"Harry, will you conduct for a moment?" she asked the man who sang tenor.

"Georgina, just go ahead and keep singing. *Gloria, Gloria...*" She waved the song on.

Sister Cecilia straightened her habit and walked back to the confessional. She burst through the door, as the priest was making the sign of the cross over Georgina's father. "Father Schneitzer," she said in a controlled voice, "why can this young girl not sing in my choir?" Father Schneitzer looked up at her in surprise. "Excuse me, Joshua," she said to Georgina's father who was kneeling on the other side of the screen.

"Sister Cecilia, you are interrupting a confession," the priest replied.

"And for that I will ask the Lord's pardon, but you are interrupting my choir rehearsal."

Father Schneitzer's face flushed with anger. "It is not appropriate for a young girl—"

“Not *appropriate?*” She rolled her eyes. “Did the Holy Father in Rome declare that giving young girls the opportunity to use their talents for the glory of God was *inappropriate?*”

“The Holy Father has said—”

“Listen to her singing,” said Sister Cecilia, the sleeves of her habit sweeping in wide arcs through the air as she gestured. The choir was singing again. Georgina’s soprano carried high above the men’s voices, completing the fullness of the sound.

“*Quonian tu solus Sanctus. Tu solus Dominus ...*”

“Doesn’t Saint Augustine tell us that ‘hymns and psalms should be sung, lest the people should pine away in the tediousness of sorrow?’”

“I am sure that when Saint Augustine was writing he did not—”

“He does not say, ‘Only men should sing psalms hymns.’”

Father Schneitzer sighed. “What am I supposed to say to Bishop Martelle?”

“I’ll talk to the Bishop,” she replied.

He raised his eyebrows in thought. Georgina’s soprano carried through the open door of the confessional behind Sister Cecilia.

“Yes,” he replied, the corners of his eyes turning up. “I’m sure you will.”

“*Cum Sancto spiritu in Gloria pei Patris. Amen,*” Georgina sang.

“She has quite a talent,” Father Schneitzer exhaled. “Very well.”

Sister Cecilia took a deep breath and smoothed her habit. “Thank you, Father. I apologize again, Joshua,” she said. Joshua nodded gravely, though his eyes were dancing. Sister Cecilia crossed herself and closed the door behind her.

School had let out for the summer, and the early morning coolness of the mountains and the promise of a beautiful day called to Georgina while she helped her mother shop in town. They had stopped by the General Store to look for new dress patterns for Georgina and her sister Lily. Georgina and Lily stayed outside while their mother shopped, throwing scattered bits of feed at the chickens in a pen on the side of the store. The pen was lined with newspaper whose headlines blared "ALLIES EVACUATE DUNKIRK." Georgina felt restless, confined to the front porch of the store. The hens clucked angrily as they were pelted with the feed, then pecked at it curiously.

"Lily, are you too scared to make a chicken eat out of your hand?" she said tauntingly.

"Oh yeah? Which one?" Lily said, defiant.

"The red and brown one."

Lily held out the feed, cooing to the flustered chickens clucking in the corner.

The red and brown bird was the largest one of the group, moving cautiously toward Lily's palm with jerky struts.

"Come here, little red," Lily sang softly.

With a flash, the hen lunged at her hand, sending Lily and Georgina screaming and giggling to the other side of the porch, knocking over a crate of onions. Their mother came out to the porch with her hands on her hips.

"Girls, what is going on?"

"Georgina made me do it," Lily said.

"Did not."

"Did too."

Their mother tossed the onions back into the crate and hollered from under her apron, "Enough. Georgina, go pick some blueberries or *something*. You've been nothing but energy since you woke up today. You need to run it off."

"Can I go to the bushes upstream from the mill?"

Her mother stood up, her face flushed from the exertion. "I don't care, just be careful you stay off the mill property, you hear? If they find you there your daddy will lose his job. They don't like kids foolin' around up there."

"Yes ma'am."

Georgina hurried home to grab a bucket. She burst outside, the front door banging. She ran down Main Street, skirts billowing behind her and catching between her legs, the metal bucket beating against her thigh. With her free hand, she lifted the skirts up so she could run faster. She felt her feet under her, pushing her strides farther apart, trying to outrun the spring wind that blew across the field. The morning sun hugged her neck and arms as the earth slowed her down at the bottom of the hill. The mountains stretched wide and high around her, and she climbed them quickly and effortlessly, crossing the mill property to the blueberries.

The blueberries rolled off the stem into her palm when she tickled them with her fingers. They grew wild in a small clearing upstream on the Jackson River. From there she was only a half mile from Falling Springs, the waterfalls that flow into the Jackson, and could see all of town. The mountains from where she stood looked like sheets draped across chairs, the folds enclosing several other small towns and farmhouses. The rhododendrons around her were in full bloom, the lavender and fuchsia blossoms heavy on their branches.

She divided the berries between her belly and the bucket, dropping them into the metal pail with a *plunk*. Soon, the *plunk* gave way to a soft *plop* as the bucket began to fill. A cardinal sang to her from across the field, his high whistle followed by staccato laughter. She sang back to him, laughing along. The bucket filled as she grew tired of her cardinal song and began to sing church songs, letting her voice carry down the river.

Panis angelicus fit panis hominum;

Dat panis coelicus figures terminum.

O res mirabilis! Manducat Dominum

Pauper, pauper, servus et humilis.

The words felt both familiar and foreign on her tongue. They slid out with the deliberate beat of the Latin high Mass song, reminding her of the censer swung by the altar boy on its slow pendulous path around the altar during Mass, emitting clouds of incense. The sweet perfumed smoke carried the Latin songs from Mass up through the skylight in the small church, over the mountains and through the clouds to heaven. God—bearded, barefoot, and jolly on his throne—received the scented songs and smiled in approval as the saints stood at his side, solemn in their robes and martyrdom.

The rituals of the high Mass felt forbidden to her, but in the secrecy of the mountain she was apart from the watchful eyes of the church. She took a handful of blueberries and crushed them on a flat rock. Their clear juices released a smell unlike that of incense, but she lifted them up anyway, singing

Ave Maria

Mater Dei

Ora pro nobis peccatoribus

Ora pro nobis

Ora, ora pro nobis peccatoribus

She conducted the transubstantiation with all of the sobriety the act was due. The Latin was God's language, the words performing magic as the bread became flesh and the wine became blood. She saw her song lifted up past the waterfall on the juices of her offering; carried on the wings of two Cooper's hawks playing on the wind, riding it around in lazy circles. Setting her makeshift censer on the ground she flopped down next to it, still singing the Latin responses. She watched as ants flocked to her juicy incense, looking for a solid piece to take with them. She rolled over onto her back, stretching her young body over the ground. Arms and legs splayed, her belly was full of berries and the grass was warm on her back. She closed her eyes and felt the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed, the vibrations in her sternum as she sang the *Kyrie*. She knew she was the only person for a mile, separate from the millions. When she opened her eyes everything she saw was the creation of God, untouched by the workings of man. It was all perfect in its completeness, wonderful in its intricacy. As she breathed, she felt her skin press harder on the ground, until the barrier melted away completely, her cells combined with the dirt and she was released. She rose above the ground, turning and twisting with the wind, riding it in upward circles with the hawks. She rose higher and higher, wondering how far she could soar before she breached the barrier to heaven, before she passed the prayers of millions of souls offered up on incense and songs and birds. She could walk across the clouds, bouncing above the rain diving and soaring and playing with the hawks, the brown hawks that looked her in the eye and opened their mouths and—

Sirens echoed up the mountain from the valley. Georgina sat up, her flesh rising off her bones as the wind blew cold. The sun had crossed to the other side of the mountain, and she lay in shadow. Her crushed blueberries had dried on her censer. The ants had abandoned it as a futile endeavor. She picked up her full bucket of berries and yawning, began her walk down the mountain toward home.

She was walking quickly as the warm June air rushed up the mountains, replaced by cool spring shadows. As she approached the small, tidy yard of her home, she observed two black cars with the paper mill logo in the front drive. As she walked up the front steps shivering, foreboding settled in her stomach. Leaving the bucket of blueberries on the front porch, she walked through the front door and found people gathered in the living room. Several men in suits looked up at her with solemn faces, their hats in their hands.

Her mother turned towards her, her face red and swollen with tears.

"Where have you been?" she asked quietly.

"What's wrong?"

"Where were you?" her mother asked again.

"Pickin' blueberries, like you said to. I fell asleep, I didn't mean to. What happened?"

Georgina's mother opened her mouth, but sobs came out.

"Your father was involved in an accident at the mill," said one of the men in suits.

"He died."

"I'm sorry?"

"That's all," she repeated.

"Bless me Father for I have sinned, it has been four days since my last confession," Georgina said on Wednesday. She had slipped out of the house early and ran to church, hoping to make it to confession before the funeral. She knelt behind the screen, her heart pounding furiously against the weight of what she was about to confess. "I killed my father," she said, the words rushing out of her. She cringed as she waited for the priest to condemn her, but only silence ensued. She looked up, waiting.

"Your father was in an accident at the mill," Father Schneitzer said slowly. "You are not responsible."

"But I was there, I cut through mill property to the berries, even after my mother told me not to," Georgina said, her voice trembling.

"What berries?" Father Schneitzer asked.

"The blueberries above Falling Springs, my mother told to me to pick them, but she said not to walk on company property or he could lose his job and then I did and I sang church songs and I—" her voice broke as her body shook with sobs. She heard the leather squeak and Father Schneitzer's robes shuffle on the other side of the screen. His hand reached around the screen and he handed her a handkerchief.

"What did you do, Georgina?" he asked quietly, his voice soothing.

She tried to compose herself, but the confession of her exercise of forbidden rituals teetered on the edge of her lips. She could not summon the will to confess, knowing the priest would finally understand how she was implicated in her father's death. After a full minute, she exhaled, wiping her nose. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry?"

"That's all," she repeated.

He paused. "You think God punished you with your Father's death?" He heard nothing but sniffles from the other side of the screen. He nodded his head. "Your mother did give you instructions not to go on company property, and you disobeyed her. 'Honor your father and mother' is one of the commandments. But God is not punishing you with the death of your father, Georgina. And singing church songs outside of church ... there's nothing wrong with that. God gave you a tremendous talent. In fact," he said, as an idea came to him, "why don't you offer all of your songs up as your penance? Use your voice to reconcile yourself with Him."

Georgina let out a shuddering breath.

"I understand that your father's family would like 'Amazing Grace' to be sung at his funeral. Given his Protestant upbringing, I have given them my permission. Perhaps you can join the choir in singing it this afternoon?"

"Yes, Father."

"Fine then." He exhaled. "Dominus noster Jesus Christus te absolvat; et ego auctoritate ipsius te absolvo ab omni vinuclo excommunicationis et interdicti in quantum possum et tu indiges. Deinde, ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen," he said, as they both made the sign of the cross.

Through many danger toils and snares

At the funeral that afternoon, Georgina was seated at the front of the church with the choir. The mourners approached the communion rail and knelt as Father Schweitzer distributed communion. "Corpus Domini nostri Jesu Christi custodiat animam meam in vitam aeternam."

"Amen."

The choir sang, "*Panis Angelicus, Fit Panis hominum ...*" and the altar boys and the priest moved down the line.

As Georgina sang the song she had used so freely on the mountain, she thought of her trespasses on company land, her forbidden participation in the secret rituals— participation she had been too afraid to confess. His death had been an accident; a machine in the mill malfunctioned leaving several others wounded and her father dead. But how much of an accident could it have been? Wasn't God omniscient and omnipresent? In control of all?

The congregation stood as the priest intoned, "Requiescant in pace." The congregation replied "Amen," and the priest made the sign of the cross over the congregation, "Benedicat vos omnipotens Deus, Pater, et Filius, et Spiritus Sanctus." Georgina stood with the choir, the piano playing "Amazing Grace." The opening fourth trembled in Georgina's chest as she sang. Powerful notes, they lifted the tune up like a memory—her offering on the mountainside, her blueberry incense. Her mother urged her brother and sister into the center aisle as the coffin passed, and Georgina watched her family file away from her out of the church.

The fourth rose again with the third verse, this time accusatorially.

Through many dangers, toils and snares...

Offer your songs as a penance.

Georgina sang furtively, pouring the full force of her voice into the simple melody. Surrounded by the choir members, she was alone at the front of the church, all eyes on her as the congregation sang along. She had not confessed the gravest of her sins. Her chest was transparent to her guilty heart, and she sang desperately, pushing to atone for

her wrongs that had killed her father. She looked past the congregation into the skylight of the church. God—sitting on his throne, no longer barefoot and joyful—was angry and vengeful. The notes tore out of her, ascending again to his feet, her penance offering.

Georgina trailed her family up the stairs to the front door, her heart heavy as she passed the bucket of blueberries that still sat on the porch.

Georgina paused, staring at the blueberries. Their skins were shriveled, the plumpness withered away. She picked up the bucket and carried it to the edge of the yard. She took the garden trowel from the shed and dug a ditch, throwing her body into each scoop, tearing at the earth with trembling arms. When she struck rock, she threw the trowel aside and buried the warm, fermenting berries deep in the ground and covered them with dirt.

Georgina's heart began to race. "You think I can make it?"

"With some work and the help of the Lord, yes, I think you have as good of a chance as any. You are really very talented, Georgina... we are lucky to have you here at Sacred Heart. But we can't keep you forever."

"I would have to leave..."

"Yes. But you will get to travel. You will see some of the world beyond these mountains. And you will only be eighteen miles away."

"How often would I get to come back?"

Chapter 2

“Georgina, please stay for a moment,” Sister Cecilia said after rehearsal, her wimple causing her sagging cheeks and neck to wrinkle. Georgina paused, setting her mother’s coat down again. She had outgrown all of her childhood coats, but her mother could not afford a new one. The voices of the other singers faded as they trickled out of the church. “You know that sometimes I travel up to the Shrine of the Sacred Heart at the Hampshires?”

“Yes, Sister.” Georgina dreaded the weekends Sister Cecilia would spend up the mountain at the small chapel. The Saturdays without rehearsal and the passionless responses at church on Sundays made the weekends drag by.

“Father Ferguson informed me yesterday that there has been an opening in the Hampshire choir for a soprano. The audition is in three weeks.” Georgina stared at her uncomprehendingly. “My dear, I think you should audition. I will work with you, we can rehearse every night for the next two weeks. I have a piece in mind that I think you would suit you well.”

Georgina’s heart began to race. “You think *I* can make it?”

“With some work and the help of the Lord, yes, I think you have as good of a chance as any. You are really very talented, Georgina ...we are lucky to have you here at Sacred Heart. But we can’t keep you forever.”

“I would have to leave ...”

“Yes. But you will get to travel. You will see some of the world beyond these mountains. And you will only be eighteen miles away.”

“How often would I get to come back?”

"I'm not sure. I have heard from Father Ferguson that the choir is quite busy—they rehearse every day and travel to competitions all over the east coast. It's a professional choir, Georgina. You would be paid."

"Paid? To sing?"

Sister Cecilia smiled. "Well, you will have to audition first. And you have a lot of work to do before then. So you are interested?"

Georgina considered a moment. The money she could send home to help her mother support the family. Since her father's death spare change had been hard to come by. But with extra income from the Hampshires... "Yes," she said.

"I want to try a song called 'Bist du Bei Mir.'" Sister Cecilia was waiting for Georgina when she came into the church the next day. "It's a German song by Johann Sebastian Bach. Have you heard of him?"

Georgina nodded.

"Good. The first thing you should always do before singing a piece is learn as much as you can about it. You must understand the music. It is not the song that is great, Georgina. It is the singer and how the singer interprets the song. You must put yourself—your emotions, what you feel—into the song, give it a soul. It becomes a living being, with the power to move someone. You must give it that life."

"Put myself into the song..." Georgina echoed.

"Right. Now, 'Bist du Bei Mir' means 'Be thou with me.' Here are the first notes, I want you to sing them."

She played the first four notes, singing the words along.

“Now you try.” The narrow road hugged the sides of the forested mountains in its wind.

“*Bist du*,” Georgina sang. Sister Cecilia lifted her hand up, raising her eyebrows as Georgina sustained the second note. “*Bei mir*.”

“Okay.” Sister Cecilia furrowed her brow. “Picture the movement from *Bist*,” Sister Cecilia sang to the note, “to *du*,” she pointed with her finger. “That’s two and half steps up. Sing the note for me.”

“*Du...*”

“Good. Keep singing. Now move the note down your throat, into your chest.” Sister Cecilia’s voice grew louder, her small body shaking with excitement under her habit. “Expand your ribcage out to make room for it, let it slide further down to the middle of your stomach. There! Support it right there. Great! Do you hear the difference?” Georgina stopped singing and nodded, smiling.

“You went from a fragile note to a full sound. Ok, let’s try the first four notes again.” She played the opening chords.

“*Bist du bei mir*.”

Sister Cecilia nodded. “But with *emotion*. What are you *feeling*? Again.”

“*Bist du...*”

Through many dangers

“...*bei mir...*”

toils and snares

“We’re here for the audition,” said Sister Cecilia. “This is Georgina D’Agostini.”

On Saturday, Georgina dressed in her cotton shift and walked to the church. Sister Cecilia was waiting with the parish car, and together they drove the curvy eighteen

miles to the Hampshires. The narrow road hugged the sides of the forested mountains in its winding ascent. They passed country farms and cottages, scenes of natural domestic tranquility that would have made Norman Rockwell envious. Just as Georgina felt that the road could be leading them nowhere, the forest opened, revealing expansive well-manicured grounds with gently rolling hills and carefully planted gardens. The buildings did not compete with the surrounding mountains, but rather complimented them—the red brick bringing out the verdant green of the mountains and the cerulean blue of the sky. Georgina gasped in awe as Sister Cecilia brought the car around to the tallest of the buildings which had a main tower rising four stories into the air.

They followed the man at the front desk's instructions to a large door at the end of an opulently decorated hallway. A sign on the door read, "Quiet, Please: Auditions in Progress." The door swung open as Sister Cecilia and Georgina approached, and a tall woman strode the room in a long black dress with organza ruffles, her chin in the air and her arms cocked at her sides. She walked with quick steps, giving the impression that she was floating. A short, balding man followed her, a Florentine hat and a stack of papers in his arms. He bumped into Georgina as they passed, and glanced over her with a sniff.

Sister Cecilia led her into the room. A piano was sitting near a set of risers, and a small table was placed across from the piano. A man in his mid-thirties was seated at the table. He looked up at them as they came through the door.

"We're here for the audition," said Sister Cecilia. "This is Georgina Fitzgerald,"

“Alfred Lancaster,” said the man, standing up and shaking hands with the two women. “You’re Georgina?” he said, checking his watch with a frown. “You’ll be our last audition for today. What will you be singing?”

“Bist du Bei Mir.”

“And you’ll be accompanying her?” he asked Sister Cecilia, glancing over her habit skeptically.

“Yes,” she replied curtly.

He shrugged and passed his hand over his eyes. “Well then let’s get started, please,” he sighed. “Here’s the piano. You may of course warm up.”

He seated himself at the table again. Sister Cecilia pulled herself up to the piano and glanced it over. She gave Georgina a fierce look. Suddenly her fingers were on the keys and she pounded the scales, slowly bringing Georgina to the high notes. When she had finished, she turned to Mr. Lancaster.

“May I begin?” she asked, eyebrows raised in mock deference.

“Of course,” he said, checking his watch again.

Sister Cecilia took a deep breath and steadied herself. She smiled reassuringly at Georgina. Georgina straightened her posture, holding up a proud chest and took several deep breaths before her entrance. Sister Cecilia played the opening chords, bringing Georgina in with her eyes.

“*Bist du bei mir, geh’ ich mit Freuden,*” her voice filled the room. She focused on the ceiling at the back of the room, casting her eyes upward.

Put yourself into the song.

“*Zum Sterben und zu meiner Ruh’.*” She sang the notes again. The ceiling melted away and she saw past it to her audience.

Alfred took up his pencil and wrote quickly as she repeated the line.

“*Ach, wie vergnügt wär’ so mein Ende.*” She lifted her voice up to His bare feet penitently.

“*Es drückten deine schönen Hände, mir die getreuen Augen zu!*” She finished on the high note, her vocal chords vibrating repentantly. The room was filled with silence for a moment as Georgina waited for Alfred to say something. He narrowed his eyes and sat back in his chair, crossing his arms. Georgina’s heart beat furiously in her chest.

“That was very good,” he said, after a long moment. “Quite impressive. You are how old?”

Georgina glanced back at Sister Cecilia. “Seventeen.”

Alfred raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“You could be our youngest choir member ever.” He sat for another moment, his hand across his mouth considering her. “Let me try something. Will you take it back to the first ‘*Bist du bei mir?*’” He gestured to Sister Cecilia. She placed her hands on the keys and played two measures.

“*Bist du be—*”

“There,” Alfred said. “You hit the note, but you did not attack it. Something is holding you back. Try again.”

Sister Cecilia repeated the measures and Georgina sang again. As she reached the step up, Alfred opened his arms. But Georgina was focused on the ceiling. Alfred shook his head, cutting Sister Cecilia off.

"Why do you sing?" he asked her.

"Why do I sing?" she repeated the question. "Because ...". She thought for a moment.

Penance.

She shrugged.

Alfred shook his head again. "Sing to me. Sing *for* me. Again."

Georgina glanced at Sister Cecilia, confused. But Sister Cecilia was looking closely at Alfred, nodding slowly.

"Again, please," he said impatiently.

Sister Cecilia played the first two measures.

"*Bist du bei mir.*" She focused on him. His fingers drew the music out of her, sculpting them in her throat and holding them delicately in the air. His eyes brightened as she sang, his fingers pulsing.

"*Geh' ich mit Freuden, zum Sterben und zu meiner Ruh.*"

"Yes!" His hands opened as she finished the phrase. "Yes." He nodded his head vigorously. "Welcome to the Hampshires."

Georgina said nothing, her heart beginning to pound. Sister Cecilia stopped the car. The distance between Covington and the Hampshires was little more than eighteen miles, but once the tree-lined road opened to the grounds of the Hampshires, Georgina felt that she was in another world. For the people of Covington, the Alleghnies were home, but for the guests in Hot Springs, the Alleghenies were a spectacle to behold, an opportunity to get away from their city-selves and become country-folk under the auspices of a round of golf.

The tamed wilderness also offered respite for one of the country's most talented conductors. Ten years earlier, the Hampshires choir had been a shabby group of singers performing only several times a year, but with the arrival of Alfred Lancaster, the choir had grown in ability and prestige. It was a staffed choir made up of middle-tier professionals who sang at the dinners as entertainment, at Board Meetings, and performed several concerts at Christmas for all of the holiday guests. Most of the singers came from Chicago, Atlanta, or New York, and the Hampshires was a reputable gig they did on their way up or down the strata of the singing elite. Most found the Hampshires enchanting at first, then quite dull after months of singing in the Virginia wilderness. Bath County was a secluded contrast to their former lives. Georgina was the first Hampshires choir member to emerge from Covington, and though the surroundings were familiar, she found the culture of the Hampshires as shocking as her cultured counterparts. Georgina's mother and Sister Cecilia drove her to the Hampshires. As they pulled into the circular drive, the main tower was as impressive to Georgina as it had been the first time.

"Oh, Georgina," her mother gasped. "It's so *big*."

Georgina said nothing, her heart beginning to pound. Sister Cecilia stopped the car in front of the whitewashed verandah where several women were sipping sweet tea in the rocking chairs. Georgina's mother got out of the car as Georgina handed her two suitcases from inside the car.

"Do you need help carryin' these up?" her mother asked.

The women watched curiously from the verandah and Georgina flushed. "No, Mama, thanks. I got 'em."

"You sure?"

"Yes. Thank you Sister Cecilia," Georgina said, exiting the car.

"Sing lovely, Georgina. Stun them with your voice."

Georgina's mother looked at her, blinking back tears. She pulled Georgina into a hug. Georgina tried several times to pull away, but her mother held her closer. Georgina saw the women on the porch giving each other looks. "Ok, Mama. I gotta go or I'm gonna be late."

Her mother relaxed her hold and wiped her eyes. "Yes. You should go. Write us, you hear?"

"Yes, Mama. I love you."

Georgina's mother tried to reply, but her face wrinkled with tears. She held up a hand in farewell and sank back into the car. Sister Cecilia waved as they pulled away. Georgina bent over to pick up her two suitcases, blushing.

"Can I help you?"

She looked up and saw a man in a suit standing in front of her. His name tag said "John Bellman."

"No... Yes... Um I'm in the choir here. I just arrived."

"Ah, well welcome to the Hampshires. Staff lives in the brick building behind those trees. You see?" He pointed to a cluster of squat little buildings four hundred yards removed from the actual hotel. "The choir lives in the one in the back. You can check in at the main desk, just up the main entrance and to your left."

"Thank you." Georgina walked up the front steps, past the women in the rocking chairs, who returned to fanning away the flies and humidity, and into the main hall. The

long hallway was flanked on both sides by rows of white columns and the floor was covered in lush carpeting printed with large floral arrangements printed on it. Victorian furniture sat in clusters throughout the hall. The walls were paneled with large gilded mirrors. Georgina caught sight of herself in one. Her tanned cheeks and brown hair pulled back at the nape of her neck were conspicuous next to the women entering behind her with their French twists and wide brimmed hats to protect their faces from the sun. Georgina pulled her suitcase closer to her to cover up her simple blue shift. She hurried over to the front desk to get her room key.

Her room was a small two-bed room in the choir staff's building, with a sink and a closet. One of the beds had piles of clothes strewn across it and the other was a twisted mass of sheets and comforter. Makeup and curlers cluttered the tops of both dressers and shoes were spilling out of the armoire door which was thrown open. Two posters of cities hung above her roommate's bed, bearing the names "CHICAGO" and "PARIS." Georgina pushed a crumpled coat and dress in the corner of the room aside with the toe of her black boot and set her father's old suitcases down. On top of the wrinkled clothes was a stack of black dresses and a letter. She opened it and read:

Georgina Fitzgerald,

Welcome to the Hampshires, we are happy to have you in our prestigious Hampshires choir. This is going to be a very exciting season for us. Last month we took first at the Commonwealth Choral Competition, while this coming August we have to defend our title at the Old South Choral Society annual competition. We also expect to have several distinguished visitors in

the coming months at the Hampshires, including Senator Truman from Missouri, who has requested a special concert.

I had laundry provide you with five of our uniforms, which are to be worn while on resort property. If they do not fit you properly, take them to the laundry and they will alter them for you. I trust that your roommate, Claire Shelton, will be able to show you around the resort. We have rehearsal at 3:00 this afternoon in the choir room, followed by a dinner concert at 7:00.

You will not be expected to perform until next week, but I would like you to attend all of the shows this week. Again, welcome to the Hampshires, I look forward to your first rehearsal this afternoon.

Sincerely,

Alfred P. Lancaster

The Hampshires Choir Director

At three, Georgina entered the choir room to find a loud assembly of people talking, singing, and shouting across the room. A few men were standing in the corner in simple black suits, while the women draped themselves over chairs. When Georgina walked into the room, the loudest voice coming from a woman lounging in the corner stopped. She stood up and eyed Georgina, while Georgina pulled uncomfortably at her uniform dress. The woman was tall and slender with jet black hair, dark piercing eyes, and ruby red lips. Her black uniform dress fit tightly around her waist and chest, the places where it gaped on Georgina. She held a cigarette in her right hand which was all angles, just like the ads Georgina had seen in the General Store.

“You must be my roommate,” the throaty voice said, and the woman suddenly broke her pouty lips into a thin candy apple red smile. She grabbed Georgina’s hand and shook it hard. “I’m Claire Shelton. The gang around here calls me Shelty,” she said, gesturing to the men in the corner who were now arguing with the women who remained seated. “You can call me whatever you want.” She shrugged and took a long drag from her cigarette, eyeing Georgina again. “Oh God, are those the uniforms they gave you? Alfred, look at these, they’re ten sizes too big on her, I thought you auditioned this girl. Didn’t you get a good look at her? Don’t worry honey, I’ll find you a smaller size tomorrow. We’ll take these old sacks back to the laundry and find you something that’ll make you stand out. Can’t hide in a pile of fabric if you’re going to get noticed around here. Come over and meet the gang.”

She grabbed Georgina’s hand again and pulled her across the room to the rest of the choir, who were now standing in a large group and arguing.

“Hey gang, this here’s...kid, what’d you say your name was?”

“Georgi—Georgina.”

“Georgina, huh? Mind if we call you Georgie? That’s kind of cute, like those silly Southerners that give their daughters boy names. Frank here would know, wouldn’t ya Frank? He’s from Atlanta and his sweetheart’s named Elliott. First time he mentioned her I thought maybe he was dating another man, but I come from Chicago where we keep it simple. Claire can’t get confused for a boy now, can it? Where you from, honey?”

“Covington,” Georgina said, wide-eyed.

“Covington? Just down the road? I didn’t know people actually came from around here. What do ya know?” Before Georgina could answer, Claire turned to the people in the corner. “Well anyway, this is Elsie, Ruth, Betty, the one in the corner with the ciggie is Helen, you already met Frank, James, Rich, and Jack. That’s the gang! And of course you know Alfred already—he’s in charge.”

Alfred looked up from the scores he was shuffling on top of the upright piano at the sound of his name. “Yes. Speaking of being in charge, let’s get started. Hello Georgina, nice to see you again. You’re going to be our second soprano, right under Claire there, so if you could stand just to her right ... Yes, let’s try that and see how it goes.”

Claire put out her cigarette and everyone else lined up around the piano.

“Ok, let’s warm up with some scales.” Alfred played the upward chord progressions, and Georgina smiled. These she knew.

The first months of living at the Hampshires passed quickly. Georgina slipped easily into the routine of rehearsals during the day, concerts at night, and long stretches of free time in the morning. She spent much of these first mornings walking around the Hampshires grounds to the Jefferson Pools, Cascades Golf Course, and mountain trails. The guests at the Hampshires were magnificently pretentious. The women poised themselves on white patio furniture and gossiping in saccharine Southern drawls while the men stood with self-importance, smoking cigars and slipping a hand into their vest pocket. There was simply nothing to do that did not involve relaxation, and Georgina observed that the guests either embraced it with a weary relief or it drove them mad.

For her part, Georgina enjoyed the time when she was free from choir obligations as much as when she was occupied by them. She was learning all the time, whether it was the pronunciation of a piece of Schubert's lieder or French cloth patterns, she devoured the culture with the hunger of a girl who walked the same streets of the same town her entire life. While the location had scarcely changed, the culture of the Hampshire radiated importance and being *en vogue*. She let the aristocratic atmosphere of the resort surround her, slowly sinking into her skin as she adjusted her familiar surroundings to a new atmosphere.

Claire had taken Georgina under her wing. She showed her pictures of Chicago, New York, and San Diego, telling her about each town. She had never been to Europe, but wanted to go. The poster on her wall from Paris was a gift from a former choir member. "That's where I'm going, Georgie. When I make it big."

Claire went out with the rest of the choir, drinking, smoking, and talking in the resort bars until late most nights, and she usually slept until rehearsal. Georgina crept out quietly in the mornings, careful not to disturb the sleeping lump buried under the covers.

As fall approached, Claire's evening habits grew more erratic. The morning before a performance, Claire walked into rehearsal late, her face still red and swollen with sleep. Alfred had stopped the music and was directing the bass part, when Frank called out, "Hey Shelty, rough morning?"

Claire shot him a glare out of the corner of her eye as she assumed her position next to Georgina. Alfred glanced up from his score. "Let's begin again, shall we? From the top."

After rehearsal, everyone was putting away their music, gathering their coats, and talking.

“James, you going to the Players Pub tonight?”
“Aw, I don’t know Elsie. It’s Wednesday night.”
“C’mon, we get paid Friday!”

“Yeah James. We all know Shelty will be there, ain’t that right?”
Claire shot a quick glance at Alfred, who was standing in the corner, carefully keeping his eyes on his score. She grinned, her eyes no longer red. “Yep, you can count on me.”

Georgina was quietly pulling her gloves and her mother’s old coat over her uniform dress. She walked past Claire toward the door.

“Hey Georgie. You want to come?”
Georgina stopped and turned around.
“Me?”

Claire shrugged. “Why not? You’re old enough, aren’t you?”
“I guess.”

“You ever had a drink before?”
Georgina blushed. “No.”

“You’ve never had *anything*? Oh, honey, this is going to be a fun night.” She kept her eyes on Georgina, but shouted across the room, “You coming Alfred?”
He looked up, but didn’t reply.

After the evening show, Claire and Georgina went back to their room. Georgina pulled out a clean uniform dress, brushed her hair, and plaited it into a long braid that she tied with a ribbon. She washed her face and laced up her best pair of boots. Claire came out of the bathroom in her slip and bra. Her hair was back in the rollers she slept in. She looked at Georgina and shook her head.

“No way, Georgie. You’re not going out in that. We’re not on duty tonight, we’re out to have fun.” She walked over to Georgina and took the braid in her hands. Her hair hung down past her shoulder blades, even when it was pulled back.

“We’re gonna start with this. You’d look good with a bob. How bout if I give you a quick cut?”

Georgina flinched. “I don’t know. How short are you going to cut it?”

“Oh, honey, it’ll be fine. I did Elsie’s, you like hers? It’s only hair. If you don’t like it you can grow it back into this old rope. Give me ten minutes, you won’t recognize yourself.” Claire guided her to the desk chair before Georgina could protest.

She pulled a pair of scissors out of her bureau drawer and unbraided Georgina’s hair. She ran her long fingernails through the brown locks. Georgina’s eyes closed and her skin tingled with pleasure. Her mother used to plait her hair in the mornings when she was a little girl. Claire parted it on the left side, pulling it into sections that she fastened with pins. Georgina sank into the chair. *Snip*. Her heart jumped as she opened her eyes and watched a long section of hair fall from her head. It landed, lifeless, on the ground. Claire tilted Georgina’s head back so she was looking straight ahead again. She took a deep breath to calm herself. As Claire worked her way around Georgina’s head,

cutting away years of Georgina's hair, Georgina could feel the air on her neck, the weight dropping away. She let out the breath she had been holding.

Before Claire would let her go to the mirror, she brought her cosmetics bag into the room. She pulled out the mascara, eyeliner, eye shadow, and rouge, applying each liberally to Georgina's face. She rummaged around in her closet, producing a black, wasp-waisted dress and handed it to Georgina. Catching Claire's excitement, Georgina put the dress on. It was loose around the chest and fell lower than it was supposed to, but Claire nodded approvingly. She finally released Georgina to the mirror. Georgina reached up and touched the short hair, ending just above her jaw, as Claire shrugged.

"It needs to be waved, but we're already late."

Claire gathered her pocketbook and coat while Georgina remained in front of the mirror, shyly looking at herself from different angles, standing up straighter, making faces at herself in the mirror. Claire caught sight of her sucking her cheeks in and giving the mirror a withering look.

"Ha, so you like it then?" She laughed.

Georgina smiled, embarrassed. "I think so."

"You know, you're actually quite pretty." Claire looked at her long and hard for a moment, but before Georgina could say anything, she said, "C'mon, let's go the Pub, we were supposed to meet everyone thirty minutes ago."

Before Georgina opened her eyes the next morning she felt her head spinning and knew she was awake. She had drunk the cocktails the choir furnished her the night before with pleasure, basking in the warm glow of the drink and the praise from her

companions. But that pleasure had now turned to pain as Georgina opened her eyes and felt the light sear her retinas and press against her forehead. The smell of smoke in her pores, the scratchy feeling under her eyelids and at the back of her throat—a night in Covington never ended in mornings like this. She wondered what her mother was doing now, glad Robert and Lily were not sharing her room to see her. She remembered with some guilt the way she had played off smoking her first cigarette, trying to hide her watery eyes from Claire as she inhaled the first breath. Her mother used to make her father smoke his cigars on the porch.

Her mouth was dry, and she felt her stomach reel as she turned her head to look at Claire. But the bed next to her remained untouched from the day before—no sleeping lump. Curiously, Georgina looked at the clock on the wall to see that it was just before eight o'clock: certainly not late enough for Claire to be up. Georgina felt sure she would have heard Claire, who moved with all the grace of the cows in the fields when she first awoke in the mornings. Georgina sank back into the pillows, trying to remember the previous night.

The Player's Pub was the sports bar at the Hampshires. Paneled in rich mahogany and lit by yellowed lanterns, it was dense with smoke and the sound of pool balls smacking together. When Georgina had walked in with Claire, it was all men, dressed in the remnants of their days' suits. A few looked up from their martinis or cue balls and stared at them.

"Claire, over here!" Frank waved at them from a corner across the room.

Claire grabbed Georgina's hand and they wound their way over to the choir.

"Who you got with you? *Georgie?*"

"Yep, look at her," Claire said, lifting Georgina's hand into the air and spinning her under. James choked on his bourbon while Elsie exclaimed.

"Have a seat, Georgie," Jack said, pulling up a chair. Georgina slipped into the chair, grinning. "What'll you have?"

"Ummm..."

"She'll have a gin and tonic," Claire said to the bartender.

The night had progressed slowly at first, with Georgina taking small sips of her drink, trying to let the gin and tonic go down without a visible reaction. The rest of the choir was talking and laughing, and Georgina watched them with shy amusement. But as the night and the number of Georgina's drinks progressed, her tongue began to loosen. Elsie had been talking about a postcard she received when Alfred strode up to the bar.

"Alfred! Welcome to the party," James said, standing up and shaking his hand. Alfred sat down, still in his uniform suit. He surveyed the party, nodding to Georgina.

"Good to see you out. I like the...ah...hair," he said pointing to his own head.

Georgina smiled with pleasure. "Thanks, Claire did it."

"I decided it was time to give our little country bumpkin a haircut," Claire said, reaching for Alfred's arm. "You like it, Alfred?"

"Very nice. Vodka martini," he said to the waiter.

"So, like I was saying," Elsie said, "Ruth sent me a postcard from Paris saying that she met Edith Piaf."

"I don't believe that. She was always confusing things. She probably saw a street performer singing *La Vie en Rose* and thought it was Edith Piaf. Remember the time she told us she saw Jefferson's ghost at the spa?" Frank asked Jack. "She came running into

our room, got me out of bed and dragged me into the snow. Turns out it was some drunk guest and his girl behind the spa building. I think we scared them when we came up on them.” Georgina laughed along with the rest of the choir.

“Well, I’m tellin’ ya, it says ‘Saw Edith Piaf in the Tuileries,’” Elsie said.

“And what was Ruth doing in the Tuileries? Not going to the Louvre, I’ll tell you that much. She can’t stay quiet long enough to go to a museum,” Jack said.

“What’s the... Twilleries?” Georgina asked.

Claire laughed. “They’re gardens in Paris. They’re always filled with couples, old women feeding pigeons, and—apparently—Edith Piaf. *Les Tuileries et la Place Vendome*...”

“...*Paris c’était la gaieté, Paris, c’était la douceur aussi,*” Elsie joined in.

“...*C’était notre tendresse. Paris, tes gamins, tes artisans, tes camelots et tes agents, et tes matins de printemps,*” everyone but Georgina and Alfred sang. The Player’s Pub quieted some as the choir sang, clapping when the impromptu concert ended.

Georgina, her tongue heavy with drink, smiled and asked, “What was that song?”

Claire had moved closer to Alfred after the song, talking to him in a low voice.

“*Paris* by Edith Piaf. La Môme Piaf, the famous French singer. According to Ruth, she spends a lot of her time in the Tuileries,” said Elsie.

“Who’s Ruth?” Georgina asked.

“Ruth was the second soprano before you came.” Elsie rolled her eyes and laughed. “She was crazy, couldn’t hardly buckle her own shoes, but that girl could sing.” She took a sip of her drink. “She made it.”

“Made what?”

Elsie looked at her skeptically. "Made it. Got noticed. Got a job somewhere besides singing for rich people in the wilderness." "Oh." Georgina took another sip of her drink. Looking into it, she felt her teeth humming as the room drifted further away. Elsie turned to Jack and Frank, talking on about Ruth, but Georgina watched the ice in her glass melt. She thought about buckling her shoes. None of her shoes even had buckles, but Claire's did. Maybe she could borrow Claire's sometime. She imagined Ruth walking around a garden in Paris with her shoes unbuckled, listening to Edith Piaf. She wondered if Ruth sang with Edith, maybe they did duets.

"Do they wear buckled shoes in Paris?" she asked, looking up.

Jack, Frank, and Elsie stared at her for a moment, then burst into laughter.

"She's drunk!"

"Georgie, we better get you home."

"I'll take her," Jack said.

"We could all probably go," said Frank, standing up. "You guys coming?" he asked Claire and Alfred. Claire was leaning on Alfred, her hand on his right leg. She looked up briefly and shook her head.

"Ok, see you at rehearsal tomorrow then," Elsie said, eyeing Claire suspiciously.

"Here Georgie, put this on," she said, holding up Georgina's mother's coat.

As they were walking back to the staff housing, Elsie turned to Jack and said, "What's Shelty got up her sleeve?"

"I don't know, she's been after Alfred since she got here. All's I know is I'm staying out of it," Frank said.

"Me too, that girl's dangerous," said Jack.

"Well *I'm* not," Elsie said defiantly. "I want to know what she's up to. If she thinks that's the way to make it, I've got news for her. Some of us show up to rehearsals on time and work hard, you can't just get there with good looks."

They continued talking. But Georgina was not listening. She was looking at her shoes, wishing they had buckles that took her to Paris, wondering how much a pair would cost.

The Tuesday before Thanksgiving, the choir was holding its final greeting rehearsal. They had the day off on Wednesday to enjoy their respective holiday celebrations. Sister Cecilia was picking Georgina up that afternoon to take her home for a night. She had not been down the mountain since January, and was eager to see her family. She had been hiding behind a book on a divan in the South Parlor hallway to pass the time before rehearsal. The warm afternoon sunlight streamed through the long windows that stretched down the hallway. Game tables separated large cushioned chairs and couches that sat contentedly here and there off to the sides. The natural light and the comfortable seating provided Georgina hours of entertainment, eavesdropping on the guests' conversations as they passed through.

"...That's what I said to my husband Robert! I said to him, I said, 'Robert, we have got to get a house up on the coast.'" The women's voices lifted down the hallway.

"Oh you must! There is the most *delightful* little cottage next to ours in Hyacinth that just went on the market. I will have Henry mention it to Robert tonight at dinner. That would be such joy to summer next door to each other! Can you imagine?"

Chapter 3

The holiday season came early at the Hampshires. For those who visited during Thanksgiving, the evening feast culminated with the lighting of the Christmas tree in the Great Hall. The Hall was bright with fragrant evergreens, red ribbons, and blooming poinsettias. For the choir, the approach of the Christmas season meant long hours of rehearsing Christmas carols in October, when the last vestiges of warm air and orange leaves were discordant with the holiday tunes.

The Tuesday before Thanksgiving, the choir was holding its final grueling rehearsal. They had the day off on Wednesday to enjoy their respective holiday celebrations. Sister Cecilia was picking Georgina up that afternoon to take her home for a night. She had not been down the mountain since January, and was eager to see her family. She had been hiding behind a book on a divan in the South Parlor hallway to pass the time before rehearsal. The warm afternoon sunlight streamed through the long windows that stretched down the hallway. Game tables separated large cushioned chairs and couches that sat contentedly here and there off to the sides. The natural light and the comfortable seating provided Georgina hours of entertainment, eavesdropping on the guests' conversations as they passed through.

"...That's what I said to my husband Robert! I said to him, I said, 'Robert, we have *got* to get a house up on the coast.'" The women's voices lilted down the hallway.

"Oh you must! There is the most *delightful* little cottage next to ours in Hyannis that just went on the market. I will have Henry mention it to Robert tonight at dinner. That would be such joy to summer next door to each other! Can you imagine?"

“Timothy and I sold our beach cottage and bought war bonds with the proceeds,” a third woman in a grey wool crepe and silk suit sniffed. The first two women blushed. “The coast can be so *dull*, anyway. I doubt if we return to the Cape now that the war is over. It’s become entirely too pedestrian.” The two women glanced at each other and arched their eyebrows but said nothing. They continued towards the Main Hall as Georgina watched from behind her book, imitating their arched eyebrows. She sighed and got up to return to her room before rehearsal. The women’s saccharine drawls were much more refined than her high country accent. She was learning to swallow her *R*’s like the French, but had not yet mastered the long vowels of the Southern lowlands. She spoke softly to herself on her walk back.

“I would be *de-lighted* if you would johyn us in Chahlston this fahll,” she exhaled. When she reached the room, she found Claire still under the covers.

“Claire?” Georgina had been alone in the room the last week. Claire and Alfred had been on good terms. But she stumbled in late the night before, and clearly had not moved since. “You’d better get up, we have rehearsal in fifteen minutes.” Claire threw the covers back with a start, staring at Georgina in a bewildered haze. Her eyes were puffy and swollen. Suddenly the world came back to her and she leapt out of bed, trailing clothes behind her and tugging pin curls from her hair.

“Can I help you with anything?” Georgina asked.

“Where’s my music?” Claire yelled from the bathroom in a husky voice.

“It’s on your dresser. Look, I’m going to go to rehearsal, I’ll just tell Alfred you overslept.”

“Ok,” he grunted, barely looking up.

"No!" Claire said, her head poking out of the bathroom. "Don't do that. Just tell him...tell him I'm coming."

Georgina shrugged. "Ok."

She walked out of the staff housing, wrapping her new burgundy cashmere scarf around her nose and mouth to protect her vocal chords from the cold air. Most of her excess wages she sent home with a letter every month, keeping only enough to buy food. But several weeks before, Claire had dragged her into the Hampshires Boutique.

Georgina had stood in front of the scarves for thirty minutes while Claire tried on new hats. She fingered the rich fabrics, turning them over in her hands and examining the colors. Claire came over with a hat on.

"Do you like this?" Georgina glanced over her shoulder and nodded. "I'm getting it. Are you buying a scarf?"

"I don't know ... I can't afford it."

"Just buy it, Georgie. I like this one best." Claire picked up the burgundy scarf and placed it on the counter next to the hat she had picked out. "We'll take these," she said to the cashier. Reluctantly, Georgina pulled her money out of her mother's old pocketbook, counting out every dollar and the change carefully.

"It's very beautiful," said the woman behind the counter. "It's been our most popular item with the guests."

Georgina had worn it everywhere she went since.

"Claire's running late," she told Alfred as she walked into the choir room. He was bent over the score, marking it up with a pencil.

"Ok," he grunted, barely looking up.

The rest of the choir filtered in, shedding hats and coats on chairs. Alfred started the scales and they warmed their voices.

Alfred announced the order of the rehearsal and papers shuffled as the choir members arranged their music. "The Richmond Symphony will be here Thursday to rehearse with us before we perform that night. So we need to work all the kinks out today before your day off tomorrow. Let's just take Handel from the top right now, though."

He bent over the piano and played the opening base octaves. "Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah!" The choir came in jubilant but unbalanced. The absence of Claire's high soprano left the chorus without the sparkle Handel had deftly placed on top. Alfred shot a dark look towards the door while the choir tried to sing their parts without the cues from the first soprano. Georgina heard Claire's part in her head, struggling to sing the harmony to a missing melody.

"And he shall reign forever and ever," the basses began, joined by the tenors in a circular fugue. The altos added in the third time around, and just as Georgina entered with the soprano part, Claire burst through the door, out of breath. The choir's attention was distracted away from the song as Claire struggled out of her coat. Alfred lifted his conducting arm higher in the air, gesturing in a wide arc for the basses to come in. His mouth opened in an exaggerated *O* as he struggled to bring the attention back to himself. Claire stumbled into her position next to Georgina, shuffling through her music to find the correct page.

After a long moment, Claire stepped down a level on the riser. Deflated, she took the position of second soprano and Georgina took her place.

"King of Kings...and Lord of Lords," the altos sang, echoed by the basses. Claire cleared her throat for the sopranos' entrance. Georgina, glancing up at her, saw that her puffy eyes were focused on Alfred.

"King of Kings..." Claire misplaced the note, her voice raspy and dry. *"For ever and ever, Hallelujah,"* the altos answered, glancing inquisitively in her direction.

"And Lord of Lords..." Georgina went higher, but Claire's voice faltered, sliding off the high notes. Georgina looked up again at Claire, whose gaze was fixed resolutely on Alfred's conducting hand, her face crimson.

"For ever and ever, Hallelujah, Hallelujah," the altos replied. Georgina steeled herself as the refrain came around again, the sopranos reaching ever higher, *"King of Kings..."*

Slamming his palm down on the top of the piano, Alfred stopped the music. Georgina jumped. He took a deep breath and his face burnt with anger. *"Georgina, please sing first soprano."* He spoke slowly, his eyes fixed firmly on Georgina's face. Her heart froze and she stared back at him for a moment, measuring his sincerity. He raised his eyebrows, gesturing with one finger for her to move over to take Claire's place. Her ears buzzing with blood, she moved left. Claire remained planted to her spot. Georgina looked up. The words were stuck in her throat, too afraid to ask Claire to move. Claire's eyes were wildly searching Alfred's face, but he remained focused on Georgina. After a long moment, Claire stepped down a level on the riser. Deflated, she took the position of second soprano and Georgina took her place.

“Ok, take it back to the beginning of ‘King of Kings,’ measure eighty-seven. I’ll give you two.” He played the two measures before the choir’s entrance, gesturing to the altos to begin again.

“*King of Kings...*” Georgina felt Claire’s presence searing her from the right. She stared, white-faced, at Alfred. On her cue, he steadily returned her gaze and brought her in.

“*King of Kings...And Lord of Lords...*” She had not rehearsed the part, but knew the melody by heart. She heard herself singing timidly the first time around.

“*King of Kings...*” She tightened her diaphragm, breathing full with her chest, letting the notes come from deep within her. “*And Lord of Lords...*” Her voice carried high above the rest of the choir, soaring with vibrato over the basses as they filled out the majestic chorus.

“*King of Kings and Lord of Lords.*”

Alfred nodded at her, smiling faintly at the corners of his mouth as the music decrescendoeed back into the fugue. His fingers leapt through the air, weaving the voices together into one cohesive sound. The men took over the refrain. The women responded. They finally joined together to finish the song with the full pyramid of vocal range, perfected by Georgina’s increasingly confident soprano.

Rehearsal continued with Georgina singing first soprano. At the end of the Hallelujah Chorus, the choir members stole glances at Alfred and Claire, expecting Alfred to return her to first soprano after rebuking her. But he resolutely avoided eye contact with Claire, who withered more with each song. He stopped and patiently went over a part with Georgina when she missed a note or an entrance. His eyes lit up,

regaining the spark they had lost over the last few months. Georgina shifted farther left, turning her back slightly to Claire to concentrate on the music. As the choir rehearsed the songs Georgina gained poise and buoyancy in her voice. She felt the familiar tingle that struck her to the depths of her being, igniting her body with excitement. Her voice filled the room, and the rest of the choir's voices rallied around hers, supporting it and lifting the music to its climax.

"Forever and ever, hallelujah, hallelujah," Alfred slashed his hands through the air to cut the choir off, his face fully animated as everyone's eyes but Claire's connected with his, suspended in the break before the final chords.

"Halle-lujah," they sang together, Alfred bringing his hands together in a triumphant gesture, ending the song. He let his arms fall to his sides.

"Wow," Georgina heard Elsie exhale in awe next to her. Jack murmured in agreement. The rest of the choir glowed, the last jubilant note still ringing in their ears.

"Wonderful!" Alfred beamed. "Oh!" he exclaimed, clasping his hands together and closing his eyes for a moment. He exhaled sharply, then opened them again. "We need to work on the transition from measures one sixty-three through one seventy, but we'll get it on Thursday when the symphony is here." He clapped his hands together.

"Everyone have a happy Thanksgiving and remember to meet here at five for the lighting of the tree. Thank you!" The choir broke, voices and scores flurrying through the air.

Georgina turned to Claire, but Claire had slipped off the riser and was shoving her arms through her coat sleeves. Georgina stepped toward her, but Alfred called to her from the piano.

Alexander “Georgina! That was wonderful! Could you stay for just thirty more minutes so we can work on a few of the problem sections? The rondo in Handel the second time around, particularly. We just need to run through it a few times.” Georgina looked back at Claire. She was tucking her music folder into her coat and looked up, making eye contact for a brief moment. Her eyes were cold and unfamiliar. She broke the gaze and walked swiftly out of the room. “...And on God Rest Ye you’re still singing the second soprano part near measure fifty-six. Georgina?”

Georgina turned back to Alfred. She nodded. “Yes. Okay.”

After forty-five minutes of rehearsing with Alfred, Georgina hurried through the cold back to her room.

“Claire?” she said as she entered the room. But the room was empty, Claire’s clothes strewn across the beds and dressers. Georgina folded Claire’s clothes and stacked them on her bed. She took her father’s old suitcase out from under her bed and began packing her own clothes. She left her new scarf in her dresser.

Sister Cecilia was waiting in the parish car when Georgina came out of the staff housing, suitcase in tow. Georgina opened the door to the car and set her suitcase in back.

“Georgina, how are you, my dear?”

Georgina smiled wanly. “Fine.”

Sister Cecilia shot her a concerned glance as she pulled away from the Hampshires.

“I saw your mother at the church yesterday. She is excited to have you home. She invited me to dinner tomorrow at noon! Which is wonderful, because my sister in

Alexandria is going to San Francisco. Can you imagine traveling to San Francisco at her age?" Georgina shook her head, as they merged onto Highway 220 and began the winding trip down the mountain. "Your mother said your uncle shot a turkey last week. She's cooking it for dinner tomorrow. Your brother sure has grown big. I bet you don't even recognize him when you see him. He's a big help to your mother." She paused. "And there's quite the surprise for you at home," she said mysteriously.

"What?" Georgina asked, her curiosity piqued.

Sister Cecilia shrugged nonchalantly. "It's not my news."

As the parish car pulled into the Fitzgeralds' front yard, Lily and Robert came out of the house and stood on the front porch.

"Georgina!" they cried, as she got out of the car. Lily ran up to her and wrapped her in a hug. Her hair was longer than Georgina remembered it, and she had filled out into a womanly figure, no longer the hard and lean girl Georgina had left.

As she pulled away, Lily shyly held up her left hand. A small gold band was on her fourth finger.

"Charles and I are getting married," she said.

Georgina gasped. Sister Cecilia came up behind her. "Any chance you will be free the third weekend in January? She will need someone to sing in her wedding."

Georgina had grabbed Lily's hand and was examining the plain gold ring. Her face fell. "We have a competition that weekend. I'll be in North Carolina," she said, crestfallen.

"It don't matter," Lily offered. "Sister can play for the wedding."

As Sister Cecilia had said, Robert too was much different. His voice had deepened, his shoulders were broader and his arms were stronger after a summer of working on the farm. Georgina took all of this in while exclaiming over her siblings.

Her mother came out onto the porch and watched her children greet one another, smiling. Georgina glanced up and saw her, breaking for the porch.

"Mama!" She collapsed into her mother's arms, relieved for the first time in months.

"Georgina! Your hair," her mother said, touching the short bob.

Robert helped her carry her suitcase up the steps to the house, leaving it in the girls' room. Georgina walked into the house and let everything that was familiar seep into her skin. She could feel in her bones the creak in the living room walls, the smell in the kitchen from years of her mother's cooking, the worn path on the carpet in the middle of the doorways.

Georgina changed into her Sunday clothes for the Thanksgiving dinner, and entered the kitchen to help her mother prepare. Lily and her mother were bustling about the kitchen.

"Can I help?" Georgina asked.

Her mother looked up, startled. "Oh, Georgina." She was stirring a pot over the stove, her face flushed. "No, Sister Cecilia and Uncle Jim should be here soon, why don't you wait for them and talk to them when they arrive?"

"Lily?"

Lily looked up from the potatoes she was beating. "No," she said smiling.

"Thank you."

Georgina sat in the living room, watching the ornaments glitter on the tree as the soprano part ran through her head. She heard voices on the front porch.

The front door opened and Uncle Jim, his towering figure blocking any view of Sister Cecilia completely, walked into the living room.

"Georgina!" he boomed, placing a large hand on her shoulder. She smiled.

"Hello, Uncle Jim."

"How's our little singer?"

"I'm fine."

"The rich folks up there at the Hampshires treatin' ya fine?"

"Yes sir, they are."

Sister Cecilia appeared from behind him, just as Georgina's mother emerged from the kitchen with the turkey.

"Let's sit down, shall we?" she said.

"This food won't eat itself," said Uncle Jim.

Everyone took their seats around the table.

"Sister Cecilia, will you say grace for us?" asked Georgina's mother.

"Of course." Everyone bowed their heads as Sister Cecilia prayed. "Heavenly Father, we thank you on this day for the food you lay before us. We thank you for family and friends gathered around this table in good health, especially for Georgina. We pray for the repose of the soul of Joshua Thomas, our friend, father, and husband who left us for your Kingdom. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen."

"Amen." blushed. "Actually, I'm singin' first now."

Uncle Jim cut the turkey and everyone joined in the feast with the clatter of plates, silverware, and voices. ally," Georgina said, her color rising.

"Thank you again for inviting me, Emma," Sister Cecilia said. "Father Schweitzer spends the holiday with his family in Richmond, so it might have been a very lonely Thanksgiving for me." she, yes. She's the prima donna! The star of the choir!"

"Well of course. You heard any word from your sister?" ing the table with his

ist. "She left three days ago, so I expect to receive a postcard soon. She was stopping in St. Louis. Perhaps she sent me one from there." hied furiously as she raised her glass

in the air. "And what's she in San Francisco for?"

Sister Cecilia shrugged. "She had never been. Anna says the cold in Alexandria begins to get to her about now, so it was a good time to leave." ut is our first Christmas

concert. "Ain't she a bit old to be traveling that far?" asked Uncle Jim.

"Certainly not," Sister Cecilia mischievously. "Just because you're old doesn't mean you're dead. She bought a train ticket and left. She called it her Grand Ye Merry Adventure." Saw Three Ships, Good King Wenceslas, Deck the Halls, Il est né le divin

enfant. Uncle Jim grunted. "That's a long ways to go for an adventure."

Everyone chewed in silence for a moment.

Sister Cecilia shook her head. "How time does fly. Lily to be married soon...How are wedding preparations coming?" said Sister Cecilia. "What else, my

dear?" "We've decided Robert will give me away," Lily said.

"Is that so? Too bad Georgina will be in North Carolina. It could give her a chance to be the first soprano instead of the second again." She winked at Georgina.

Georgina blushed. "Actually, I'm singin' first now."

"*First?*" Sister Cecilia said in surprise. "When did that happen?"

"Yesterday, actually," Georgina said, her color rising.

"Well that's tremendous! Congratulations!"

"Is that good?" asked Georgina's mother.

"Good? Bless me, yes. She's the prima donna! The star of the choir!"

"Well, there's our little Georgina," said Uncle Jim, pounding the table with his fist. "Singin' first." He lifted his glass high in the air. "To Georgina," he said.

Everyone lifted their glasses. Georgina blushed furiously as she raised her glass in the air.

"What sort of music are you singing?" asked Sister Cecilia.

"We sing a little of everything," Georgina said. "Tonight is our first Christmas concert, so we're performing Christmas carols."

"And which songs are you performing?"

"We're doing the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's Messiah, God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen, I Saw Three Ships, Good King Wenceslas, Deck the Halls, Il est né le divin enfant—"

"Illy nay?" asked Uncle Jim.

"It's a French song," said Georgina.

"It means 'He is born, the divine child,'" said Sister Cecilia. "What else, my dear?" She turned back to Georgina hungrily.

"And Stille Nacht, Here We Come A-Wassailing—"

"What's Shtillay Nocked?" asked Robert.

"It's Silent Night in German," said Georgina.

"Why don't you just sing it in English?" said Robert.

"I ... I don't know."

"You shouldn't sing anything in German, if you're askin' me," said Uncle Jim.

"Might come off soundin' like a Nazi."

"The German tradition in music goes back a long way, actually," said Sister Cecilia, wiping her mouth with her napkin. "They were some of the best writers of songs back in the eighteen hundreds. They started the lieder tradition, in fact."

"We've got Silent Night in English, it's good enough for me. I wouldn't be singin' any French songs either. If I never have to think about that country again it will be too soon for me."

Georgina's mother gave him a warning glance.

"What?" he said, lifting his palms in the air.

"It's Thanksgiving dinner," she said to him under her breath.

"What's leader?" asked Lily.

"It's short songs with words," said Georgina, quietly.

"Now, Jim, some of the best composers were German. Brahms, for example. You know Brahms lullaby." She hummed a few bars of the song. "And Bach? Their music was around long before Hitler was. And it's something that can unite us when Hitler's gone."

"Are we all going to sit around and sing Silent Night together at Hitler's funeral?"

Uncle Jim muttered under his breath.

“Georgina, will you pass me the squash, please?” Georgina’s mother asked. “Jim, how is the farm?” Jim hesitated for a moment, but let the subject drop. “Farm’s good, all the calves are grown. Didn’t lose one this summer.”

Georgina looked appreciatively at Sister Cecilia, who returned her gaze with a smile.

The moods of the mountains were all familiar to Georgina. They could change their appearance in the time it took her to hop a fence, emerging or receding at will. But she was aware of the tricks, knew intimately their dispositions in every season and every light. Shrouded in the early morning fog they awakened slowly, unrolling from the haze at their leisure. In April they grew frolicsome, bursting boldly into the fields and usurping the skyline as they inhaled deeply into their bellies. The snow in the winters sat in contrast to the stubble of their chins on their ashen skin; they refused to shake the snow out of the wrinkles in their sulky stubbornness. Georgina was not surprised when one mountain suddenly seemed higher than the rest, nearer her home than it had before, had more folds than a week earlier—she knew their natures.

But as Sister Cecilia guided the car back up the road to the Hampshires after dinner, the mountains were unfamiliar to Georgina. They were elusive—suddenly more expansive than she had known them to be. They stretched out their feet to her yet pulled away.

As they pulled up to the staff housing, Sister Cecilia got out of the car and walked around to the passenger side. She gave Georgina a hug, then pulled away from her,

holding her at arms length. She studied Georgina's face for a long time. Georgina waited for her to speak. But Sister Cecilia finally just nodded—a single firm shake of the head, then turned and got back in the car.

Georgina stood with her shoulders squared as she watched Sister Cecilia drive away. "Walter, are you feeling okay?" Her words were thick with a saccharine drawl.

"They don't have curvy mountain roads in London, Walty?" The young man threw a handful of slushy snow that was piled on the side of the driveway at his brother. Hunched against the car, Walter looked up and glared.

His father was discussing the bags with the bellman. He glanced at his sons. "He's fine. He just needs to breathe a little of this country air. Donald, why don't you escort your mother to the spa. I'm sure she will want to get her name on the list. Walter, help me check in."

The family parted, leaving the bellman with their suitcases. Walter and his father crossed the verandah to the front desk.

"Good afternoon, sir. Welcome to the Hampshires," said the man behind the desk. "Are you checking in?"

"Yes. William Thomas."

He glanced at Walter, who was slouched against the desk, his teeth gritted. He tapped him on the small of the back with his hand, closing his eyes and shaking his head disapprovingly. Walter sighed and straightened.

"Very well, Mr. Thomas, let me check this book ... Ah, yes. Suite 378, in the Main Tower. And will you be joining us for the Thanksgiving dinner tonight, followed by the lighting of the Christmas tree?"

Chapter 4

"I *am* glad that is over." A woman stepped out of a black Cadillac across the circle drive from the parish car, where Georgina stood with her shoulders squared as she watched Sister Cecilia drive away. "Walter, are you feeling okay?" Her words were thick with a saccharine drawl.

"They don't have curvy mountain roads in London, Walty?" The young man threw a handful of slushy snow that was piled on the side of the driveway at his brother.

Hunched against the car, Walter looked up and glared.

His father was discussing the bags with the bellman. He glanced at his sons. "He's fine. He just needs to breathe a little of this country air. Donald, why don't you escort your mother to the spa, I'm sure she will want to get her name on the list. Walter, help me check in."

The family parted, leaving the bellman with their suitcases. Walter and his father crossed the verandah to the front desk.

"Good afternoon, sir. Welcome to the Hampshires," said the man behind the desk. "Are you checking in?"

"Yes. William Thomas."

He glanced at Walter, who was slouched against the desk, his teeth gritted. He tapped him on the small of the back with his hand, closing his eyes and shaking his head disapprovingly. Walter sighed and straightened.

"Very well, Mr. Thomas, let me check this book ...Ah, yes. Suite 378, in the Main Tower. And will you be joining us for the Thanksgiving dinner tonight, followed by the lighting of the Christmas tree?"

“We will.”

“Excellent, I will have them set a table for you. The Hampshires Choir begins its performance at seven tonight for the Christmas tree lighting. They will be accompanied by the Richmond Symphony, it should be a wonderful show. Now if you will just sign here ...”

William pulled a pair of glasses from his pocket, and read the paper over.

“William Thomas?”

A group of men and women were walking by the front desk. One of them, a tall balding man with comical features was smiling and walking towards the Thomases. William looked up over his glasses. His face broke into a smile.

“Clarence Myers.”

“I thought that was you. How are you? Up from Richmond, I see?” They shook hands.

“Yes, well, Helen thought it would be nice to spend the holiday here, get away from the city for a bit.”

“Quite right. Mabel and I spend every Thanksgiving here,” he gestured to a woman in a saffron wrap standing several yards off. “They do a nice job, it’s become something of a tradition.” He lowered his voice and raised his eyebrows, intimating confidence. “It is much better than her turkey, to be honest with you.” The men laughed heartily. Clarence patted his rotund belly. “And how is the tobacco business?”

“Oh, business as usual, you know. And you, are you still in shipping?”

“Oh heavens no. My, my, I got out of that probably ten years ago. Sold it for quite a sum to Shafer out of Atlanta—you know him? Short fellow, glasses? Used to run

around with that Row—Row—Rowland from the District. Yes, well I've recently been investing in grain futures. You would be amazed at the profit to be made, William. I suspect you could really pull it in. It's where all of the money is going. I expect that in ten years we won't need agriculture at all, just the futures. Ha! Ah, but you know how it is. I mean to look up all of you fellows from the College, but then where does the time go, after all?" He sighed, and glanced over at Walter.

"Is this your son?" he asked, his eyebrows raised in surprise.

William turned to Walter and smiled. "Yes, this is Walter, my oldest. He is just back from the war, in fact, only two months ago."

"The war, is it? Good man." They shook hands, Walter smiling thinly.

"Thank you, sir."

"And what unit were you?"

"The 28th ID, sir."

"Ah ha, the bloody bucket. I was an Army man myself, once. Fought in the Great War, in fact. I believe you all were stationed in the European Theater?"

"Yes, sir."

"France is a terrible country, isn't it? I suspect you saw a lot of action?"

"Well, sir, I never actually, um ..." His color rose as he stuttered his response. "I wasn't deployed until they had ah ... the Nazis had ..."

"He landed in Dublin the day they declared the war over. They kept him there for a few weeks before they flew him back home," his father said.

"That right?" Clarence replied. Walter nodded, his eyes on the ground. "Well, no matter. And what are your plans now, hmm?"

"He will go to Richmond College in January to study business," his father said, slapping Walter on the back.

"Ah, I see," laughed Clarence. "A chip off the old block, eh? And he'll be pledging Phi Gam, no doubt?"

"Certainly, yes, yes," William chortled.

"Another generation of Thomases," Clarence said, shaking his head. "I don't know how you all do it. Hmmm." He sighed. "Well, I won't be keeping you, you have bags to unpack and whatnot. See you at dinner this evening?"

"Of course, see you then."

As the parish car pulled away, Georgina lugged her suitcase toward the staff housing, examining the mountains in the distance.

"*She's the prima donna,*" she said to herself, her breath coming out in white tendrils that evaporated into the air. She lifted her chin high and smiled, greeting a guest exuberantly as they passed each other on the lawn. She hummed the Hallelujah chorus to herself as she strode up to the group of staff housing buildings sheltered in the pine trees. She rounded the porch and marched up the front steps, through the front entrance. The mountains disappeared as she was confronted with the door to her room. *Claire*. Her stomach lurched.

Georgina took a deep breath and opened the door slowly. All of the lights were on and the beds were neatly made. The dressers were uncluttered and the armoire doors closed nicely, no shoes or clothes spilling out onto the floor. It looked strangely barren without the usual mess. Georgina walked into the room, puzzled.

"Claire?" she called out, although she knew there was nowhere for her roommate to hide in the small room. She set her suitcase on her bed and unpacked the few clothes she had taken with her. After she had finished, she walked to the room next to hers and knocked on the door.

"Elsie?"

There was the sound of shuffling feet, and the door opened. Elsie stood halfway behind the door, her pin curls covered by a scarf.

"Hey Georgie! How was Covington?"

"Fine, thanks," she smiled wanly. "Listen, do you know where Claire is?"

"Claire? Haven't seen her since rehearsal Tuesday. Ruth, you seen Shelty?" She looked back into her room, where Ruth was lounging on her bed thumbing through a magazine.

"Saw her walking to the Player's Pub with some guest last night," Ruth muttered without looking up.

"Walking with a guest?" Elsie asked.

"Yeah," Ruth replied glancing toward Georgina and Elsie. "Well, no, not walking so much as falling over him. They were coming out of the dining room. She looked pretty drunk. You have a good day off, kid?"

"Mmmhmm," Georgina replied. She looked down the hall towards the front entrance.

"See your family and all of that?" Ruth asked.

Georgina nodded.

"They doin' okay without ya?"

"Yeah, seems like it," Georgina said distractedly.

Elsie looked at Georgina skeptically.

"Georgie, come inside for a minute." She opened the door wider, and Georgina stepped inside. Elsie shut the door behind her.

"You know Shelty had this comin', don't you?" Elsie asked, putting a hand on Georgina's shoulder.

"What do you mean?" Georgina asked.

"Claire's been singing in this choir for four years. The only one of us who's been here longer is Alfred. At the time, he was probably lucky to get her. The choir hadn't started winning competitions yet, and most sopranos would never dream of coming to a resort in the mountain wilderness."

"Yeah, no offense or anything, Georgie, but these mountains aren't exactly New York City. Hell, they're not even Atlantic City," Ruth said, the magazine pushed to the foot of the bed.

"But four years ago the war was just starting and Claire was lucky to be getting a singing job at all," Elsie resumed. "But with each year, the choir has gotten better, and Claire hasn't been able to stay ahead."

"And she hasn't taken care of herself," Ruth said. "We all like to have a good time, but..." Ruth grimaced. "Claire overdoes it."

Georgina nodded. "She has been a pretty bad roommate."

"She knew it was only a matter of time until someone came along who was better than her. Then she started that whole thing with Alfred—"

"She probably thought he would have to keep her around," Ruth said.

“—and that was *never* going to end well.”

“*Never* date your director, Georgie,” Ruth said. “It *always* ends badly.”

“And then you came along and ...”

“And *Wow!*” Ruth exclaimed. Georgina smiled bashfully, but waited for more.

“Georgie, you can’t worry about Claire,” Elsie said, looking Georgina earnestly in the face, her curlers bobbing on her head. “She did this to herself, and you’re better than she will ever be.”

“Mmmhmmm,” Ruth nodded in agreement.

“You might be the best Alfred’s ever heard, judging from the looks he was giving you at rehearsal on Tuesday,” Elsie said. “I thought he was going to jump off the conductor’s stand, he was so excited to have someone unifying the parts.”

“It was *amazing*,” Ruth said.

Georgina grinned. “He did like it, didn’t he?”

“Naw, Georgie. You’re a natural,” Ruth said.

“Now you’d better go get ready, we don’t have much time before we’re supposed to start rehearsal with the symphony,” Elsie said, glancing at the clock on the dresser. “I have to take these out of my hair,” she said, pointing to the pin curls. “And *you* need to get that voice of yours warmed up.”

“Okay. Thanks Elsie. Thanks Ruth.”

Georgina walked back to her room and showered and ironed her choir uniform. She borrowed Claire’s makeup bag that was still sitting on the bathroom counter and, humming to herself, slowly lined her eyes, rouged her cheeks, darkened her eyelashes with mascara, and plumped her lips with bright red lipstick. She pinned her waved hair

back behind her ear and sliced a lemon Sister Cecilia had given her and squeezed it into a glass of warm water. She drank it slowly as it rinsed and relaxed her vocal chords. She slipped her dress on and fastened her shoes just as Elsie knocked on her door.

“Come on, we’re going to be late!”

Georgina grabbed her music folder, her mother’s jacket, glancing around the room to make sure she got everything. Her suitcase still sat on Claire’s bed, but she ran out the door.

“I’ll get it later.”

When they entered the rehearsal room, it was bursting with noise and people. The forty members of the Richmond Symphony and the ten members of the Hampshires choir were tangled in instruments, stands, coats, and hats. The air was filled with loud chatter and short rifts of music as the strings and brass warmed up individually. Georgina glowed as she thought again of what Sister Cecilia had said. *The prima donna*. This was all hers.

She removed her coat and scarf and joined the choir members who were already on the risers, singing several bars as she went. Alfred stood at the front of the room, talking excitedly with the director of the Richmond Symphony. He caught sight of Georgina and nodded. She smiled back conspiratorially.

Alfred broke off the conversation and moved to the conductor’s stand. The musicians began to quiet. Georgina surveyed the room—the only one missing was Claire. Alfred gestured for silence and spoke from his conductor’s stand.

“Everyone, welcome back and happy Thanksgiving! Thank you to Harold Nichols and the Richmond Symphony for coming to play with us, we hope you enjoy

yourselves here and we're sure that tonight's performance will be a great one." The symphony conductor bowed towards Alfred.

"Let me first give you the order for tonight's performance. We're going to start with Here We Come A-Wassailing, which will just be the choir, then the Symphony will join in on Three Ships, Good King Wenceslas, God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen, Stille Nacht, Il est né, then they will light the Christmas tree to Deck the Halls, which we will immediately follow with Handel's Hallelujah Chorus to finish the program." Papers shuffled as everyone put their music in order for the performance.

"Right now we will skip over Wassailing and go straight to Three Ships because we have the Symphony here. So if you all will—"

Claire sauntered in at that moment, smiling at no one in particular. She took off her coat unhurriedly and took her position on the risers. Alfred glanced her direction but did not pause.

"—take out Three Ships we will start with that right now. Harold, if you will do the honors of starting the Symphony for us."

The symphony director nodded and took his position at his score. He raised his arms and pointed to the trombones.

"Ready?"

He gave them a measure with his baton and the music began. Georgina glanced behind her at Claire, but Claire was watching Alfred for her entrance with a satisfied expression. Georgina turned back, focusing on her voice, tightening her abdomen to summon the sound from her stomach.

The choir and symphony quickly ran through the pieces together, both invigorated by the fullness of sound that the other provided. Harold nodded to Georgina in approval as he conducted Handel. After Alfred dismissed them to move to the Great Hall, Georgina turned to Claire to speak to her. But Claire was already talking with Betty.

"...with Jonathan Ward," Claire was saying.

"Who is Jonathan Ward?" Betty asked.

"My boyfriend."

"You have a boyfriend? I thought you were dating Al—"

"I'm done with him," Claire said quickly, cutting Betty off. "I'm done with this place. Jonathan asked me to move to Cincinnati with him. We're leaving right after the show tonight." She sighed happily.

"You're leaving?" Georgina said in surprise.

"Yes. His car is packed with all of my things," Claire said, turning toward Georgina for the first time, but not meeting her eyes.

"Your makeup is still in our room, and your posters are still on the walls. Don't you want those?"

Claire laughed. "Jonathan will buy me whatever I don't have. *You* can keep those," she said, gesturing towards Georgina.

"Isn't this ... happening kind of fast?" Georgina asked.

Claire sighed and finally met Georgina's stare. There was a wild light in her dark gaze. "He's taking me away from here. That can't happen too soon," she said coldly.

Betty looked at her in shock. "Does Alfred know?"

"I'm telling him right now." Claire turned and marched down the risers to Alfred, who was talking to Harold. She tapped him on the arm. He spun around and stared at her quizzically.

"I'm quitting. Tonight is my last performance," she said, her eyes flashing.

Alfred looked for a long moment at her, his face impassive.

"Good luck."

"Think on it..." She put on a large and waved. "Mabel!"

The great hall flickered orange in the light of the lanterns on the walls. The Hampshires staff lined the hallways with candles in their hands, smiling and greeting the guests who were making their way from the dining room to the Great Hall. The guests gasped as they saw the Christmas tree towering magnificently over the symphony and choir. It had been erected during dinner and spectacularly decorated while they enjoyed thick slices of crumbling mesquite smoked turkey and tart cranberry sauce. They had dined with gusto, enjoying the fruits their labors could purchase, their wine glasses never allowed to empty and no plate of food going cold. Except one.

Walter had been accompanying his mother on a stroll around the grounds of the Hampshires just before dinner when Mabel Myers approached them from the direction of the Main Tower.

"Halloo!"

They both squinted at the figure hurrying towards them.

"Who is that?" Walter's mother asked.

"I'm wearing." She wrung her hands and pulled her wrap tighter.

"I don't...oh yes," he said, recognizing the saffron wrap from earlier that afternoon. "She's the wife of a friend of Dad's from the College. We met them at the check-in desk earlier. Clarence someone?"

His mother nodded. "Clarence Myers," she said as the figure approached. "They have a fine daughter. Elizabeth? She's very pretty ..."

"Mother..." he said, exasperated.

"Think on it..." She put on a large smile and waved. "Mabel!"

"Helen! Hello!" Mabel replied, out of breath.

"How *are* you?" Helen replied as they embraced. "Walter was telling me he met you earlier this afternoon, I'm sorry to have missed it—I was reserving spa appointments."

"Yes, yes," she said, bowing slightly to Walter. "I'm fine, I'm...oh, flustered," she replied, her face flushed from the cold and excitement. "They lost our luggage on our flight in from Chicago. I just received a message from the front desk—" She held out her hand which contained a crumpled note. "It has made it as far as Covington, but they can't get it any further tonight because of the holiday and all," Mabel said, gesticulating in frustration.

"Oh dear," Helen replied, concern creasing her eyebrows.

"And I can't find Clarence *anywhere*, not that it would matter if I *could* find him, he's probably in fine form this close to dinner and in no shape to be driving those windy roads. Oh, if I don't get my bags tonight, I don't know what I'll do. I have only what I'm wearing." She wrung her hands and pulled her wrap tighter.

"Well perhaps we can help you," Helen said. "We drove here just today, I'm sure Walter here would drive down the mountain and retrieve your bags," she said, prodding Walter with a look. He hesitated, then stepped forward.

"Yes ma'am."

"Oh, bless you," Mabel exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "You don't know how this relieves me. It would put me in such a bind not to have our luggage. Clarence hasn't given a second thought to it, but no one would notice if he wore the same suit every day, would they Helen?" She grasped Walter's hand in gratitude. "Thank you so much." She unfolded the note in her hand and handed it to Walter. "It says here it is at the post office, on Main Street. I don't believe it can be that difficult to find *anything* in Covington." She turned to Helen. "We drove through on our way from the airport—what a small town!"

Helen nodded in agreement. "Walter, you'd better head on down. Dinner begins soon," his mother said. "I will save your seat at the table if you're late."

"Thank you again, my dear," Mabel said. Walter nodded and walked toward the hotel.

His mother kept the waiter from taking Walter's plate until the dessert plates had been cleared. It was announced that the concert was to begin in fifteen minutes and chairs had been set up for their viewing pleasure.

"Where could he have gone to?" Helen asked William with concern as they were getting up from the table.

William shook his head. "I don't know, must have gotten lost."

"Maybe he got sick again on those roads," Donald laughed. His father shot him a stern look and said, "We can ask the wait staff to keep a plate of food for him, surely he can't be much longer. Shall we head to the Main Hall?"

They left the dining room, joining the other guests in patting their full bellies, contented smiles on their faces. In the dim glow of the Main Hall, they saw Clarence waving at them from a row of seats.

"William, do join us for the concert," he said, his face flushed with drink.

The Thomases seated themselves next to the Myers, facing the unlit tree.

"Where is Walter?" Mabel asked.

Helen shook her head. "Not back yet."

"Oh dear, I hope he's alright," she said, as a man in a tuxedo motioned for the crowd to be silent with a broad smile. The guests hushed to an excited murmur as he spoke.

"Welcome, happy Thanksgiving to all of you! I trust that you enjoyed your dinners and the company of your friends and family. As Thanksgiving passes behind us and we move towards Christmas, we here at the Hampshires enjoy a tradition of bringing the season in with song and lights. Tonight we have prepared for you a very special performance. We have brought together again the talents of the wonderful Richmond Symphony, under the direction of Maestro Harold Nichols..." He paused as the audience clapped and Harold bowed. "...and our very own esteemed Hampshires Choir, under the direction of Alfred Lancaster." The audience clapped again, settling further into their chairs. "We hope you enjoy this performance, we know we will."

Georgina took several deep breaths as the manager walked off the platform.

Alfred stepped onto the conductor's podium. *Wassailing* was easy: the parts were in unison and there were no solos. A simple warm-up piece. Alfred was all business during performances, and he raised his arms with more gravity than ever. The tip of the baton made minute, almost invisible movements as he gave them eight counts before bringing the men in.

"*Wassail wassail wassail wassail,*" they sang, setting the rhythm.

"*Here we come a-wassailing among the leaves so green,*" Georgina sang with the other women. She could hear Claire behind her, over-singing the delicate balance of voices. She corrected by projecting her notes over Claire's while keeping her volume at the level that brought the vocal pyramid to a perfect point, piercing the dimly lit night. Alfred caught her adjustment and gave her a slight nod of approval.

"*And God send you a happy New Year.*" The choir ended in perfect harmony, the last note hanging in the air before the audience applauded.

Alfred stepped aside as Harold mounted the podium and the symphony came to concert attention. He raised his hands and the trombone and oboe and clarinet players lifted their instruments to their lips. With a flick of his wrist, Harold drew a plump, brassy sound from the trombones that hit Georgina in the breastbone, sending a pleasant warmth through her body. The clarinets and oboes answered the trombones' call, and the women were brought in by Alfred's baton.

"*I saw three ships come sailing in on Christmas Day, on Christmas Day...*"

Georgina placed the high notes on top, her voice gently setting them on the right key instead of reaching for them.

"*Oh oh oh,*" she sang as the men carried the melody, forming her lips into a perfect three-finger high "O." "On Christmas Day in the morning," the women finished softly. Harold conducted the last grace note out of the flutes, and the audience applauded again. The guests listened with pleasure as the choir and the symphony performed the rest of the holiday classics. The arrangements were traditional, showcasing the talents of the musicians and enveloping the guests in the warmth of the holiday spirit. After the last notes of *Il est né* sounded with their militaristic beat, the staff members came together in two lines on either side of the Christmas tree with their candles. The timpani sounded a soft but lively rhythm, and the staff walked around the Christmas tree in time. The choir entered softly, the high soprano parts first.

"Deck the halls with boughs of holly, fa la la la la la, la la la la."

The music made a quick crescendo as the men came in.

"Don we now our gay apparel, fa la la, la la la, la la la."

They came together with the brass trumpeting joyful notes over through the air as the staff carefully lit the candles within reach on the tree.

"See the blazing Yule before us, fa la la la la, la la la la."

The room began to light up as the candles burned with a white light on the tree. The red and gold glass ornaments sparkled on the boughs. The guests whispered to each other in excitement as the music built to its full pitch.

"Heedless of the wind and weather, fa la la la la, la la la la."

The timpani drummed the music out as the staff members walked away from the glowing tree.

Before the audience could cheer, Harold conducted the strings immediately into Handel's Hallelujah chorus. Alfred met Georgina's gaze and held it for a second, imparting his confidence. She filled her lungs with air, squared her shoulders, and tensed her abdomen. The strings stepped up three notes to the choir's entrance.

"And he shall reign forever and ever," the basses sang.

Walter had pulled the car into the circle drive in front of the main entrance. The grounds were deserted, with no bellmen in sight. He unloaded the suitcases from the trunk of his father's car and set them on the verandah. He could hear music coming from behind the doors, and resentment welled within him. He had missed dinner, and was now missing the concert. He kicked the front left tire of the car that had a patch on it as he got back into the Cadillac.

"Damn tire,"

He parked the car in the parking lot and hurried through the cold to the entrance of the main building, picking up the suitcases as he went. He pulled the heavy doors open, the warm air and music hitting him at the same time.

The doors closed behind Walter as he stood in front of the Christmas tree, facing

the choir. "Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" Georgina listened for the balance, correcting instantly by decreasing her volume. The strings and the brass swirled with the voices at full volume. As they swelled even higher, the parts separating and combining again and again, one of the staff members flicked a switch and the electric lights on the tree came on. The audience gasped with delight.

Georgina could hardly contain her excitement as the choir decrescendoeed.

"And he shall reign forever and ever."

"The Kingdom of this world, is become..." The music hit a sudden crescendo, and Georgina let her voice ring out at full forte, *"the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ, and of his Christ."*

She paused as the fugue began, and waited for her part.

"And he shall reign forever and ever," the basses sang.

"And he shall reign forever and ever," the tenors and the altos sang.

"And he shall reign forever and ever," Claire and Elsie sang.

Georgina entered. *"And he shall reign forever and ever."*

Stun them with your voice.

"King of Kings ... and Lord of Lords."

You must give it that life.

"King of Kings ... and Lord of Lords."

The prima donna.

"King of Kings ... and Lord of Lords."

The doors closed behind Walter as he stood in front of the Christmas tree, facing the choir. His entrance was synchronous with the Hallelujah chorus, as if the choir was rejoicing at his return. The lights and music swirled around him. He stared, surprised by the transformation that had occurred since he left. The main hall was glowing, and his tired, hungry body soaked it in. His mother waved to him from her seat, frowning at his soiled suit, but he did not see her. He was captivated by the music issuing from the choir and symphony.

"And he shall reign forever and ever."

The girl on the far right was younger than the rest—but she was glowing, the features of her face emphatic with passion. And her voice. He could feel it emanating across the room, setting the notes ever higher. It shook the deepest of his bones to life.

“Forever and ever...Hallelujah! Hallelujah!” Her voice carried over all of the other voices, warming him on the inside as he stood transfixed by its power, drinking it in, letting it fill him, wanting more and more as the crescendo brought the music to a fevered pitch.

“And he shall reign forever and ever, forever and ever, forever and ever, Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!” The music paused, and the choir came together with gravity.

“Hallelujah!” The notes trembled in the air for a moment. Walter wanted to hold on, to make it last as long as possible before the conductor cut it off. It was his lifeline, he needed more, he had not yet been filled. But the conductor snapped off the music with his baton and what seemed an interminable period of empty silence followed. The spell was broken by the emphatic applause of the audience, and Walter exhaled for the first time since he had come in the door.

The applause pounded in Georgina's ears, her heart matching its rhythm. She had done it—she had seen it in his eyes as she sang. Yes, yes that's it, you've got it, he seemed to be saying. He opened his arms wide at the end, beckoning her voice to him and she released fully, her unencumbered voice soaring forth.

Alfred joined hands with Harold to take a bow. As the guests stood, they released the choir for the evening.

“We have rehearsal tomorrow morning at ten. Please be ready to work.” Georgina tried to press her way to Alfred—she wanted to hear his praise, needed to listen to his gestures in words. But the mass of guests, instruments, and musicians carried her far from him. Harold caught her by the elbow and began discussing something with him in low tones. Georgina relented to the flow of the other choir members in the slow procession through the guests to the choir room, glancing over her shoulder trying to catch sight of Alfred as she exited the Main Hall.

“Fine concert,” the guests nodded at the choir members.

Georgina smiled politely. Elsie turned to her as they entered the choir room.

“That was great, Georgie!”

“Thanks...” She was surveying the room with a single mindedness of purpose.

“Hey Ruth!” Elsie grabbed Ruth’s arm as she walked by. “You going to the Pub tonight?”

“Sure, why not?” she shrugged.

“You leavin’ now?”

“Yeah, I could use a drink. You comin’, Georgie?”

Georgina shook her head. “No, I’m...I’m tired. Goin’ to bed early.”

Elsie raised an eyebrow as she gave Georgina a skeptical look, but Georgina gave her a reassuring smile.

“Y’all have fun. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

They left, and Georgina crossed the room to her coat. She sat on one of the chairs and arranged her music as clasps buckled on instrument cases and conversations swirled around her. She moved all of the parts from one side of her folder, then spread them out

on the chairs around her and reshuffled them, putting them back on the other side of the folder. She tried to appear consumed with the task. The flutists giggled, slowly packing their instruments. She stood up, brushing imaginary pieces of lint off her coat. Putting it on, she fiddled with the buttons as the last two musicians ambled out of the room, nodding to her as they went. She breathed a sigh of relief, taking her coat back off and sitting down again. Suddenly, she heard voices coming down the hall.

"I do hope you give it some serious thought," she heard Harold saying. Georgina grabbed her folder and stood up quickly. She started for the folder cabinet as he kept talking. "They have not been able to keep someone since it opened in forty-one."

"What happened to Tolley?" Arthur said. "The last I heard the Arts Council was thrilled to have him."

"Samuel Tolley was *great*. But he knew it, and he gave the Council and the Theater hell."

Alfred chuckled. "Sam. He's been like that since Juilliard."

"I think you could be the man for the job."

There was a deep sigh. "I don't know."

The footsteps stopped outside of the choir room. Harold lowered his voice in confidence. Georgina froze, straining to hear. "It was ten years ago, Alfred. You going to hide out here in the wilderness the rest of your life? Your voice isn't coming back, but you've got an incredible talent as a director. Look what you've done here. That soprano of yours is really quite amazing." There was a pause. Georgina blushed, her heart thumping. "Richmond would be good for you. You've taken this as far as it can go. Control of a company, even a new one like Richmond's, will be a great career stepping

stone. You should bring that soprano with you. She would make a fine Patti." Alfred remained silent on the other side of the door. Was he nodding? Was he frowning? Georgina listened harder. Then suddenly he appeared in the doorway. Her heart froze as he saw her. He cocked his head in surprise, and Harold entered behind him. Georgina turned crimson and lunged toward the folder cabinet.

"I—I was puttin' my music..." She fumbled with her folder, jamming it into one of the slots.

Alfred walked into the room, rubbing his eyes agitatedly. Harold chuckled.

"There she is! Fine performance tonight!"

Georgina looked up, uncertainly. "Thank you," she said, glancing at Alfred, who dropped his hands and nodded slightly to her, giving her an apathetic half smile.

"What is your name, my dear?" Harold said.

Georgina squirmed uncomfortably. "Georgina Fitzgerald."

"Georgina Fitzgerald," he mused. "Well done tonight. Well done indeed." He rubbed his chin for a moment more, then patted Alfred on the back. "I'd best be on my way home. Happy Thanksgiving to you, Alfred. And don't forget, the resume is due next week." He donned his coat and hat, tucking his musical scores under his arm. "I'd be happy to put in a word for you."

Alfred nodded, wearily.

"It was nice to meet you, Georgina."

He left the choir room, and Georgina stood, awkwardly rooted to her spot for a moment, before she turned toward her coat. "I'm sorry, I'll just..." She shoved her arms through the sleeves and hurried toward the door.

"Georgina?" he said, turning back to her. "I'm fine. You were telling your

story— She froze. For me to say "In truth, Walter was not listening to her brother, but was

watching." "Will you please...ah...not tell anyone what you heard?"

She turned around. He was looking directly at her. anshires whenever he could

get a moment of the concert. A persistent emptiness had

filled his mind. He nodded, looking again at the ground. She started to turn again, but he looked up suddenly.

"What do you think of Richmond?"

"For you?" she asked. light of the Christmas tree. He tried to recreate her voice in

his mind. "No...well, yes. But for yourself?"

"For me? I...I don't know, I've never been there. There was a picture of the capitol building in our history books in fifth grade, but..." she trailed off.

He nodded again. She waited for him to say something, but when he remained silent, she turned and left. brother exclaimed, gurgling.

"Are you sure you don't want to come with us to visit with the Myers? Elizabeth

was to Two evenings later, the Thomas family was sitting in the dining room after dinner.

Helen was recounting a conversation she had earlier that day in the spa with Mabel

Myers, when she turned to Walter, who was staring fixedly at the door, which was open to the Main Hall.

"Walter, you've been so quiet this weekend. Are you feeling okay? Perhaps you caught a cold when you were fixing that tire in Covington. There was a chill wind blowing that night, do you need some medicine?" his mother said to him.

not name. He walked around the gardens, keeping the main building in sight. His

“No, ma’am,” he said, turning back to her. “I’m fine. You were telling your story—not much for me to say.” In truth, Walter was not listening to his mother, but was watching the Main Hall for any sight of the choir. Since the Christmas tree lighting concert, he had been silently stalking the grounds of the Hampshires whenever he could get a moment alone, looking for the girl from the concert. A persistent emptiness had filled him since the last note had connected them, filling him with warmth and...something new. He had not been able to name it, as he paced around the spa, golf courses, club houses, and main buildings, but it kept him awake at night as he saw her face glowing in the flickering light of the Christmas tree. He tried to recreate her voice in his mind and felt his heart quicken and stomach soften as the memory worked for a brief moment, then left him colder and emptier than before.

When the family rose from dinner, he excused himself.

“I am going to browse the library,” he muttered lamely.

“The library?” his brother exclaimed, grimacing.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with us to visit with the Myers? Elizabeth was looking quite pretty at dinner tonight,” his mother said.

“Oh, let him go. He wants to get an early start on school, right Walter? I was eager when I was his age, too. He’s got big shoes to fill at the College. Study up, son!” his father said.

Walter smiled weakly. “Yes sir.”

He escaped quickly out a side door onto the grounds. The night mountain air was cold but he did not button his coat, preferring the cold on his skin to that which he could not name. He walked around the gardens, keeping the main building in sight. His

thoughts were reeling at a feverish pitch around in his head, always circling back to her. *Big shoes to fill...* He grimaced. He could see his entire life stretching out before him, a straight path from where he stood. Richmond College, a Phi Gam and a business major; Marriage to a girl as bland as Elizabeth Myers—nothing like *her*; work at the Tobacco Company; weekend escapes to places like this, where men sat around and congratulated each other on their accomplishments; and finally death. He had stopped walking, staring across the gardens into his future. He realized suddenly that his hands were clenched into tight fists. He exhaled slowly and shoved his fists into his coat pockets. *Maybe I should just go inside*, he thought, looking back toward the main building. But he saw her face again, her mouth open in an angelic *O*, singing with the force of an entire host of angels. *What if she walks by?* He began walking again, circling the building a fifth time while watching the main entrance. His pace was hurried to keep up with his thoughts, and he did not see a figure approaching from behind him. The dark figure was walking, head buried in coat and hunched against the wind, toward the main building. Neither figure noticed the other, and they collided with sudden force in front of the white verandah wrapped in evergreen boughs and red ribbons. He replied with automatic politeness.

“Oh! Pardon me. I did not see—” he said as the figure recoiled and surfaced from her coat. “—you. It’s you,” he said, his breath taken away by her sudden appearance.

Georgina looked at him curiously. “Sorry?” she said, not sure if she had heard the guest correctly.

“I’m Georgina Fitzgerald.”

“Walter Thomas.”

"It's..." He realized that in his frenzied thoughts as he paced the grounds looking for her he had never thought about what he might say when he finally found her. He was at a loss for words, and stared at her, his mind suddenly blank.

"Are you lost? Can I point you in the right direction?" she offered helpfully.

He shook his head.

"Are you looking for someone?" she said, noticing his flushed face. His overcoat was open and he was shivering slightly.

He shook his head again, then hesitated. "Well, I was ..." he trailed off again. His voice was warm and silky. It reminded Georgina of the low brass noise, hitting her in the chest with its low vibrations.

"It's an awfully cold night to be walkin' around with your coat open," she said slowly, kindly. His hair was disheveled, as if he had been tearing at it with his hands. "I'm on my way to the choir room in the main building, is that where you're headin'?"

"You're in the choir!" he said triumphantly.

"Yes, I am," she answered proudly, though confused as relief flooded his countenance.

"You were at the concert on Thanksgiving."

"Yes." She nodded.

"You were ..." He paused, searching for the right word. "...good," he exhaled.

She squinted at him skeptically. "Thank you..." she said.

"Sure." He smiled.

"I'm Georgina Fitzgerald." he approached.

"Walter Thomas."

"Walter, what do you ya say we go inside? I'm about to lose my voice out here in this cold," she said.

He nodded and followed as she started toward the door.

"Where are you from, Walter?"

"Richmond."

"Oh?" she said, intrigued.

They entered the shelter of the Main Hall, and Georgina turned to Walter.

"Well, Walter, it was nice meetin' you, but I have to go to the choir room now. We have a concert tomorrow night, and I have to go practice. If you're still here, you should come. We'll be in the Jefferson Hall at seven."

"Yes, of course, I'll be there," he said, his chest pounding.

"Great," she said. "See you then!" She turned and walked down the hall, wondering to herself with a smile who the awkward boy with the disheveled hair and open coat was.

He stood rooted in place until she had turned the corner and disappeared from sight.

Georgina stepped down from the risers after the concert and saw the boy from the night before making his way toward her. In the darkness of the Hampshires gardens, she had taken him to be younger than herself. But as he approached in the light of the concert hall, she noticed his broad shoulders and strong chest. His expression was eager, and she could not help but smile as he approached.

"Hi," he said breathlessly.

“Hello. You made it to the concert. Thanks for—Oh, excuse me for a moment,” she said, reaching out for Alfred who was passing by. “Alfred!” He turned as she caught his arm. They had not talked since the night of the Christmas tree lighting concert. Alfred remained distant in rehearsals, and the other choir members were beginning to talk about it.

Walter “What’s wrong with Alfred?” Elsie had asked Ruth that afternoon. “He’s being very...”

“Cold? He usually tells us how we sound, even if it’s to yell at us because sound awful.”

“Yeah,” Elsie agreed. “No praise, no nothing.”

They shrugged their shoulders and left rehearsal.

“Could I come talk to you before rehearsal tomorrow?” Georgina asked him.

Alfred looked at her blankly. “Ah...Not before rehearsal, but how about after?”

Georgina nodded. “Thanks. I’ll see you then.”

Alfred left, and Walter watched him go, his jaw squared. Georgina turned back to him and his face softened.

“Are you doing anything now?” he asked.

“Talkin’ with you, it seems,” she replied, her eyes dancing.

Walter “What I mean is—Do you want to go for a walk?” he asked.

“Outside?”

“Yes.”

Georgina thought for a moment, then shrugged. “Ok.”

They left the warm noise of the Hampshires for the cold, quiet grounds. Georgina wrapped her cashmere scarf tightly over as much of her mother's coat as she could, trying to hide the tatters in the collar. They walked aimlessly in awkward silence.

"How was your—"

"What did you—" They spoke at the same time, then blushed, embarrassed.

Walter gestured to Georgina. "You first."

"I was just going to ask what you did today."

"Oh. Nothing much, really. Long meals with my parents and their friends, talking about nothing of consequence as if our lives depended on it."

Georgina giggled. "You sound bitter."

"Do I? Well, that's because I am. It's too cold to golf, there's nothing to do here, I don't know why we came."

"There are choir concerts," Georgina offered. The main buildings of the Hampshires were far behind them now, as they neared the edge of the grounds.

Walter blushed. "I didn't mean that your concerts weren't something to do. I enjoy those."

She laughed. "I'm glad. I'll agree with you on one thing, though. It is cold."

She looked back at the warm glow of the Hampshires across the grounds. She shivered. Walter took off his coat, offering it to Georgina. His shirt flapped in the breeze, and he grimaced at the cold. Georgina laughed again.

"Put your coat back on, you'll catch your death of the cold. There's a chapel up ahead. We can step inside to warm up. Come on." They sped up their pace in the direction of the chapel, tucked into the trees at the end of the road.

Georgina pushed open the door to the small chapel and stepped inside. Walter hesitated, but took the door from her in a gentlemanly gesture. They closed the door against the cold wind, and were immediately cloaked in the warm, incense-laden air of the chapel. The wooden floor creaked loudly under their feet, interrupting the serene stillness. Candles flickered at the feet of the statues of saints, casting long shadows across the pews. Georgina walked down the aisle and genuflected instinctively, crossing herself before sliding into a pew. Walter stood awkwardly behind her, watching her with confusion.

“Um, should I...?”

Georgina pointed to the pew in front of her, and Walter sat down uncomfortably.

“Are you not Catholic?”

“No...Presbyterian.”

“Oh,” Georgina replied. “We didn’t have Presbyterians in Covington. Just Catholics and Baptists.” She shrugged.

“You were great tonight,” he said, sitting stiffly in the pew.

“Thanks,” she said reflexively, sliding to the end of the pew so her back was against the wall.

“No, really,” he said, looking earnestly at her. “You were wonderful.”

His steady gaze gave her pause. She cocked her head to the side and smiled.

“Thank you.”

“I was at your Thanksgiving concert.”

“Oh, yes? And did you like it?”

Walter looked up at her and she gave him a reassuring smile, hoping he would go on.

Walter nodded slowly. "Very much so. It made me feel..." he blushed and stopped.

"Yes?"

He gestured with his hands, no words escaping. He sighed. "Well, it's hard for me to say. I've never felt like that before. I've been walking around feeling nothing but...empty for as long as I can remember," the words came out in a rush. "Following my father everywhere he goes. That's what I feel like, as if I have to be empty to make room for him to control me. First he didn't want me to go to the War. He said it was almost over and there was no sense going over and doing clean-up duty. Then he laughed at me when I came home without a single fight. Now it's Richmond College, and he wants me to take over the business. I don't *want* to sell tobacco for the rest of my life. He doesn't understand why I wanted to come here tonight. 'What do you want to listen to music for, son?'" he said, his voice lowering as he imitated his father. "If it's not practical, he won't do it." He looked up at Georgina. "But when I walked into the Main Hall and you were singing... What was the song? The one with all of the Hallelujahs?"

"Handel," Georgina replied encouragingly.

"Yeah, when I walked in and you were singing Handel, it just...it filled me up. With, I don't know, with *life* or *joy*. It was like you were singing directly to me, your voice carrying all the way across the room and filling me up with warmth and happiness and..." He blushed as he heard himself speak, and stopped, looking down at his hands. Georgina had been listening quietly to his confession, but glowed now under his praise. Walter looked up at her and she gave him a reassuring smile, hoping he would go on.

"That's why I came tonight. I had to feel that again," he said. He exhaled quickly, folding his hands together and resting his chin on them. "Why do you sing?"

"Me?" she asked, startled by the question. "I sing because..." She thought for a moment. "I sing for..."

Richard Alfred.

"People."

Walter nodded. They sat silently for several moments, Georgina's words hanging in the air. She wanted to say more, but nothing came to her. Walter was nodding silently to himself, relaxing back into the pew. Finally, he spoke.

"Where are you from, Georgina?"

"Covington." She liked the way he said her name.

He raised his eyebrows. "Your accent sounded like someone from the hills around here."

"You know them?" she asked, surprised.

"I was stuck in Covington the night of the Thanksgiving concert. Flat tire...it's a long story. I made it back just in time for the...Handel."

"Oh, were you driving up from Richmond?"

"No, getting a family friend's bags."

Georgina nodded, excited to be talking about something familiar. "Where did you stop?"

"The post office. It's a very small town. Do you like it there?"

She smiled and shrugged. "It's home. Do you like Richmond?"

He shrugged back. "It's home."

Hampshire “But it’s so *big*, there must be so much going on all the time! What do you do?”

Animated, she leaned forward.

He laughed. “I suppose compared to Covington it’s big. But there are much larger cities. Atlanta, Chicago, New York...they are much more exciting than Richmond.”

Georgina sank back into the armchair. “Well, Richmond is the closest I may ever get to a big city.”

Walter looked at her, puzzled. “Why? They’re not so far away. We go down to Atlanta at least twice a year, and to New York every summer.”

“This is the farthest I’ve ever been from Covington,” Georgina said. Walter gaped at her, shocked. “Unless my voice takes me there, I won’t be going.”

They sat in silence for a moment. The chimes in the clock Main Tower tolled to them from across the grounds. Georgina counted eleven tolls.

“It’s getting late,” Georgina said.

Walter nodded reluctantly.

“I should be getting back to my room.”

“I’ll walk you back.” They rose and he escorted her to staff housing. The glow of the church kept them both warm the entire walk.

Georgina had trouble falling asleep that night, as she lay in bed thinking of Walter—and Richmond.

Georgina awoke easily the next morning hours before rehearsal started. With spirited energy she dressed and bounded out of the staff housing. She gazed around the

Hampshire grounds, looking for something to do, somewhere to go that would match her euphoria with its grandeur. Her eyes followed the base of the mountain tucked nearest the Hampshire ground up to its summit. Her legs compelled her instinctively toward the hiking trail.

It was a bright, fall day and the air was surprisingly warm for late November. She ascended the mountain quickly, her thoughts propelling her. *No, really. You were Wonderful*, he had said. His eyes had penetrated her with their sincerity. She recalled his slumped shoulders as he talked about his father, his hands twisting into white knots with anger and frustration. She wanted to take them in her own, untangle them. *You filled me up*. She smiled to herself. His praise filled her up, made her glow. There had been a connection, she had felt it. She would sing again for him if she saw him today. And she would sing for him tomorrow if she could. And the day after that and the day after that, just to fill him up, just to make him happy...

She had halted on the trail and was standing, looking down on the Hampshires through the leafless trees, her palms pressed together in her ardor, a fine sheen of sweat coating her. Her breath was coming quickly, her pulse beating in her ears. The grounds were just beginning to stir and she gazed intently, hoping to see a tall man with earnest brown eyes pacing the grounds. She squinted through the barren trees and saw several figures hurrying across the lawns, but could not discern from her height if one of them was Walter. Sighing, she shook her head free of her thoughts and continued her ascent.

Richmond. The city continued to appear in her life of late. She imagined the streets lined with tall buildings, taller than any of the mountains that lined Covington's

city limits. There would be people everywhere, bustling to and from their lives, important men in suits, running business and governments. Handsome, tortured young men paced its streets, fighting the destiny their parents laid out for them. Harold had wanted her to go to Richmond. *A fine Patti.* She took the summit with long strides and gazed over the Hampshires. The sun had risen higher, but a chill wind blew at the top, cutting through her thin sweater. Turning her back on the Hampshires, she looked east in the direction of Richmond. Another, higher mountain blocked her sight.

Determinedly, she crossed the spine of the summit to look around the offending mountain. Standing on the farthest edge, the mountain fell away under her and rolled across the valley, stretching out for miles into the sunrise. She shielded the sun from her eyes, straining to see the buildings, the people. She saw a glint of light, a reflection as small as a pinpoint on the horizon and she smiled.

"Richmond." She dropped her hand and nodded. "Richmond," she repeated, feeling the capitol *R* roll across the roof of her mouth. Her previous exertions now left her cold, and she shivered slightly as she began her descent, her thoughts turning to rehearsal.

After rehearsal, Alfred approached Georgina as she was putting on her coat.

"We can meet in my office," he said.

"Your office?" Georgina asked, startled. "Oh. Right," she said, suddenly remembering asking him if they could meet. "Your office. Listen, Alfred, I don't—"

"I'd like to talk," he said, cutting her off. He appeared much more composed than he had the night before, though still reserved. He looked at her beseechingly.

Georgina hesitated, then nodded. She took her coat back off and followed him to his office.

She had never seen his office before. It was a small, solemn room, little bigger than a closet. Alfred sat down behind a small cherry desk that partitioned the room, and pointed Georgina to a chair on the other side. On the wall behind his head was a diploma from Juilliard bearing his name.

Alfred P. Lancaster

Music with an Emphasis in Voice

He looked at her calmly, and she wondered if she should start.

“Alfred, I—”

He held up his hand. “I know you overheard Harold and me discussing the night of the Christmas concert.” Georgina blushed. “And I wanted to explain myself. But first, I’d like to know just how much you heard.”

“Well,” Georgina said, taking a deep breath and speaking slowly, “I heard you talking about Richmond. And Harold mentioned a company? And...” She hesitated. “That your voice...” She trailed off and Alfred nodded calmly.

“That my voice is gone. Yes. It happened a few years after I graduated. I was in the Company at the Met. We were playing Rigoletto, I was the Duke.” Georgina nodded continuously, reluctant to interrupt Alfred’s confession. He met her gaze unblinkingly. “But I wasn’t taking care of my voice. I rarely warmed up, slept little, and socialized a lot. The arias were demanding, and I practiced only during rehearsals. But I had natural talent,” he gestured toward Georgina, his eyes glowing. “Like you. I thought I could do no wrong. When I caught a cold I ignored it, performing night after

night on weakened vocal chords. I didn't rest...I was young and enjoying myself. But the critics noticed and the reviews suffered. Which made the whole company suffer. And then the cold turned into laryngitis. And finally scars on my vocal chords. And the next thing you know," he leaned back in his chair and opened arms wide to the empty space between them. "No voice."

Georgina's hair stood up on the back of her neck as the two words replaced the empty space, echoing in her ears. *No voice*. She shivered. Alfred laughed suddenly.

"Yes. That's how I felt too. I had thrown away the one thing that gave me joy." He sat thoughtfully for a moment staring vacantly into his memory. His words sank into Georgina's skin slowly. *I had thrown away the one thing that gave me—*

"So I moved up here to escape the critics."

"Just the critics?" Georgina asked, wryly. Alfred looked up at her, startled. She surprised herself, speaking before she thought. He furrowed his brow, but after a moment gave her a sly smile.

"No, I suppose not." He shook his head. "It's not easy to escape yourself. But I tried. The Hampshires was more than happy to have me as their director, and for a while I appreciated the anonymity. The work became monotonous, but I preferred it to facing my..." he sighed. "...demons," he muttered, mostly to himself. "It wasn't until you came," he looked back up at Georgina, "that I realized what I had been missing. Really. Missing. I hadn't known it, but the whole time, I had been missing the *joy* of singing. But you, I watched you sing during the Christmas concert..."

Georgina sat up, alert. He *had* noticed.

"Yes. You sang the best you ever have."

She nodded slowly, mulling this over. "You overheard Harold giving me an offer to take control of the Richmond Opera Company. He took me by surprise. I was still exhilarated by your performance, thinking about solos I could give you for the next concert. Handel has never sounded finer. It was...well, wonderful."

Wonderful, Georgina thought. *Walter*. Her heart leapt at the thought of his name and she blushed.

"No, you were," Alfred said, mistaking her blush for embarrassment. "I was still so excited from remembering what it was like to sing as you did that I was unprepared for Harold to suggest I leave. It upset me, as you saw."

Georgina nodded, trying to focus again on what Alfred was saying, but she kept thinking of Walter's dark brown eyes, his deep voice telling her she was *wonderful*.

"But I have had several days to think it over now, and I have decided to apply for the...ah...job. Harold was right—I can't stay here forever. I did not come here to heal. I came to escape and forget. But I miss the joy too much to keep doing that. So," he looked intently at her, "I will apply, and if they decide to give me the job, I will move to Richmond." Georgina nodded absently. Alfred leaned forward. "Harold was right about something else. You should come to Richmond, too," he said. Georgina's eyes snapped to Alfred's face. She had heard wrong, surely.

"What?"

"You cannot hide in these mountains, either. It's time for you to leave. You have learned a lot in your year here. But you are not quite ready for a big venue.

Richmond would be good for you. It would give you a place to perform for larger audiences, amongst better talent. It would challenge you.”

“An opera company? In Richmond?”

“You wouldn’t start as the prima donna there, you would have to work your way up. You have much to learn.”

Georgina continued to stare dumbfounded at Alfred. He squirmed uncomfortably in his chair across the desk from Georgina.

“I would...like your blessing on this, Georgina,” he said. “And, you of course have mine should you decide to come.”

In a flash, Georgina leapt across the desk and wrapped Alfred in a hug. Surprised, he attempted to stand, but her hold was too tight in her excitement.

“Well, I...ah...suppose that works,” he laughed nervously. He patted her on the back until she finally released and stepped back, her face flushed.

“Oh, Alfred, I don’t know what to do first! I’m so het up! I always hoped the chance would come to go to a big city, but I never thought it’d come so soon. Oh!” She clapped her hands together. “I gotta run and tell somebody!” She turned to leave, but turned back to give Alfred one last hug. He held out a hand to stop her and stood up from his chair. She shook his hand and burst out of the office before he could say anything. He stood, looking at the door and smiling to himself after she left.

Chapter 5

Georgina left the dressing room after rehearsal and followed Paul and Edward up the stairs to the main stage of the Landmark Theater. Edward was grunting as he hauled his considerable mass up the stairs.

“This *opera buffa* is beginning to wear on me,” he huffed.

“I think it’s the stairs that are wearing on you, old fellow,” replied Paul.

“Humph,” Edward grunted as they reached the top. “It’s the masses. They can’t appreciate a fine work of art when they hear it. It has to be *funny*. Why can’t we for once stage *Il ritorno d’Ulisse in patria*? I will play Giove, you can play one of the mortals, perhaps Telimaco...” He gestured patronizingly to Paul.

“Don Octavio isn’t enough for you?” Paul said, his eyes flashing as they retrieved their light spring jackets from backstage.

“Don Octavio,” Edward grimaced. “Octavio is a chump. I want to be a god. Give me the Baroques, give me Monteverdi, give me Cavalli—”

“Oh give me tedium,” Paul said, rolling his eyes. “There’s a *reason* no one produces the Baroques anymore.”

“Because we have too many castrati like you who can’t perform the arias,” Edward said slyly as he struggled to get his arms into his jacket. Georgina laughed as Paul narrowed his eyes. She put on her new sage jacket Walter had given her two weeks before.

“*Because* the Baroques were so busy comparing their patrons to gods and goddesses they could not focus on the music. *Wagner* was a true genius. If we could get a real tenor in here, maybe we could perform Siegfried—”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Edward scoffed. “We haven’t got the resources in Richmond to produce—”

“—or Beethoven even. I would make a fine Fernando or Pizarro,” he continued, ignoring Edward.

“Beethoven was a betrayer of his own art!”

“An *innovator*,” Paul said, holding up an instructive finger. They crossed the stage to the stairs, where other members of the company were talking. “He began an entire *movement*.”

“The Romantics were hardly a movement. They were the precursor to modernity, the bane of my existence,” Edward said, clutching his chest dramatically.

“Are they at it again?” Florence asked from the seats, rolling her eyes. Georgina nodded, amused.

“And you can hardly call Beethoven an opera composer. He wrote *one* opera,” Edward continued, following Paul down the stage stairs.

Paul stopped short, turning suddenly on Edward, who almost ran into him. “Don’t insult Beethoven.”

Edward regained his balance and held up his hands defensively. “If it weren’t for the Baroques, we wouldn’t have a job,” he offered. “They invented opera.”

Paul turned and continued down the stairs. “The Greeks invented opera,” he said over his shoulder.

“And the Baroques improved on it.”

“And the Romantics improved on the Baroques.”

"You're forgetting the Classicists," Edward persisted. "If you want a Romantic so bad, why not choose Verdi?"

Florence shook her head. "They enjoy this," she said to Georgina.

"I would have thought you'd pick him long ago. I'll give you Verdi. He was at least *prolific*."

"Did you hear that, Alfred?" Paul said, turning to the conductor. "Edward wants to put on a Verdi opera. What do you say, we can do Rigoletto and Edward Pearson here can be the Duke. I wouldn't mind being Rigoletto, hunchback and all." He opened his arms wide, hunched over halfway and grimaced, singing "*Ah, la maledizione!*"

"Now hold on, I didn't say that I wanted to *perform* Verdi," Edward said, his face reddening. "I said he was *prolific*."

"No, you said 'I *give* you Verdi.' Now I'm *giving* him to Alfred," Paul retorted triumphantly. "How about it, Alfred? Who will be your Gilda?"

Alfred was standing in the orchestra pit, making notations on the score. His pencil halted, and he stood with his head bent for a moment.

"You're going to need a *lovely* leading lady to suit this handsome beast of a Duke here," Paul said, gesturing to Edward, who was sputtering trying to think of a response.

"I can't believe you two have already moved on to the next performance when Giovanni hasn't even opened yet," Helen interjected from her seat next to Florence.

"No kidding," Florence said. "We open next week and you guys are already skipping ahead to the next production. How about a little focus?"

Georgina shrugged, unsure. "I think so. He's said his dad works in a tobacco company. I don't ask him much about it. Why?"

"I agree," Edward said, grasping onto the excuse. "We should not be thinking ahead when we have so much to work on still. Like your aria," Edward said pointedly to Paul.

"I was just giving Alfred a suggestion," Paul shrugged with a grin. Alfred had silently resumed notating his score with a furrowed brow.

Georgina had donned her jacket and shook her head with a chuckle. Florence turned to her.

"You got any big plans for the afternoon? Helen and I were going to go up to Carytown and see Dillinger at the Byrd Theater if you want to come."

"Dillinger?" Edward exclaimed. "You see this cheap entertainment? It's what ruins me!" He tore at his hair in mock anguish.

Helen shrugged. "'His story is written in bullets, blood, and blondes.' You got anything better than that, Edward?"

Georgina laughed. "Thanks, but I'm supposed to meet...someone for lunch."

"Oh, the boyfriend!" Florence said. "I've seen you two around together, he's quite handsome!" She stood, and the singers made their way to the back of the theater.

"What's his name?"

Georgina blushed. "Walter Thomas."

Paul stopped midway up the aisle. "Thomas? Not as in the Richmond Thomases? As in Thomas Tobbacco?"

"No!" Helen exclaimed incredulously.

Georgina shrugged, unsure. "I think so. He's said his dad works in a tobacco company. I don't ask him much about it. Why?"

“You’ve never heard of Thomas Tobacco?” Paul asked. Georgina shook her head. “The Thomases are one of the oldest families in Richmond. They practically own the town. You’re really dating him?” He looked at Georgina incredulously. Her color deepened and she nodded, embarrassed. “Hold on to that one,” Helen said as she continued walking to the door. As they left the theater, Florence called back, “See you tonight, Alfred.” Alfred had stopped writing again and was seated, his hands stroking his forehead in thought. He put up a hand to wave to them without shifting his gaze. The singers stepped out into the bright March sunlight, Paul still muttering to himself in astonishment.

“It’s really warmed nicely, hasn’t it?” Florence said, tactfully ignoring him. “It was so cold when we came in this morning.” “That’s what you get opening week. Late nights, early mornings, and a break in the middle so the stage crew can finish the set,” Paul said, squinting into the sunlight. “I’m parked a block over on Cherry. See you this evening.” He waved as he crossed the street.

“You want to catch a streetcar up to Carytown?” Helen asked Florence.

“Yeah. Georgina, you need a ride anywhere?”

“No thanks, I’m supposed to meet Walter in Monroe Park. I’m just going to head across the street.”

“Ok.” Florence and Helen turned in the direction of Cary Street. Georgina turned to Edward. “You okay Edward?” He was staring vacantly into the sky.

“Hmm? Oh, just thinking about where to eat lunch. I think I will set off for Shockoe Slip.” He turned to go, and Georgina laughed to herself as she casually walked across the street in a gap between the cars. She was getting her bearings in Richmond, slowly cataloguing all of the places the other members of the Richmond Opera company mentioned in passing. She enjoyed walking about the city with a distracted air and her brow furrowed, as if her feet were guiding her of their own accord. She practiced walking with quick competence as she came to the corner of Laurel and Cathedral and entered the gates of the park. She glanced around the small park, but did not see Walter. She sat on a bench to wait.

Practically owns the town.

All of the guests at the Hampshires had been well-off, she knew. But to practically own Richmond? She gazed around at the impressive architecture that surrounded her. The red bricks of the Landmark Theater and the copper domes that had turned green since the shriners first placed them on top of their temple; the red brick apartment buildings and town homes that lined the streets; the austere columns of the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart and the large dome: which ones did the Thomases own? Her eyes followed the towers on either side of the Cathedral entrance, the graceful arches over the doorway. The white limestone and granite was a peaceful complement to the green copper domes. She had never been near such a large church. She wondered what it looked like inside. She rose to her feet and took a step toward the Cathedral.

“Georgina!” She spun around, startled. Walter was jogging toward her out of breath, beaming. “I’m sorry I’m late. Class got out late, and then I got caught in

traffic...Are you ok?" She had taken a step back, an intimidated expression on her face. But she smiled and it quickly disappeared.

"Yes, you just startled me."

"Oh, sorry." He took a step toward her, placing his hands on her waist. Her stomach leapt as her gaze focused on his strong jaw and pink lips. "How does the Jefferson sound to you?" he asked.

"What's the Jefferson?"

"It's a hotel. They have pretty good food."

Georgina nodded.

"My car is this way, then," he said, pointing to Franklin Street. "The Jefferson is only a few blocks from here."

They drove the few blocks to the Jefferson Hotel in his black Cadillac. The grand white marble and limestone building shone brightly in the noonday sun. Walter pulled under the covered drive and parked. He jogged around the Cadillac to open the door for Georgina as a man in a tailed tuxedo came towards them.

"Mr. Thomas," he nodded to Walter, holding out a gloved hand. Georgina glanced curiously up at him as she stepped out of the car. Walter handed him the keys and escorted Georgina through the heavy front doors. The doorman tipped his hat to them.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Thomas, Ma'am." Georgina blushed and bowed her eyes, but as they entered the foyer her gaze was drawn upward again by the dome ceiling. The large marble columns that stretched the full two stories brought her gaze down from the dome to the grand staircase which was poised staunchly at the end of the lobby. Between

the columns, the walls were a rich red and mahogany, with wall sconces lighting the corners. Mahogany furniture was carefully placed across the floor, upholstered in red, gold, and blue. Piano music drifted through the air, which had a strangely muted quality.

“The...Heroic Polonaise,” Georgina murmured to herself. “Chopin.”

“Ah, Mr. Thomas. Will it be Lemaire’s today?” Walter had continued walking to the concierge after Georgina was stopped in her tracks by the magnificent hotel.

“Yes, sir. Two of us.” He gestured to his side, then looked around quizzically for Georgina.

“Georgina,” he called, breaking her solitary gaping. She came to his side.

“Walter, this is place is...” She caught the concierge looking at her with narrowed eyes, and smoothed her high country accent. “...*tremendous*.”

He glanced around, surprised. “Yes, I suppose it is. It was better before they took the stained glass domes out and let the recruits stay here.” The concierge gestured for them to follow, and they crossed the lobby to a brightly lit dining room.

“By the window sir?” the *maitre d’* asked.

“That will be fine,” Walter said. The *maitre d’* led them to a table for two covered in a starched white tablecloth. He pulled a heavy armchair away from the table and gestured for Georgina to sit. She sat quickly, and the *maitre d’* grunted as he tried to push the chair into the table. He cleared his throat.

“Oh, sorry,” Georgina said, flustered. She stood again as the *maitre d’*, with a pained expression pushed the chair into the table. With an air of efficiency, he took the napkin off of the table in front of Georgina, and with a flick of his wrist snapped it open. He laid it across Georgina’s lap in a quick movement. He took a small menu from under

his arm and held it open in front of Georgina. She was stunned for a moment, before realizing she was supposed to take it from him. Walter had slipped easily into his chair and was graciously looking away. The *maitre d'* repeated the napkin and menu ritual with him, and Walter took both gracefully.

“Shall I tell you about our specials today?”

“Please,” Walter said.

“Our appetizers are canapés with your choice of foie gras or sherry cheese. Our soup today is a Consommé Bellevue. The salad is a grapefruit and endive salad, it’s very light and fresh. And finally our entrée is a filet mignon served with a bordelaise sauce, chestnut puree, and fresh string beans with celery. What can I get you to drink?” he looked at Georgina.

“I...uh...” she looked helplessly at Walter.

“We’ll have water for now,” he said.

“Very well, Mr. Thomas. I’ll be back in a few moments to get your order.” The *maitre d'* glanced skeptically at Georgina before turning on his heel. After he left, Georgina leaned over the table and whispered to Walter.

“Walter, I’ve never been in a place like this. I don’t know what any of those things mean!” she intimated. Her eyes were wide with bewilderment.

Walter chuckled, his eyes dancing. “You can understand an entire opera but you can’t figure out the menu?”

Georgina laughed. “We don’t sing about food.”

“Would you like me to order for you?”

She relaxed back into her chair. “Please.”

"You won't be disappointed," he said, raising an eyebrow and smiling.

When the *maitre d'* returned, Walter ordered and they relinquished their menus. She sat back and sighed, pleased to have the ordering ordeal finished. Walter tilted his head to the side and focused his brown eyes intently on her.

"How was rehearsal?"

"Oh it was great!" she exclaimed. "But we have so much work to do before Friday. I'm worried that we won't pull it off, but Florence says this is how it always goes. Last season they did *Die Zauberflöte* and she said they did the blocking for the last two scenes opening week! We had our blocking done several weeks ago, we're just working on the scenes with the chorus now. Florence said Alfred's kept us on schedule better than the last conductor. I would have hated to work under him!"

"And how are your arias?"

"We didn't work on them this morning, but Alfred seemed pleased last night when we did Act One. I still can't get over how many times I repeat the same line in the aria. I mean, I read the libretto and it says all of the lines right there, but in the score I have to sing them five times." Georgina was animated now, leaning forward on the table. She was careful to soften her accent, despite her excitement.

"What are they about?" Walter was catching her excitement, his eyes glowing.

"Oh, there are so many! When Alfred said I would start with a chorus part, I didn't expect to get a part with any arias, but he put cast me right away as Elvira! I play the tragically abandoned lover of Don Giovanni, and I get to help him in his downfall at the end of the opera. Oh no!" she covered her mouth quickly. "I told you the ending!"

Walter laughed. "I don't speak Italian, if you don't tell me exactly what happens, I won't understand at all Friday night."

Georgina grinned. "I think you would figure out the ending on your own. Don Giovanni gets dragged into the fires of hell by a statue of the Commendatore. It's a spectacular scene."

"Are you in it?"

"No, I come in afterwards. And then I am so disturbed that I spend the rest of my life in a convent."

Walter raised his eyebrows. "I hope you don't get any ideas."

At that moment the *maitre d'* came with their food. He set it in front of them with a flourish. The food was beautifully presented on the plate, and Georgina, warmed up to the atmosphere of the Jefferson by the conversation, promptly picked up a fork and began eating.

"How was your class?" she asked, realizing she had been talking for a long time.

Walter sighed, vexed. "Dull."

"Which class was it?"

"Principles of Microeconomics. It's simple stuff, really. Supply and demand, the invisible hand, Adam Smith...But it's so...well there are no statues being consumed by the fires of hell." He was lost in thought for a moment, then shook himself free and looked again at Georgina. "So where exactly should I meet you on Friday after the performance?"

"Are your parents coming?" she asked with an eager expression.

"I have your address," she said.

Walter looked away. "No. They ah...they had another event to attend." He colored, pushing his food around his plate with his fork. "But they said they wished they could come."

Georgina nodded, unconvinced. She had only met his parents once, just before he left the Hampshires for Richmond. She had come flying out of Alfred's office the day he told her she should go to Richmond. She checked herself at the Main Hall, slowing down to a brisk walk through the hall crowded with guests. She spotted Walter at the front desk and skidded up to him, out of breath.

"Walter!" she exclaimed, panting. "Alfred wants me to come to Richmond!"

He looked at her, baffled. "Sorry?"

"He says I should audition for the Richmond Opera company!" She suddenly noticed his parents, who were looking at her in bewilderment, their suitcases and coats weighing them down. She turned back to Walter, who picked up the cue.

"Sorry. Georgina these are my parents. Mom, Dad, this is Georgina. And that's my brother Donald." He colored slightly.

"Oh! Well it's so nice to meet y'all," Georgina said.

"Georgina's in the choir here at the Hampshires," Walter said. His father nodded comprehendingly. His mother smiled charmingly.

"The concert y'all put on the other night was just delightful!" she said. Georgina noticed the difference in his mother's "y'all" and her own "y'all."

Georgina nodded. She turned to Walter. "So you're leaving?"

"Yes..."

"I have your address," she said.

Walter blushed under the careful eye of his parents, but looked straight into her eyes. "I have yours."

"It should only be a few months more until I come to Richmond. I can call you when I arrive?"

Walter nodded, but Georgina had not missed his father's quizzical brow and his mother's discerning looks. As she considered the entrée before her, she hesitated for a moment. She chose to ignore his parents' absence at the opera and looked again at Walter.

"Well you can meet me by the stage. Just stay in your seat for a few minutes after it's over and I'll come out." She took another bite of her food, her expressions suddenly perplexed. "What exactly *is* this I'm eating?"

Walter peered at her plate. "Calamari."

"What's cala-mary?"

He grinned slyly. "Squid."

She grimaced, but her expression slowly cleared as she kept chewing.

"It's...good." She laughed.

After lunch, Walter took her past the marble statue of Thomas Jefferson to the Palms Court to see the alligator.

"That's Old Pompey," he said, pointing to the scaly creature loafing in the pool. "When I was little, they used to have three or four swimming in the marble pools here."

The alligator moved his eyes and Georgina jumped, grabbing onto Walter. He laughed.

"Do they ever...leave the pools?" she asked.

"I've never seen it, but I've heard stories. One time, one escaped to the library, and an old woman used him as a footstool. When he started to walk away, she screamed and ran for her friends."

Georgina shivered and pulled closer to him. "Is that true?"

"No one knows. They say she liked her sherry, and by the time the others arrived, the alligator was gone."

Georgina stared at Old Pompey, feeling Walter's breath on her neck and shoulder. The alligator's yellow eye focused steadily on her, and she returned its gaze unwaveringly. The three of them stood, locked in stillness, for a long time. Finally, Georgina blinked, and shook herself free of the alligator's stare. She turned to face Walter.

"I should probably head back to the theater. We've got rehearsal again at two."

He nodded, his brown eyes softer than Old Pompey's in the way they took her in. Her pulse quickened, and she smiled, hooking her arm through his. They left the alligator behind them, still staring steadfastly in their direction. They walked past the concierge and doorman.

"Good day, Mr. Thomas. Ma'am." Georgina returned their nods, as Walter helped her into the car and drove her back to the theater.

On Friday evening, Georgina walked from her small apartment on Leigh Street and 28th to Broad Street to catch the streetcar up to Chamberlayne Avenue. She wore a silk headscarf that Walter had given her over her pin curls and carried the makeup Claire had left behind in a small bag tucked under her arm. She sat with calculated

thoughtlessness on a bench in the streetcar as it climbed the hill past downtown. On the side of the streetcar, Georgina spotted a flier.

Don Giovanni

presented by

The Richmond Opera Company

under the direction of

Alfred P. Lancaster

starring

Maria Wieczorek as Donna Anna

and

Edward Pearson as Don Giovanni

Georgina glanced at the woman sitting next to her, wondering if the woman suspected that she was in the company of an opera singer. Georgina wished she had a libretto or a playbill bearing her name to surreptitiously place on her lap.

Georgina Fitzgerald as Donna Elvira

Unfortunately, the flier had stopped after Don Giovanni. The woman next to her sniffed loudly as they bumped past the capitol.

The streetcar stopped at Chamberlayne Avenue, and Georgina walked the two blocks to Franklin Street. As she cut through Monroe Park, she noticed a black limousine parked on the curb in front of the theater. Two silver-haired men in tuxedos and a golden-haired woman in a fur coat and evening gown were emerging from the car. Three other men and two women in shabbier work clothes were standing attentively nearby, as

a man with a camera attempted to take a photograph inside the limousine. Georgina peered curiously at the fuss as she crossed the park.

"What a quaint little city!" the woman was remarking.

"Indeed, much less crowded than the City," the taller man in a tuxedo agreed.

One of the men in work clothes stepped forward to the limousine to push the photographer aside. He reached into the depths of the car and passed one valise after another to his assistant.

"That's the last one," he said passing a wire birdcage behind him. He retracted himself from the car and stood, his hand held out palm up. The heeled foot of a woman emerged from the limousine, followed by a hand that rested on his outstretched palm.

"Maria!" the photographer called, the bulb flashing. Georgina watched with reverence as the full figure of Maria Wieczorek surfaced from the limousine onto the curb, smiling for the camera before turning to her entourage.

"Barry, take the bags to my dressing room," she instructed the man with the valises. The man nodded and turned toward his assistants, gesturing to the theater. Maria shook her head, vexed.

"It is such an imposition, all this moving about," she said.

Her companions nodded sympathetically.

"You are a true friend to Alfred," the woman said.

"I must get inside. God knows how long it will take me to sort out my costume."

"Break a leg, dear!" the woman said, kissing Maria on both cheeks.

"We'll take the limousine downtown for a few drinks and be back in time for the show," her friends said, taking turns embracing Maria.

Georgina clutched her small bag of makeup to her chest as the woman and two men climbed back into the limousine, waving goodbye. Georgina swung open the heavy front doors of the theater, entering the dim lobby. Inside, the theater was aflutter with last minute preparations. A stage hand stood on top of a ladder, painting the backdrop, while another hung a window on Don Giovanni's chambers. Edward was chasing the costume director with his jacket.

"I cannot *fit* in this jacket! The buttons keep falling off! What kind of Don Giovanni goes jacketless?" he was shouting.

Paul called across the stage to him, "Perhaps if you hadn't eaten two dinners before putting it on..."

Edward spun around, his face turning crimson with anger. He sputtered, but could not conjure a retort. He turned back to follow the costume director, who had disappeared off stage.

Georgina took in the excited chaos with a deep breath.

"Opening night. You ready?" Florence appeared at her side. Before Georgina could answer, Maria marched in, issuing commands.

"I will be in my dressing room, but I need Mildred to steam my costume, Dorothy to warm my tea, Louise to do my makeup, and—Persephone! Where's my Persephone?"

A man appeared, offering her the birdcage. She pressed her lips to the bars.

"There you are, my sweet friend of the sirens. I need *you* to sing to me! Alfred!" she exclaimed, releasing the birdcage. "Where's Alfred? I want to discuss my aria in scene sixteen with him. He has been conducting it entirely too fast. I *must* have time for my cadenza. Bring me a program, I want to be sure my biography is correct." She

proceeded down the aisle, her assistants trailing her. Georgina backed timidly into the seats to allow Maria to pass, but Florence rolled her eyes and proceeded to march down the aisle in front of Maria.

Once in the dressing rooms together, Florence glanced irritably over her shoulder at Maria's dressing room door, which stood partially ajar. Costume, makeup, and bird calls flew within.

"What a pain in the ass," she confided in Helen and Georgina.

"All those New York Met divas are like that," Helen said through the bobby pins in her mouth. "Prima donnas one—" she stuck a pin into her hair, "—and all."

"Where's my Persephone?" Florence mimicked in a high pitched voice.

"Barr-y!" Helen shrieked, dissolving in laughter.

"She's hardly the star. We all have a lot of arias. That's the beauty of Giovanni."

"Well she brings some credibility to our playbill—sure, she's from the *Met*—"

Florence rolled her eyes, "but the people of Richmond are perfectly willing to listen to one of us sing Donna Anna," Helen said, gesturing to the three women.

"I wouldn't mind singing it myself," Florence agreed. "Will someone lace me up?" she asked, holding out the strings of her corset. "Not too tight. I have to breathe for my high E."

Georgina took the strings. "I don't know. Inhale," she commanded. Florence took a deep breath, expanding her ribs to their full capacity. "I have never heard anyone sing as well as she does. Did you hear her cabaletta in Act Two? She is so *agile*."

Florence turned, the corset strings pulling out of Georgina's hands, and narrowed her eyes. Helen hesitated with the pins, looking skeptically at Georgina in the mirror.

Georgina blushed, but squared her jaw unapologetically. A piercing scale issued from Maria's dressing room and the women winced.

"She has great breath control," Georgina offered. Florence and Helen collapsed in laughter. Georgina finished lacing Florence's costume and put the finishing touches on her own.

"*Che per mio scorno amai*," she sang to herself, adding to the chorus of other warm-ups proceeding around the backstage.

"Alfred wants everyone on stage for warm up," a stage hand called into the dressing room. Georgina's stomach lurched, and she grabbed the dressing table for support. Florence put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"You'll be fine. Just don't look at the audience."

Alfred ran the singers through their warm ups, rehearsed several sections of arias, and addressed the company.

"The doors will open in just a few minutes to let the audience in. But before they do, I want to say a few words." He spoke calmly, but Georgina noticed his white knuckles grasping the conductor's stand in front of him. The singers stood in line on stage, as Alfred addressed them from the orchestra pit. "First, a huge thank you to Maria Wieczorek for coming down from the New York Met to help our company with Don Giovanni. I think we can all ah...learn something from her greatness." The company applauded, and Maria blew kisses to Alfred, feigning a modest embarrassment. Alfred nodded, a lop-sided smile on his face. "Yes. Thank you, Maria. And to the rest of you, I... ah ... well I want to thank you for your hard work and ..." he released the conductor's stand, gesturing vaguely into the air. "Break a leg."

The company clapped again and returned backstage, breaking into scales and conversations again. Shortly, the stage hands circulated whispers of "*Quiet!*" backstage. Excitement tensed Georgina's muscles and straightened her spine with urgency. She heard the first sounds of the audience trickling into their seats on the other side of the curtain. She glanced around the backstage area, hoping her nerves did not betray her novitiate. Edward had finally stuffed himself into his jacket and was pacing between Paul and the stage hands with his chest high in the air, humming under his breath. Maria cooed quietly to Persephone, who was perched on her finger, bowing her colorful head in a gesture of praise.

Georgina watched quietly as she fingered the ribbons on her lavish costume. It was the nicest dress she had ever worn. If she was allowed to keep it after the performance, she could display a collection of them around her small apartment; silk gowns in the living room, linens from the more modern shows she would do in the kitchen, rich brocades in the sitting room... She did not yet have a sitting room, but she could move to New York and buy an apartment that had one. Next to the rich brocades, she would display her pet of exotic origin, with her artifacts from her European travels inconspicuously occupying the mantles and corner tables. She could invite Walter over to her sitting room to...sit, she guessed. Walter—was he already seated in the theater? She had little time to think on it before she was distracted by Maria. Persephone had left a spot of green excrement on her costume, and Maria was simultaneously admonishing the doting cockatoo and the assistant who was trying to wipe it off. Georgina grimaced, deciding to purchase an exotic pet that could be house-trained for her New York apartment. Walter had promised to take her to New York soon; she wondered if they

could see a performance at the Met. Perhaps Maria knew what was playing. She rose to her feet and took a step toward Maria.

“Five minutes!” a stage hand called from the wings.

A ripple of excitement passed through the company. Georgina halted in her path and turned back to her chair, focusing on her first aria. She mouthed the song silently, rehearsing the breathing and pronunciations of the Italian words. Edward and Paul scuttled to their positions in the wings. Maria finally relinquished Persephone and joined them. The murmur of the audience had grown steadily and drifted under the curtain to their ears. The orchestra began to tune, and the audience grew quiet. Georgina heard from backstage the first trembling note of the Overture, and Paul took his position on stage. She watched from a chair in the wing as the orchestra sounded its last soft notes and the curtain rose.

“*Notte e giorno faticar, Per chi nulla sa gradir,*” Paul sang jauntily. The faces of the audience were dark as Paul paced the stage. Georgina had reserved Walter’s ticket, and located his seat ahead of time. She looked past Paul and found Walter gazing with rapt attention at the performers on stage. The lights reflected in his eyes, and he looked flushed. Georgina smiled to herself as Maria, Edward, and Paul worked their way through the recitative. The audience applauded heartily at Paul’s antics and Maria soared into her disapproval of Edward.

“*Mio caro padre! Ah, l’assassino mel trucidò,*” she sang, passionately mourning the death of Donna Anna’s father. Walter’s eyebrows rose in amazement as she let the high note resonate. Georgina’s smile waned. The note interminably in the air, delaying

Georgina's arrival to the spotlight. With a prolonged trill, Maria finally resolved the aria. The audience applauded wildly, but Georgina watched with envy. She clenched her hands as scene five approached. Finally Edward and Paul crouched in a corner of the stage, hiding from the scent of an approaching woman. The introduction of her aria sprang forth from the violins. She was propelled into the spotlight instinctively, walking the blocking by habit. The orchestra swelled as she inhaled deeply within the liberally tied corset. Before she could contemplate her actions, she tightened her stomach and let the aria issue forth.

"Ah chi mi dice mai, Quel barbaro dov'è."

She grasped her chest despairingly, her expression that of a brokenhearted woman. Donna Elvira had been left by Don Giovanni, her heart used for his lecherous games. Georgina's heart was racing, and she suddenly became aware of the audience's presence without looking directly into it. She listened to her voice, hearing it as if she were in the crowd, with no control over it as it issued from the depths of her gut. She wanted desperately to glance at Walter—to see the approval in his eyes—but she knew Alfred would notice.

"Ah si retrovo l'empio." She began to warm in the spotlight, her heart slowing as she took control of her voice. She poured her nervous energy into her aria, letting the warm light transform it into passion. She cast her voice into the crowd, hoping to reach Walter over the orchestra.

"Poverina, Poverina," Edward sang softly to Paul from their position in the corner. She circled the backstage. But it was crowded with stage hands and choristers. She returned to the stage. She reveled in

Her nerves calmed. The words, the notes, the blocking—these she knew from the hours of rehearsal like she knew the reliability of her own breath. But the lights, the stage, the costumes—the newness of these filled her with a passionate kind of energy much like the new softness of Walter's eyes filled her with satisfaction.

"*Che per mio scorno amai, Che mi mancò di fe?*" She continued, matching Maria for energy. She paced the floor backstage to keep the heat of her passion. Act One ended with a flourish and the singers gathered backstage, talking amongst themselves.

"Great crowd tonight," Edward said glowing with exuberance.

"Yes indeed. They laughed at all of my lines," Paul agreed, wiping the sweat off of his face with a handkerchief.

"Bring me Persephone!" Maria called, lifting her voice to the rafters. "And a cool cloth. Someone help me undo my costume. It is *stifling* in this theater." She marched to the backstage door in search of cooler air, pulling at the sleeves of her gown.

Georgina emerged from the wings, the lights of the stage still compelling her legs toward the group of performers. "I'd say it's going well," Florence said. "Georgina! You are quite the performer!" she said as Georgina approached.

"Indeed, well done. I don't believe I've ever heard Donna Elvira played so well," Edward said impressed.

Georgina nodded her thanks, but continued past the performers in search of an empty corner where she could maintain her character. She circled the backstage. But it was crowded with stage hands and choristers. She returned to the stage. She reveled in

the space between the curtain and the set. She could hear the muffled noise of the audience on one side, and the cast on the other; it served to further isolate her in the softly lit expanse of stage. The set had already been changed to the outside of Donna Elvira's house for the beginning of Act Two. She practiced her blocking, moving silently over the stage, the orchestra playing in her head. She did not stop at her own part, but continued, noiselessly mouthing the words to Donna Anna, Leporello, and Don Giovanni's parts as well. She threw herself expressively into the lead roles.

"Lascia almen alla mia pena, Questo piccolo ristoro."

She was halted by a noise from backstage.

"Where is Georgina?" Alfred was calling.

She scurried off stage into the wings, eager for Alfred's comments.

"Yes?" she asked, emerging from the wings.

Alfred turned to her, his features animated. As he opened his mouth to speak, Maria reentered the stage.

"Alfred, dear, how *great* am I?"

He turned and looked at her, his eyes dimming. He nodded. "Wonderful, Maria," he said somewhat dispassionately. He turned back to Georgina and opened his mouth again to speak, but Maria continued.

"You simply *must* talk to the director from the Met. This theater is *roasting*. I don't know what they do, but you must figure something out. It is *unbearable*. And the acoustics. I find that it is harder to project my high G into the balcony once it is full of people. Of course, at the Met I have never had such a problem. Is it true this building was built for *shriners*? Good heavens," she cackled. "What an unusual building for a

theater.” Alfred nodded, waiting for her to continue. But she stood with her eyes closed in a pained expression while she fanned herself with an elaborate wooden fan painted with cherry blossom and a cockatoo on the face. He turned back to Georgina.

“Georgina—”

“I shouldn’t be surprised if I fainted in the second act,” she interrupted. “I daresay the performance is going well despite my discomfort, however.” Alfred exhaled, exasperated. “It is lucky I am so willing to sacrifice my own well-being for the art, or I do believe we would be booed off stage.” She opened her eyes. “Which is not to say that your conducting is not superb, of course, Alfred. I do believe you have really made something of yourself, despite your misfortune. Oh, Alfred that was horrid wasn’t it?” She put her hand on his arm, looking up at him with sympathetic eyes. “I remember when it happened, I just thanked my lucky stars *my* voice was still intact. I said to Samuel, I said, ‘Should that ever happen to me I should just wither up and *die*.’ Oh dear, and you know we thought you had, hiding up there at that sylvan old hotel. But here you are, reemerged and a fine conductor.” She turned to Georgina who was struggling to suppress an ironic laugh. “Let that be a lesson to you, my dear,” she offered graciously. “Protect that little voice of yours.” Georgina nodded, endeavoring to appear grateful. Maria thought for a moment more, then shook her head and gave Alfred’s arm a final squeeze before releasing her hold on him and returning to her seat backstage.

Alfred stood deflated and lost in thought.

“Did you want to talk to me?” Georgina asked him hopefully after a moment of silence.

“Hmmm? Ah...yes. Just to ah...Keep up the good...” He rolled his finger in circles through the air.

“Singing?” Georgina helped.

“Yes. It sounds nice.”

“Thank you,” Georgina replied, disappointed. *Nice?* she thought to herself as she walked away. She shook the frustration off as the stage hands called for quiet,

determined not to let it affect her performance.

Wonderful. She pictured Walter’s eager eyes as he sat across the pew from her in the flickering candlelight of the church. She smiled. With a confident breath she arranged herself for the second act.

She took the stage again. Don Giovanni hid behind his servant, Leporello and called to Donna Elvira. She scorned him, but his song began to woo her again. In spite of herself, she left with the man she believed to be her repentant lover. Confused by the clothing switch that had occurred, however, she was instead leaving with Leporello.

Nine scenes later, she discovered his true identity. Betrayed once more, she was left on stage alone to mourn.

“*Infelice, o Dio, mi fa. Ma tradita e abbandonata,*” she sang. She filled the empty stage, her voice leaving no corner quiet. High above the audience the spotlight elevated her. She was splendid in its glow, a tremendous being that captivated the attention of an entire theater. The trills of the flutes and clarinets paled as she sang her cadenza. The lights fell and she left the stage to the sounds of the audience’s praise.

The act continued, and she watched with fear from the wings as the pyrotechnic fire engulfed Edward and the statue, dragging both into the depths of hell. In a frenzy, she returned to the stage to search the set for Don Giovanni.

“Io men vado in un ritiro, A finir la vita mia!” she vowed with a vengeance. She joined together with Helen, Florence, and Paul to sing the moral with fervent sincerity.

“Questo è il fin di chi fa mal; E de’ perfidy la mort, Alla vita è sempre ugual.”

The violins ran their glissandos and finished with a flourish, the curtain falling on the stage. Georgina exhaled deeply, the applause issuing from behind the curtain. Her costume was heavy with perspiration. She wanted to wipe her face, but she knew her makeup would smear in thick lines across her cheeks. The other singers sagged under their exhaustion, enjoying the temporary reprieve behind the curtain. They joined hands and came together in a line as the curtain rose. The applause crept under the rising curtain, replenishing for the moment their spent energies. Each of them beamed, enjoying the fruits of their labors. The chorus stepped forward to receive the applause first. Helen and Florence followed. Paul stepped to the edge of the stage to take his bows. The audience clapped politely as he stepped aside. Georgina moved forward, and as she approached the volume of the applause grew. She heard cheers and whistles. Her heart soared as she dropped her knee for a curtsy. As she rose the audience rose with her. First a few in the balcony, then a row in the orchestra section. Then, as if on cue, the entire audience rose together, the applause from the standing ovation now thundering in her ears. She beamed, thriving off of the applause that permeated her skin, energizing her weary body. She curtsied again, reveling in her moment on stage as the audience

entered, and Walter slipped into the chair across from his brother.

continued to cheer. She did not notice Maria at her side until the diva's arm hit Georgina mid-curtsey.

"*Get off,*" Maria hissed through clenched teeth, a smile plastered on her face. She gestured grandly to the audience in gratitude. Georgina stepped aside, abashed. The applause quieted and the cheers stopped as Maria continued to curtsy. Georgina felt a squeeze on her arm, and turned around to see Florence winking at her with a reassuring smile.

"They were cheering for you," she heard in her ear. Georgina glowed as Maria finally stepped aside. The Company took a bow together and the curtain fell to the applause.

Walter stood long after the applause had ended with his hands clasped in rapture. He had cheered loudly for Georgina as she curtseyed on stage, wanting to shout to the rest of the theater that she belonged to him. But the words would not form, and he managed only to yelp into the applause. He waited for her to wave to him, give him a secret smile, but she seemed separate on the stage as she glowed in the spotlight—untouchable. The audience filed out around him as he stood staring at the heavy red curtain behind which Georgina had disappeared. He felt the contents of the inner pocket in his blazer pressing against his heart and he clasped his hands even tighter to calm his nerves.

His parents had asked him to eat dinner with them that night before the opera. He met them at the country club in the main dining room. They were already seated when he entered, and Walter slipped into the chair across from his brother.

"Hello Walter. How is class?" his father asked.

"It's fine," Walter said unemotionally.

"Is Crane still the professor for financial accounting? He was quite the fellow—used to memorize his entire lecture and deliver it to the ceiling. Didn't look at us once. And if we interrupted him, he'd lose his place and start the lecture over from the beginning." His father slapped the table jovially. "We had a brother release a toad into the room during his lecture one day. Crane didn't even notice! The toad hopped around the entire room—the class was roaring!" He laughed heartily.

Walter shook his head passively. "No, he must have retired." He glanced around the table. "Where are the menus?"

"We already ordered for you," his mother said.

"You were late," his father added.

A hot anger rose inside of Walter. "What did you order?"

"The six ounce filet," his father said. "The same thing I got."

Walter struggled to control the rising fury. "I don't want the same thing you got," he said quietly.

"Don't be disagreeable, Walter," his mother said cheerily, patting his forearm.

Walter drew his hands off the table into his lap. His father looked at him sternly as the table sat in a tense silence.

"Walter, are the fraternities going to begin rush soon?" his mother asked, changing the subject.

Walter shook his head. "It begins tonight," he said.

His father choked on his cocktail, setting his glass heavily back on the table.

"Tonight! Are you missing it now?" he sputtered.

"No. It's later. At eight."

Relieved, his father eased back into his chair. "Later, eh? That's not how it used to be run. Back in my day we did it over dinners. So which of the houses will you be going to?"

Walter looked up from the table, steadily returning his father's gaze. "I'm not," he said evenly.

"You're not? Phi Gam it is, then. You might consider going to a few others tonight. Not that you won't get into Phi Gam, but it looks more diplomatic."

"No," Walter said. "I'm not rushing."

His father gazed at him for a moment, weighing his response.

"Not rushing? Why ever not?" his mother asked in surprise.

Walter shrugged. "Georgina's opera opens tonight. I couldn't miss it."

"Oh, Walter." His father grimaced. "You can't be serious."

Walter gripped the arms of his chair as the fire within him grew. "No, Dad. I am. Quite serious," he said defiantly.

His father laughed. "She's not our type, son. Surely you must see that."

"And why not?" Walter said loudly, his deep voice echoing through the room.

"What *is* our type?"

His father leaned forward. "You met her at a resort where she worked to serve you. You are from two different worlds," he whispered severely as the diners at other tables shot curious looks in their direction.

"She was in the *choir*, she was not changing my linens," Walter retorted.

"Walter, dear, you're making a scene," his mother said, placing her hand again on his wrist, smiling reassuringly at the other tables.

Walter jerked his hand back again.

"She doesn't have to be changing your linens. She has not the slightest idea how to cope with our kind of wealth," his father said. "She seems like a nice girl with a good voice, but do you want to be associated with her type? She is a *performer*."

"What are you insinuating?"

His father shrugged with a vague wave of his hand.

Walter stood suddenly, his chair crashing onto its back, one of the arms splintering. His mother gasped. He stood erect, giving his parents a blistering stare.

"You won't change my mind," he said fiercely. "I love her." His voice broke. He turned quickly on his heel and marched to the door as the waiter emerged from the kitchen, their dinners in hand.

"Wa..." A noise escaped his mother's throat, but she checked herself as the other diners watched curiously. Walter kept walking, his fists clenching and unclenching as he left the country club. He marched to his car without stopping and turned the ignition. He pulled out of the parking lot, turning onto Three Chopt Road, the College and country club disappearing behind him. The cool air streamed in through the open car windows, failing to cool his fury but hardening his resolve. He turned off of Cary Street into the Windsor Farms neighborhood and parked his car outside of his parents' house.

He entered through the back door, bounding up the stairs two at a time to his bedroom. With a swift movement, he sent his old dresser crashing onto the floor. On the

wall behind his dresser, a small rusty key hung on a nail. He took the key and dropped to his hands and knees next to his bed, kicking over piles of linens his mother had stowed in his room since he left. He searched wildly under the bed with his hand until he hit a wooden corner. He pulled his grandmother's jewelry box from under the bed, wiping the dust off of the inlaid ivory pattern that decorated the lid. With trembling fingers, he put the key in the lock and opened the box. The tinny notes of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* played on the cylinder and steel comb of the music box. The inside was lined with red felt, on which sat only one piece of jewelry. He lifted the golden ring, the diamond sparkling in the moonlight that streamed in through the window. He took his handkerchief from his pocket and gently polished the gold, rolling the ring around in his fingers. Breathing easier now, he tilted the ring into the moonlight, squinting to read the engraving on the inside.

Walter and Clara Thomas 1899

Walter tucked the ring into the inner breast pocket of his blazer with the small key and shut the jewelry box. The music stopped, and Walter pushed the box gently under the bed. He surveyed the scattered mess of his room before departing, shutting the door firmly behind him. With a deep breath he strode down the stairs to his car, patting his breast pocket every few steps. He left for the theater, his former rage leaving him cool and exposed to the chilly night air.

Georgina's performance had soothed his unfurled nerves, once more filling his soul with her familiar song. Yet she had shone on stage, foreign to him. Perhaps it was the lights; perhaps it was the costume or the makeup. He wanted to know the foreignness.

As the last patrons left the theater echoed with silence. Walter glanced around anxiously, feeling suddenly exposed in the large hall. He left his row of seats and approached the stage, which was still brightly lit by spotlights. Timidly, he took the stairs up the side of the stage, walking across the few feet between the orchestra pit and the curtain. He gazed out into the auditorium, looking at the rows of empty chairs. He heard the music in his head, and imagined the performance from Georgina's point of view. He imagined performing along with her, moving swiftly across the stage as his voice flowed into the balconies. Yet he remained rooted in place on the stage, his hands in his pockets, tensely staring at the empty seats.

"Walter?" Georgina called as she appeared on the side of the auditorium. He jumped, embarrassed at being caught on stage. She laughed, approaching him. "What are you doing up there?"

"I was just..." He smiled sheepishly. "Seeing how the view is from where you stand."

"Oh," she said, smiling curiously.

He regained his composure and knelt down as she set her jacket and bag on the stage. "You were ..." The spotlights warmed his nerves, muddling his thoughts as he tried to look sincerely into Georgina's eyes. He gestured, unable to finish the sentence.

She grinned, feeling the warmth of his gaze spread through her body. "Go on," she said.

"Well you brought down the house," he said.

She rolled her eyes. "I know that," she said. "Tell me something I haven't heard."

His pulse quickened, and he could feel his heart beating against the breast pocket of his blazer. He took a deep breath. "Well, before I met you, I was empty. I went from day to day not feeling anything but disappointment and anger. But when I hear you sing, you fill me with something else." His deep voice echoed through the theater.

Georgina dropped the coy smile, replaced by the genuine look of someone listening to the articulation of her praises.

"You fill me with hope, with warmth, with...*joy*," he said passionately. He reached into his breast pocket and felt the key and the ring. He removed the ring, holding it out to her. Georgina's eyes widened in surprise and disbelief as she looked up at the ring shining in the spotlight.

"Will you be mine...forever?" he asked her, shifting his weight to one knee on the stage. His eyes glowed in the light from the stage, and Georgina tried to respond, but her voice had abandoned her. She nodded.

Chapter 6

“That stunt you pulled at dinner was the last of your little rebellions, son. You had your go at the war and you have been sulking ever since you failed. Your mother and I are tired of it. We expect you to begin acting like a part of the family you were born into. That includes going to your classes, getting your diploma, and working at the company.” His father held up an instructive finger for a moment, looking sternly at Walter, then turned to go.

“I’m engaged,” Walter said triumphantly.

His father halted in his tracks, his shoulders slumping. He turned slowly to Walter, his face ashen.

“I don’t care what you have to say, father. I asked her last night. I love her and we’re getting married.” He squared his jaw defiantly.

His father shook his head slowly. “You don’t...know,” he spoke softly. “...the first thing about this girl. Where she comes from, what her education is, what religion she is, who her *parents* are—” His voice rose steadily.

“She’s from Covington,” Walter cut his father off. “She can sing entire operas in other languages and is well-versed in music theory. She is Catholic. And ...” he suddenly drew a blank. “Her parents are very nice people,” Walter recovered as his father narrowed his eyes skeptically.

“What do her parents do?”

Walter glared angrily at his father.

“You see? You don’t know. You don’t know the slightest thing about her, you don’t know what the rest of your li—”

"I *do* know," Walter said angrily. "I know that she makes me feel different from anyone I've ever met. This family, this life—they leave me empty. But she fills me with life and with love and with *joy*. And if I have to live the rest of my life away from all of this," he gestured to the high ceilings of his parents' house. "Then so be it."

His father shook his head, taking several steps toward Walter. "It's not that simple. Where will you get married? Do you know the slightest thing about the Catholic Church? Where will you live? What will you do if you aren't working for the company? You have no other qualifications, Walter, and no education. You cannot support the kind of lifestyle you are used to on her opera salary. What if her career fails? What if she loses her voice? You have not been raised to suffer the kinds of hardships poverty would inflict upon you. You would not be able to stay true to her should the worst come to pass, even if she remained with you for all that time. These theatrical types seldom stay married for long, Walter. They convince themselves that what happens on the stage is real. They live in a different world than you and I."

Walter opened and closed his mouth in syncopation with his father's questions. He asked them with increasing volume and speed. As his father paused for breath, Walter broke in. "I could get a job anywhere in the city!" His deep bass echoed through the empty house, reverberating off the walls. "There are plenty of people who would hire a Thomas."

"They would hire you because of a reputation created by your grandfather and me. It would be as a favor to our family. Not because you have earned it," his father said fiercely. His expression suddenly calmed. "But would that serve your little rebellious instincts?" Walter's face flushed with anger. "No, I suspect not. Then I won't have to

ask everyone in town not to employ you. I could do it, you know," his father said coolly. "But no, you want to do something different. To rebel against everything your family has spent generations building." He spoke slowly, watching Walter begin to squirm uncomfortably as the truth of his father's words began to cut him, dissecting out the triumph from before. "But what we've built is not just the factory on the river. It's not just the warehouses, the tobacco farms, the office building. It's not this house," he gestured to the walls as his voice crept across the room. "It's within you, as well. We have bred you to be an aristocrat. To need nice things. To never be uncomfortable. You can't live without it. There's a real world out there that you've never had to experience, Walter. And you can't survive in it. If you can't win in this world, you have to at least be able to survive."

His father stared at him, his commanding voice still ringing through the walls. He waited, anticipating Walter's next move. But Walter stood deflated in the middle of the floor. He looked helplessly at his father, unable to summon even anger. Surprise crossed his father's face, and then it softened.

"But I'm a businessman," his father continued graciously. "And I've had to make a compromise or two in my life. Understand, I usually win, even in the compromises. But I'm not so hard-hearted that I don't give the other side one thing they want. It doesn't hurt me any if you marry this girl. I suspect that you will be the one who suffers, not me. What I want is for someone to continue the business—someone in my family. So that the control and the wealth stay in the name that I have worked so hard to build. Don't look at me like that, Walter. It was a tradition my father passed on to me, and his father to him. You may marry this opera singer of yours. On the condition that you

finish your studies at the college. And then you work for the company upon your graduation." He looked carefully at Walter. Walter was staring past his father, unblinking. "Are you listening to me?" he asked. "This is it. You have no other options, Walter."

Walter stood motionless, the straight line of his life stretching ahead of him.

the
bridal dressing room, holding the white material out to Georgina. Georgina had been applying her makeup in the mirror when she turned around, startled by Sister Cecilia's entrance.

"Sister Cecilia!" she exclaimed, wrapping the nun in a hug.

"Oh, Georgina." Sister Cecilia returned the hug. "Look at you! Your mother wanted so badly to be here. But she just got the job at the post office, and besides she could hardly leave your sister in her state."

"What's wrong with Lily?" Georgina asked alarmed.

"Oh, haven't you heard? She and Charles are going to have a baby!"

"That's wonderful! Oh, is mother fit to burst?" Georgina clasped her hands together in excitement as she slipped into her high country accent.

"Yes, she's very excited. The baby is due any time now. And with two of her daughters married... And you an opera singer!" Sister Cecilia gazed proudly at Georgina, tucking a stray lock of hair behind Georgina's ear. "You certainly have grown up since I last saw you."

Georgina smiled. "What is this?" she asked, suddenly aware of the material Sister Cecilia had handed her.

Chapter 7

Sister Cecilia parked the parish car in front of the First Presbyterian church off of Cary Street. She bustled into the church, her arms laden with white material and her habit billowing behind her.

“Your mother insisted you wear this,” she said, bursting through the door of the bridal dressing room, holding the white material out to Georgina. Georgina had been applying her makeup in the mirror when she turned around, startled by Sister Cecilia’s entrance.

“Sister Cecilia!” she exclaimed, wrapping the nun in a hug.

“Oh, Georgina.” Sister Cecilia returned the hug. “Look at you! Your mother wanted so badly to be here. But she just got the job at the post office, and besides she could hardly leave your sister in her state.”

“What’s wrong with Lily?” Georgina asked alarmed.

“Oh, haven’t you heard? She and Charles are going to have a baby!”

“That’s wonderful! Oh, is mother fit to burst?” Georgina clasped her hands together in excitement as she slipped into her high country accent.

“Yes, she’s very excited. The baby is due any time now. And with two of her daughters married ... And you an opera singer!” Sister Cecilia gazed proudly at Georgina, tucking a stray lock of hair behind Georgina’s ear. “You certainly have grown up since I last saw you.”

Georgina smiled. “What is this?” she asked, suddenly aware of the material Sister Cecilia had handed her.

“It’s your mother’s wedding gown. Lily was far too tall to fit in it, but your mother wanted you to wear it today,” Sister Cecilia said, holding the dress up by its sleeves and shaking the skirt out. It was a simply cut starched cotton gown with no frills or adornment.

“But I already have a dress,” Georgina said, looking down at the dress Walter had given her the money to buy. She fingered the lace edging and fine silk material.

Sister Cecilia considered Georgina for a long moment.

“I mean, I could change,” Georgina offered hesitantly.

With a quick movement, Sister Cecilia folded the cotton dress up and tucked it under her arm. “Well, what your mother doesn’t know won’t hurt her, will it?” she said.

“Now tell me about this wedding. Who are your bridesmaids?”

Georgina blushed. “I don’t have any,” she said.

“No?” Sister Cecilia arched her eyebrows.

“Walter’s parents wanted—I mean *we* wanted a small wedding. No wedding party.”

“And who is giving you away to the groom?”

“Give me away? Does someone have to?”

Sister Cecilia gasped. “I have never seen a wedding where the bride walks down the aisle alone. And I have played piano at my share of weddings,” she conceded. “Even if I’ve never been in one.”

Georgina thought for a moment. “My father would have been the one to do it.”

She sighed. “I don’t know who...” She paused, then looked up. “Would you?”

Sister Cecilia “Oh my dear, I would be honored to take your father’s place.” Sister Cecilia hugged Georgina again before pulling away. “I must go meet this groom of yours before I can consent to giving you away. And I will have to tell his parents that I will be walking you down the aisle. I will be back in a little bit, my dear!”

“Sister Cecilia, I don’t—” Georgina called after her, but Sister Cecilia had disappeared out the door and left Georgina to herself in the dressing room again. Georgina nearly ran to stop her, but she did not want anyone to see the dress. She sat back down, putting the finishing touches on her makeup in the mirror.

She had ridden the streetcar from her apartment one last time that morning. The day before Walter had helped her move her belongings into their new house. He parked his Cadillac outside her apartment in Church Hill and they had spent the day carrying her belongings from the apartment to his car and moving them up Cary Street.

“Georgina, you came with three suitcases and it’s taking us a day to move you out,” he said, huffing under the weight of a trunk. “You haven’t even been in Richmond a year.”

Georgina laughed. “I was finally making enough money to spend some of it. And you gave me most of this. Walter!” she exclaimed as he tripped on the sidewalk and careened toward the car. She rushed to his side to steady him. “Why don’t you let me help you with that?” She lifted a side of the trunk, helping him carry it.

Walter jerked it away, continuing his ungainly path to the car. “I’ve got it,” he said, heaving it into the back of the car. There was the sound of breaking glass as it landed. She shifted through the contents of the box until she found the porcelain crucifix

hands without looking up from the ground.

Sister Cecilia had given her when she had moved to the Hampshires. She held the pieces up, trying to fit them back together.

"I'll buy you a new one if it matters that much to you," Walter grunted. Georgina shook her head, swallowing hard.

"No. It's fine." She took a deep breath and put the broken pieces back in the trunk. "Why don't we just call a moving company like your father suggested?" she said.

"I am perfectly capable of doing this myself," he said, his face sullen.

The apartment began to empty as Georgina watched Walter damage her belongings, sacrifices to his inexperienced hands. Georgina pushed thoughts from the day before from her mind. She snapped her compact shut with finality and steadied herself for the ceremony.

and her stomach sank.

The wedding was small and brief. Only Walter's family and closest friends attended. Georgina invited a few from the opera company, and Florence and Helen came with Edward and Paul. Alfred had another engagement and sent his gift with Florence. When it came time, Sister Cecilia walked slowly with Georgina, their black habit and white wedding gown trailing them down the aisle. They stopped short of the altar, Sister Cecilia raising Georgina's veil. She looked slowly at Walter, then at Georgina, searching Georgina's eyes closely before finally kissing her on the cheek and turning from the altar to the pews. Georgina watched her take her seat next to Florence and Helen. Across the aisle, Walter's mother followed the nun with her eyes, then whispered into his father's ear. Unnerved, Georgina turned to Walter. She gave him a small smile, but he took her hands without looking up from the ground.

"Do you, Georgina, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

Georgina squeezed Walter's hand and he looked up at her. She searched his gaze for something she could connect with and found only a small glimmer.

"I do." The two syllables fell heavily in the stillness of the church, too short to echo. She looked at him fervently.

The church was plain, a sterile whitewash covering the inside and out. There were no pipes for an organ, no choir loft.

"And do you, Walter, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

Walter hesitated.

You have no other option.

"I do," Walter said. The glimmer had disappeared, replaced by a cold emptiness, and her stomach sank.

"You may kiss the bride," the preacher said triumphantly.

Georgina closed her eyes to hold back the tears as they kissed and the congregation's applause echoed through the empty church.

Georgina and Walter rode from the church to the reception in the back of the limousine, Sister Cecilia squeezed in between them.

"And where are we now?" she asked.

"This is Windsor Farms. It's my parent's neighborhood," Walter answered.

"We're a long way from Covington, aren't we Georgina?" Georgina laughed politely.

"Hmm," Sister Cecilia said, looking at them in turn. "You are an interesting duet, you two. The soprano and the deep bass." The car was quiet for a moment as she shook her head in thought. They approached the Virginia House on Canterbury Street and she emerged from her reveries, leaning across Walter to look out the window.

"What is this?" she said, as Walter helped her out of the car. "What an enchanting house!" She crossed the lawn, looking up at the Manor house. Friends of the Thomases were standing on the lawn and she directed her questions toward them. "Do tell me about this place," she commanded them.

"This is the Virginia House," they said cautiously, looking inquiringly at the nun walking toward them. "It's an English Priory that was converted to a Manor home before the Weddells brought it to Richmond." They nodded to an elderly couple standing in the front yard.

"They just *brought* it over the ocean?" Sister Cecilia asked incredulously.

"In pieces," one of the women said. Georgina stepped out of the limousine, aided by Walter. A fall breeze blew through her veil, loosening the knot that had been tightening in her chest. She took a deep breath and looked up at the combination of Manor and Priory in front of her. The late afternoon sun seemed to warm Walter as well, and he took her arm and proceeded up the lawn.

"You say it was a Priory?" Georgina heard Sister Cecilia continue behind her. "What order?"

Walter and Georgina approached the Weddells.

"Mr. Weddell, Mrs. Weddell," Walter addressed them. "Thank you so much for letting us use your home this afternoon."

“Oh, Walter, call us Alex and Virginia, please,” Mrs. Weddell said. “You’re an adult now.” Georgina smiled pleasantly. “It’s no trouble at all,” agreed Mr. Weddell. “Anything for Helen and William’s first son!” “Georgina!” Georgina turned around. Florence and Helen were approaching from behind, followed by Edward and Paul. “What a beautiful wedding,” Florence said. “I believe I teared up a little when I saw you cry.”

“Georgina, did you know this house is from the *sixteenth century*?” Sister Cecilia asked before Georgina could respond to Florence. “Oh!” she exclaimed spotting the singers. “Are these your colleagues?” “Sister Cecilia, this is Helen, our mezzo-soprano. And Florence, our lyric soprano. Edward is our tenor. And Paul is our baritone.” Georgina introduced the singers, each nodding in turn, eyeing the nun curiously. “Sister Cecilia was my choir director in Covington.”

“And what parts did you all play in *Giovanni*?” Sister Cecilia asked eagerly.

“I played a servant girl,” Florence said.

“Yes, yes, Zerlina,” Sister Cecilia responded.

“I was Leperello,” Paul said.

“I see. And did you omit the *Questo è il fin di chi fa mal* chorus? I know it is the style these days to omit it. But I don’t believe you get the true message of the entire opera without it.”

“Yes, we performed it,” Edward said, his eyebrows raised. “It is quite the dramatic touch, isn’t it?”

“Oh, horribly frightening after the statue drags Don Giovanni into the fires of hell. Tell me, how did you stage the final scene?” Sister Cecilia nearly burst out of her wimple as she talked with the singers. Georgina listened, glowing with pride.

Behind her, Walter’s parents had joined the Weddells and Walter in their conversation.

“And where will you two be living, Walter?”

“Just across Cary, in a house on Hamilton Street.”

“To keep them close to us, right Walter?” his father asked with a wink.

The Weddells laughed.

“Shall we move on to the loggia? I believe the reception is set up there,” his father said.

Walter collected Georgina from her conversation and escorted her to the side of the house. The reception passed quietly, as the guests enjoyed the cake and the notes of the string quartet drifted through the cooling air.

“Beethoven. Opus eighteen,” Paul leaned over to Edward as they observed the musicians.

“Number one in F Minor, second movement. Are you sure his deafness wasn’t already in its advanced stages when he composed this?” Edward replied.

Sister Cecilia chuckled. “It’s rather depressing for a wedding.”

“It was inspired by the tomb scene of Romeo and Juliet,” Paul said, casting a fierce glance at Edward.

“Oh heavens, no!” Sister Cecilia exclaimed. She tapped to the cellist on the shoulder. “Can we please lighten the mood? Some Vivaldi or Mozart perhaps?”

"Anything but Beethoven," Edward added under his breath. The cellist nodded, with a smile. *disappeared into the darkness of the limousine.*

"They asked us to play Beethoven," he shrugged. "Happy to change."

As the sun moved down the James River setting it on fire, Walter whispered to Georgina.

"It's time to go home."

Home. The word sounded empty.

The guests lined the sidewalk leading to the limousine as Walter escorted Georgina past them. His parents were standing together, his father watching contentedly while his mother waved. The Weddells tossed rice grandly at the new couple. As they passed Florence, Helen, Edward, and Paul, Georgina heard them shout, "See you at rehearsal!"

Sister Cecilia stood at the end of the sidewalk, separated from the rest of the guests. Georgina pulled away from Walter and approached her. Sister Cecilia took Georgina's hands in her own, the long shadows of the old Priory falling across her face. Georgina looked up into her wimple, a dim light shining in Sister Cecilia's tired eyes. Georgina's face crumpled, her chin quivering as Sister Cecilia pulled her into the heavy black robes. They were stiff on Georgina's cheek and after a moment she pulled away.

"You have a new obligation now," Sister Cecilia said, wiping the tears off Georgina's cheeks with her cold hands. Georgina stepped back, searching into the darkness of the habit.

"Georgina," Walter said from the limousine where he held the door open.

She stood for a moment more. "Okay," she said finally, acquiescing. She turned to Walter and disappeared into the darkness of the limousine.

yellow, the skin nearly transparent under the sheen of sweat. She pulled her damp hair back from her face, quickly securing it with shaking hands into messy pin curls against her scalp as the nausea began to subside. Her hair would only get damper and more frizzed under the wig, and she was already late for the theater. She rinsed her face with cool water, letting it run down her arms and freshen her clammy skin. She wiped the counters and sink with a rag as she left the bathroom, glancing out the window. The clouds were gathering in the sky, indicating a large storm.

"Walter?" she asked as she passed his study, makeup and character notes in tow. He did not move as he scowled at the papers on his desk. "Walter, I'm going to the theater." She waited for him to respond. "Are you sure you can't come?" she asked after a moment. He finally glanced up, irritated.

"I told you yesterday. The board rejected my acquisition proposal and I've got to find something else to boost sales. What will I tell them, that revenues will just have to stay flat because I was too busy going to the theater?" He spat the words in disgust. "No, Georgina, I can't come."

She winced, then nodded as she turned for the garage.

Walter sat back in his chair as he heard the car pull out of the driveway in the direction of the theater. She was slipping away from him with each encounter, and he could not bring her closer. He had tried—God knows how he had tried. He shook his head. His father was right. It was his own incompetence, his own weakness, his impotence. He slammed his palm down on his desk, his throat closing once more to the

Chapter 8

Georgina looked in the mirror. Her face was a pale yellow, the skin nearly transparent under the sheen of sweat. She pulled her damp hair back from her face, quickly securing it with shaking hands into messy pin curls against her scalp as the nausea began to subside. Her hair would only get damper and more frazzled under the wig, and she was already late for the theater. She rinsed her face with cool water, letting it run down her arms and freshen her clammy skin. She wiped the counters and toilet with a rag as she left the bathroom, glancing out the window. The clouds were gathering in the sky, indicating a large storm.

“Walter?” she asked as she passed his study, makeup and character shoes in tow. He did not move as he scowled at the papers on his desk. “Walter, I’m going to the theater.” She waited for him to respond. “Are you sure you can’t come?” she asked after a moment. He finally glanced up, irritated.

“I told you yesterday. The board rejected my acquisition proposal and I’ve got to find something else to boost sales. What will I tell them, that revenues will just have to stay flat because I was too busy going to the *theater*?” He spat the word in disgust. “No, Georgina, I can’t come.”

She winced, then nodded as she turned for the garage.

Walter sat back in his chair as he heard the car pull out of the driveway in the direction of the theater. She was slipping away from him with each encounter, and he could not bring her closer. He had tried—God knows how he had tried. He shook his head. His father was right. It was his own incompetence, his own weakness, his impotence. He slammed his palm down on his desk, his throat closing once more to the

words which might bring her back. His chest heaved as he looked out the window of his study, his anger dissolving into the air. He shook his head clear and bent silently back over his desk.

“She’s here!” Edward called from the stage as Georgina walked in. He was pacing the stage in his ornate duke costume. Alfred spun around in the orchestra pit, looking up at Georgina as she hurried down the aisle in a frenzy toward him. His expression changed from worry about the opera to concern for Georgina as he noticed her pale coloring.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Georgina apologized, out of breath. “I was feeling ill.”

“Are you better now?”

“Yes. I’ll hurry.”

He shook his head. “Slow down, take your time. We’ll begin late if it will help you to give a performance like you did in rehearsal yesterday,” he said giving her a kind smile. She set her bags on the stage and placed a hand on her chest, dabbing at her forehead with a handkerchief. Alfred looked at her, concerned. “Are you ...ah... sure you’re ok?”

She nodded quickly. “Yes, fine,” she said. She hoisted her bags onto her shoulder and turned for the dressing room.

“There you are!” Florence called from her dressing room as Georgina passed.

“We were worried *I* would have to play Gilda tonight!”

“Just running late,” Georgina called over her shoulder. She closed the door to her dressing room and took a deep breath, sinking against the door. In front of her were

Gilda's costumes and libretto. She took the chiffon gown in her hands, the minute details in the fabric having a calming effect as she studied them closely. The gown was finely made, simple and with Victorian style, the empire waist allowing her to sing without a corset. At the request by the theater directors that a tight budget be followed for the production, Alfred had chosen to move the setting forward a few centuries so the costumes could be less ornate. Slowly, she shed her own clothes and slipped the gown over her head, taking pleasure in letting Gilda, the beautiful young daughter of the hunchbacked court jester, Rigoletto, replace Georgina. She pinned Gilda's wig securely to her own head, letting her fingers linger in the long golden locks. She slid easily from the role of Georgina, the wife of a Tidewater Aristocrat to Gilda, the naive beauty who must balance her devotion to her jealous father and her love with a skilled philanderer. The fears of 232 Hamilton Street were happily replaced by the familiar excitement of a performance. She took deep breaths as she applied her makeup and sang several scales, the predictable flow of half steps up and down acting as a balm. Her color had returned, and by the time the stagehand called for warm-ups, Gilda had completely consumed Georgina.

She listened from backstage as the curtain rose to a full house, the court of Mantua in the midst of a grand ball. The Duke of Mantua bragged of his recent conquest of his courtier's wife and his interest in a beautiful girl he had seen at church. The recitative moved quickly; she admired Edward's ability to keep pace with the orchestra while articulating every consonant. He quickly began the jaunty first aria. Alfred kept the orchestra in check, matching Edward's ever-changing interpretation of the rubato.

“Se mi punge, una qualche beltà.” He held the cadenza longer than normal, playing to the audience.

“Good audience tonight,” a stagehand remarked as the audience zealously applauded. She turned her head from him, committed to remaining Gilda. She watched her father from the wings.

Rigoletto lurches awkwardly forward, mocking Count Ceprano for unwittingly losing his wife to the charms of the Duke. He mocks Count Monterone for losing his daughter to the same hedonist. Enraged, Monterone curses the Duke and the jester to dissonance in the lower strings.

“Sii maledetto!” Monterone sings, as Rigoletto shrinks in horror.

The hunchback lurches home in despair, encountering the hired assassin Sparafucile. Sparafucile offers his services in a duet underpinned by a seductive melody in the cello and double bass. Repulsed and yet intrigued, Rigoletto inquires after the killer’s art. Rigoletto considers purchasing Sparafucile’s services. But he is haunted by the curse and commands the killer to leave. He continues to contemplate the curse as he nears home.

Gilda moved slowly from the backstage to the wing, watching as her father dismissed his musings with a final cadenza.

“Ah no, è follia.” The music swirls as he runs home, finally reaching the courtyard where he hides his daughter.

“Mio padre!” she calls to him lovingly. He asks her again if she has left the courtyard except to attend church. She swears that she has not. He sings that she is his

“Vence doesn’t have streets,” Walter said quietly.

only joy in life, tender as a flower. He leaves after their tender duet, unwittingly letting the Duke into the courtyard. "T'amo!" the Duke calls to her, wooing her with his seductive words and melody. She slowly bows to his flattery, to his entreaties to come to him, finally joining him in duet. Together their melodies compliment each other while their words keep them separate. The pulsating strings in the orchestra drop away, and in perfect unison they come together for the cadenza.

"Sì care a me," they sing tenderly, the strings entering again to conclude the duet.

"Did you know that Verdi kept *La Donna é Mobile* a secret until just before the first performance? He didn't give it to Raffaille Mirate until hours before the premier—he knew it would be tremendously popular and he wanted it to have its full effect. Edward told me." Georgina shook her head in awe. "Verdi was right. You know the song, don't you Walter?"

Walter did not look up from his plate, but shook his head. Attempts to engage him in a conversation about Thomas Tobacco had been met with little success. Georgina, however, delighted in discussing the opera company and their rehearsals. She sang the first few lines of the familiar tune. Walter shook his head again.

"I suspect you'll recognize it when you hear it opening night. I do not envy Edward for that one. It would be impossible to interpret the aria in a satisfactory manner, everyone knows it so well. People were singing it in the streets of Venice just hours after the first performance."

"Venice doesn't have streets," Walter said quietly.

“What?” Georgina asked.

He cleared his throat, looking up for the first time. “I said Venice doesn’t have streets.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, intrigued.

“Canals. It’s all canals.”

“Canals! As in Shockoe Bottom?” Her voice tinkled with wonder.

Walter shook his head. “No. It’s all marshland with canals and—” he sighed, frustrated. “Never mind.”

“Hmm.” Georgina sat quietly, building a city of canals in her mind. After a few minutes she spoke again. “And how close is Venice to Milan? Alfred said that the Milanese—is that the correct term?—the Milanese used Verdi’s name as an acronym for their patriotic cause. They were occupied by the Austrians and wanted to become a part of Italy again. They were heavily censored, and shouted ‘Verdi!’ in the streets, but they meant ‘Victor Emmanuel Re D’Italia.’ That was the President they wanted I think ... Emmanuel. No—*Re* means *King*, so they wanted Emmanuel as King. During the Risorgimento,” she said slowly, rolling her tongue across the *R*. She mused for a few moments more. “Alfred says I should go to Europe after *Rigoletto* closes. To study at the conservatories.”

Walter looked up from the plate of Welsh rarebit he had been studying solemnly. His dark eyes flashed at her.

“Just for a few months,” she said. “You could take some time off—you’ve been working hard at the company, I’m sure your father would be fine without you.”

“I can’t leave,” he said, his deep voice fiercely quiet.

“Well then you could visit me,” she said hopefully. “Thank of it: Paris, Rome, Bayreuth, Venice—all the great opera houses of the world!”

Walter shook his head. “What do you need to go to Europe for? The Richmond Company has given you all you need.”

“Alfred says it’s the next logical step in my career—I need some formal training to put on my resume.”

“Alfred?”

Georgina nodded eagerly, missing the note of anger in his voice. “He says that with a full resume I could apply for a company in New York or Chicago. Even if I don’t get one of the big houses, he says that the auditions have people from all over the country and I will probably get offers from any number of second tier opera houses. –Which is not to say that Richmond is below second tier. But Alfred says since it’s a young company it hasn’t established a strong reputation yet. He says it will come with time, but that I should take these opportunities—”

“Georgina!” he exploded, his basso profundo filling the room. The other diners in the restaurant looked at them curiously. He gritted his teeth and hissed at her. “New York? Paris? Chicago? Where are you going to live? You expect me to leave? To follow you?” He shook his head vehemently.

Georgina sat back, rebuffed. “I could live on my own,” she offered slowly.

“Alfred says a lot of opera singers only stay in an apartment in the cities during the season, then they go home. I could—”

“And how will that look, to have my wife gallivanting around the cities alone? These cities aren’t safe for a woman, Georgina. You’ve not been to these cities—you haven’t been to *any* cities.”

Georgina reddened, and picked up her fork. She pushed at her salmon filet. Walter stared at her angrily, his face flushed. When he was confident that the argument was over, he turned back to his plate.

“Alfred offered to be my manager,” Georgina said slowly, looking up hopefully at Walter. “He would travel with me, take care of bookings, fees, and even give me voice lessons. He’s been to all of those cit—”

Walter slammed down his fork. Without looking at Georgina, he pulled out his billfold and laid down enough money for the meal. With a clenched jaw, he rose from his seat and turned sharply on his heel, exiting the restaurant.

“Walter? Come back,” Georgina called after him.

Gilda had been kidnapped by the mischievous courtiers. The courtiers brought her to the Duke’s palace so that he might share in their amusement at the mistress Rigoletto had been hiding in his courtyard. The Duke discovers his love, discovering that Gilda was not Rigoletto’s mistress but his daughter. Nevertheless, the Duke marvels at his good fortune to have his love delivered into his arms. He confesses that no woman has ever captivated his heart the way she has with her innocence and beauty. He worried terribly when he found that she had been kidnapped. He leaves in a flurry of strings to collect his beloved.

Repentant and distraught, Rigoletto lurches onto stage.

“*La rà, la rà, la rà, la rà,*” he cries, a cheerless version of his jester laugh. After probing the courtiers for the whereabouts of Gilda, he finally confesses that she is his daughter, not his mistress. He pleads for their sympathy.

Walter Suddenly, Gilda bursts on stage, throwing herself into her father’s arms. “*Dio! mia Gilda!*” he cries with joy. But as he holds her, Gilda weeps with shame for disobeying her father. Slowly, painstakingly, she confesses that she has fallen in love with the Duke’s fatal beauty. The strings creep slowly, urging her along with her admission as the oboe echoes her tone. Rigoletto responds, the strings in minor, that he wishes the shame would fall on him, falling into a duet of shame and tears with Gilda. They resolve to leave the city as soon as Rigoletto finishes some business. As they decide, several henchmen cross the stage, Monterone in tow. Seeing that his curse had not worked on Rigoletto, but has turned instead on himself, Monterone decries his own misfortune in the face of Rigoletto’s happiness. The brass and winds storm furiously between his lines.

Rigoletto, his anger rising, declares that this will not be—the Duke will be revenged for his philandering. “*Si, vendetta, tremenda vendetta.*” The rousing melody is soon joined by Gilda, pleading for her beloved’s life. The music quickens as they crescendo, Gilda hitting an impossibly high note before the curtain falls to the resolving chords of the orchestra.

Walter’s work was interrupted by his thoughts once more. “Walter, this is Alfred. Alfred, my husband Walter.”

"Nice to meet you," Walter had said. Alfred returned his greeting with a narrow smile and a weak handshake. Walter had been surprised—this was Alfred? Narrow shoulders, short in stature, and prematurely balding in the most undignified manner. Yet Walter remained uneasy in his presence; somehow threatened. They had only met on a handful of occasions, and each time Walter received the same taciturn greeting. It was dubious, Walter decided. He gazed out the window of his study at a brewing storm. The man could scarcely make eye contact—what did he have to hide? Before he could stop himself his mind raced over the possible answers, each one more vulgar to him than the next. The scenarios were well developed in his mind, the product of countless hours of work interrupted by jealous thoughts. He was jealous, he knew it. Though he had no evidence to prove his suspicions, despite careful surveillance. He kept track of her handkerchiefs, her jewelry, he even counted her hairpins once, to see that there were neither additions nor subtractions. Nothing was amiss, but he could not rid himself of Alfred's shifty eyes. Yet Alfred had been willing to look into Georgina's eyes.

"Beautiful cadenza tonight!" he would say to her in his pleasing tenor. "I nearly brought the orchestra in too soon—thank goodness I waited the extra count. I would have masked entirely your trill. I should have expected it. It was a good crowd tonight—You always feed off of the audience's approval for inspiration. Well done!"

She glowed with these remarks as she watched him walk away. The anger rose to his throat now, just as it had then, blocking his voice. He lifted his hands in front of his eyes—they trembled with undiffused rage. They had a destructive power, a power he had seen all too recently. He tucked them under his legs, securing them firmly beneath him.

Are you sure you can't come? Her eyes had been filled with hurt since that night—he could not bear to look at her. It filled him with rage, even as he thought of it now: rage and self-loathing. He rose from his desk, pacing the floor of his study and clearing his throat. She was like a wounded creature, creeping around the house afraid of him. Why would she not stand up to him? But it was his own fault. He turned on the radio, hoping to drown out his thoughts.

“Dio! mia Gilda!” *“Qual pluma al vento, Muta d'accento... e di pensiero.”* The audience *“Ah! l'onta padre mio!”* Walter recognized Georgina's voice, and halted in the middle of the floor. *the memorable tune came to a close* *Maddalena, Sparafucile's sister,*

“Bello e fatale un giovane, Offriasi al guardo mio,” she confessed with the pulsing strings in minor. The tune changed, turning major. *“Se i labbri nostril tacquero, Dagl'occhi il cor parlò.”* The orchestra swelled with her voice, a tremendous crescendo to the high note. Walter listened intently. *“E con ardente palpito Amor mi protestò.”*

Amor. He recognized the word. The music continued into a lively tune. It ended with thunderous applause coming over the radio.

“That marks the end of the Second Act. We are broadcasting live the Richmond Opera's performance of *Rigoletto* from the Landmark Theater. Starring Edward Pearson and Georgina Thomas. Under the direction of Alfred P. Lancaster. Maestro Lancaster has really had quite the turnaround in public performances, as he began his career several decades ago in New York City at Juilliard—”

Before he knew what they were doing, Walter's feet carried him out of the study, down the stairs, to the garage. He started the car and backed out into the street, heading toward the theater. *leaves as a storm begins to grow* *Meanwhile, the Duke returns to his*

Gilda stands quietly on the stage as the curtain rises. The orchestra plays in a low legato as Rigoletto joins her. Wishing to show her the nature of her lover, he forces her to peer into Sparafucile's river inn where the Duke is staying. She looks in, just as the Duke commands Sparafucile to bring his sister. He begins his most famous aria, celebrating the fickleness of women.

"*La donna é mobile Qual piuma al vento, Muta d'accento...e di pensiero.*" The audience fluttered with excitement—this was the aria they had come to hear. They applauded wildly as the memorable tune came to a close. Maddalena, Sparafucile's sister, enters the stage and the Duke begins to woo her. His seductive words work the familiar spell on Maddalena.

Maddalena responds to him, ridiculing him as a lecher. But she is slowly overcome by him.

Gilda cries from outside of the inn, hearing the same words that the Duke used on her.

Rigoletto chastises Gilda, urging her to leave the Duke.

The voices of the four intertwine in the quartet, one emerging for a brief note before dissolving again into the tangle of harmonies, only to be followed by the emergence and dissolution of another. The unsuspecting in the audience applauded with delight as the quartet came to a quiet end.

Gilda rises in despair, obeying her father's command to prepare to leave town. He lurches behind the inn, returning with Sparafucile. Rigoletto offers him the full price to kill the Duke and leaves as a storm begins to grow. Meanwhile, the Duke retires to his

room in the inn and Sparafucile tells Maddalena of their most recent assignment. In love with the Duke, she begs for his life. Gilda creeps back on stage in men's traveling clothes, her love for the Duke drawing her back to the inn. She listens to the conversation just as Sparafucile and Maddalena decide to kill the next person to knock at the door before midnight instead of the Duke. Hearing this, Gilda decides to sacrifice herself for the Duke. "Morir per l'ingrato!" she sings pleadingly, looking up to the audience.

The streets were full as Walter tried to find a place to park. He quickly tucked his car in a small space two blocks away and sprinted toward the theater as the lightning flashed above. He had not brought an umbrella in his haste, and the rain beat against his clothes. He threw open the heavy outer door to the theater, his khakis dripping puddles onto the floor. He hurried toward the theater doors. An usher stepped in front of him, a mystified look on his face.

"Sir, I'm sorry you cannot enter until the performance over." He examined Walter's disheveled appearance.

Walter stood panting. He looked blankly at the usher, seeming to retreat. With a sudden movement, he threw the usher aside and burst through the theater doors.

The thunder rolled as Sparafucile and Maddalena discussed their plans. The clock struck thirty minutes to midnight and wind blew ominously in the strings. Sparafucile and Maddalena sang their recitative, and the winds blew again. But Georgina was staring at the back of the theater, her face ashen. Alfred raised an eyebrow in the orchestra pit.

He conducted the wind again, but Georgina did not move. Again and again the wind sounded, but Georgina was stuck in place.

"Georgina," he whispered. She blinked, shifting her eyes from the back of the theater to the sky.

"*Che! piange tal donna! Nè a lui darò aita!*" she sang softly.

Alfred exhaled, relieved, and pushed the orchestra forward. Georgina gained momentum, returning bit by bit to Gilda. She stands slowly and turns to the inn door, knocking.

Walter! Let me in!

"*Pietà d'un mendico,*" she cries in a monotone high note.

Why did you storm out of the restaurant?

Sparafucile searches in the sideboard for his knife, calling to Gilda to wait as the winds blow in the orchestra.

"*Perdona tu, o padre, a questa infelice!*" she sings in a trio.

With a crash of thunder and lightening, the door opens. The bass rumbles through the orchestra.

I am your husband.

He grabbed her by the wrists, stabbing her repeatedly with his sword. The storm raged violently, clashes of thunder in the brasses, lightening in the cymbals, and wind in the strings. She collapsed in a heap as the storm subsided.

The play continued; Rigoletto returned and took the body in a sack from Sparafucile. He began to drag the sack towards the river, but heard the familiar tune of

the Duke in the distance. Realizing he had been tricked, Rigoletto looked into the sack where Gilda lay dying. Horrified, he called to her.

From within the sack, Georgina weakly sang Gilda's reply. He asked her what had happened, and Gilda pointed to her heart. But as Georgina moved her hand, something stirred within her. She pointed instead to her stomach.

"L'acciar qui, qui mi piagò."

As she sang her final duet with Edward, she looked past Alfred in the orchestra pit, across the audience. Walter stood in the back of the theater like a specter, haunting her notes. She could feel the small being within her, pulling her farther from Gilda, farther from the stage. She was pulled back to herself, under the watchful eye of Walter.

"Lassù in cielo, vicina all madre," she wept, tears falling on her costume and the stage.

"Non morir mio tersoro pietàde," Edward replied, concern flickering across his face.

"Addio," she exhaled. And Gilda died.

Chapter 9

Georgina woke at seven, alone. The bedside lamp was still on, and her book laid, pages ruffled, at her side. The wine bottle was empty on the floor. She walked downstairs into the still house, donning her robe. She searched for traces of her husband. The couch was empty and the extra beds were still perfectly made. The coffee pot and the stove were cold. She checked the garage, but his Cadillac was gone, and the newspaper was in the driveway. She walked out into the chilly April morning and retrieved the Sunday paper. Turning to the Entertainment section, she checked the TV schedule. "Vladimir Horowitz in Moscow, 12:00 PM, WXPB Channel 12."

The Cadillac pulled into the parking garage off of Virginia Street. Walter waved listlessly to the parking attendant, wondering how much it would cost whoever finally moved his car. He took his briefcase out of the back seat, left his keys on the dashboard, and locked the doors. Walking into Shockoe Bottom he looked up Cary Street to the Thomas Building, sparkling in the Sunday morning sunlight rising behind him.

Vladimir smiles, the large skin spot on his right temple rising with his eyebrows. "Before I die, I want to see the country where I was born," he says, his thick Russian accent obscuring the words. "I didn't see my family for sixty years. I don't know how they look, how they are. When I left Russia my niece was nine years old, now *seventy*. She wants to come to Moscow to meet me."

"Will you have perhaps a greeting for the Soviet people?" a reporter asks.

“I will have yes, definitely,” Vladimir replies, pointing at someone he knows and smiling. “With the piano too, especially.” He holds his hand up, spreading his fingers wide. “With the words too, maybe. The Ambassador of *Peace*.”

Georgina turned on the TV at noon and watched as he tottered onto the stage, holding the doorjamb to step down, raising his hands in humble gratitude for the audience’s applause. Dressed in a black tuxedo and bowtie, his wrinkly face showed embarrassed appreciation. She closed her eyes for a moment, listening to the applause. He sat himself at the piano, hunched over. The applause stopped. He surveyed the instrument.

Walter stepped into his office and collapsed into his executive chair. His suit was rumpled from the night before and hung loose on his frame. He smelled of cigarettes and stale gin. His figure had shrunk in the last twenty-four hours, taking on the years he had warded off.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the rumpled pack of cigarettes. The silhouette of a man in a bowler hat stared back at him from the package. “Tidewater Dandies.” The brand had been mostly unsuccessful, but so had everything else. Chicago had lost its stockyards, Richmond had lost its tobacco. It was not his fault, really. America was no longer a labor economy. Everything was service. He opened the pack and pulled out the last cigarette. The bottom dangled pathetically from the filter. He crushed it in his fist and threw it on his desk, the flakes scattering across his papers. He rose to search for a new pack.

The new security had been junk bonds. Investing in futures—it had been what that friend of his father's friend had so many years ago at the Hampshires. What was his name? Charles? George? It didn't matter. He pulled open all of the drawers in his secretary's desk looking for a cigarette.

"Damn tobacco company and we don't have any cigarettes," he grumbled. He had joined the mad frenzy of acquisitions. Anything and everything. Leverage it with junk bonds, pay for it later when the cash came in. It was genius. He left the desk, returning to his chair.

It was all over now. The cash never came in. He stroked the black leather armrests distractedly, rubbing his fingertip into the place where the leather was beginning to crack.

Vladimir begins to raise his hands to the keyboard, but puts them back on his lap, looking at the crowd as if someone called his name. No, he decides, and turns back to the piano. He raised his hands in a gesture of surrender, places them on the piano and massages it into singing Scarlatti's Sonata in B minor.

His movements are slow through the exposition. The rest of his body seems shrunken in the tuxedo, but even from the back row his hands look huge. His wrists hang below the keyboard, fingers sticking out straight instead of curled like other pianists. The little fingers curl up until they are used, when they strike like snakes. Then they retreat back into his palm, waiting for the next note.

His fingers stilled as he closed his eyes. The silence of his office taunted him. *Failure.* He reached over and fumbled with the radio. A spirited song was playing on the piano. He thought he recognized it and hummed along.

Georgina watched with rapt attention. Chopin's "Heroic Polonaise" began in a stately triple meter, gathering more notes with every measure, finally breaking into the A section.

His body suddenly comes alive, faster and livelier than before. His attention focuses on the song, making it sing as the music builds to a feverish celerity. It climaxes, then decrescendos into the B section. His fingers shake with age, feeble and slow when they are still. But as the music gains speed and volume, they fly with startling speed.

Section A returned with more magnificence than before. Georgina leaned forward, captivated by the regal Polonaise. The last chord sounded with triumph, and Georgina leapt to her feet, clasping her hands at her chest and spilling her coffee on the carpet. The applause continued to pour from the TV, echoing off the walls, reminding Georgina of her still barren house. She looked at the clock. It had been over forty-eight hours since she had heard from him. She cleaned the coffee and picked up the phone to call her husband.

Vladimir wipes his nose with his handkerchief and smiles at the crowd, sharing their joy. Cheers and applause fill the hall as he waves to the audience, then walks slowly off stage, his slouch returning with the end of the music.

The phone on his desk rang, but he did not open his eyes to answer it. His hands lay limp on his lap, where they fell after the piece ended. He listened to the applause come through the radio. It swelled again as the pianist walked back on stage.

With no hesitations this time, he puts his fingers to the keys and plays the opening fourth of Schumann's Traumerai. Written as part of *Scenes from Childhood*, "Dreaming" drifts upward as Vladimir smiles faintly, settling into the piece. Georgina's hand falls from her ear, and she hangs up the phone as the first two notes play with the deliberation of a child. The simple melody drifts upward, taking her thoughts with it.

The fourth comes around a second time with the same strength, but quickly loses speed as it climbs again. Walter opens his eyes and looks around his office. A picture of him and Georgina at their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary is suspended on the wall. They are smiling insipidly, hands crossed in the formal pose always demanded that no one but the photographer wants to see themselves in. A framed ink of the Thomas Tobacco warehouse is next to it, along with a yellowing picture of his company from the war. He smiles sardonically within, too exhausted to unite his body and emotions. With a great effort, he rises and walks over to the pictures.

Never playing the fourth the same way twice, it comes around a third time, slower and with more gravity. It hits Georgina in the breastbone, vibrating through her body until she feels it in the tips of each hair standing up on her arms; along the way it passes through her soul, dragging a memory from underneath years of forgetting. The same fourth as the opening to *Amazing Grace*. The same fourth that ended her father's funeral.

The fourth plays again, as the camera pans to the audience from Vladimir's hands. An elderly man with his eyes closed listens stoically as tears stream down his cheeks. His countrymen sit hypnotized by the simplicity of the song.

Walter takes pictures down from the wall, one by one, as the fourth lifts the melody to a minor note at its crest. One by one, he throws them to the ground, the glass smashing. It pierces the anniversary photograph, and the frame of the tobacco warehouse breaks. The crashes do not unsettle him. He shuffles across the office, broken glass crunching under his shoes, to a small wooden box on the shelf. He wipes the dust off of the inlaid ivory pattern that decorates the lid. With trembling fingers, he removes a key from his breast pocket, puts the key in the lock, and opens the box. The tinny notes of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* play on the cylinder and steel comb of the music box. He lifts the contents and holds it, the cool metal in his palm.

Her body shudders with the new key, the rousing fourth persisting. The hawks riding the summer updrafts, fixed in the single point where the air held them suspended. She had sent her songs to God on their wings, with the simple offering of blueberry incense. She had lain in the field, watching them, feeling her back pressed firmly against the earth until she had become a part of it. She had released her soul, experienced joy. But it had ended all wrong. Her father had died because of it. Father Schneitzer had told her to sing—what was it? Sing for her penance. She did not tell him about the rituals, the secret rites she had performed.

The song returns to the original key with the fourth coming around a seventh time. The two notes sound strong, but the melody has slowed to a sigh. Walter sits back in his chair, humming the melody. He feels the cool metal on his right temple, but his

voice breaks. Closing his eyes, he presses the barrel against his throat. The music feebly rises to its highest point, and his finger tenses on the trigger.

His death was not her fault. She breathes a deep breath, feeling her chest freed for the first time in fifty years.

The melody slowly slides down through a minor key, settling with finality on the second note of the fourth. Georgina and Walter slump into their chairs. Salty tears and thick blood run down, the audience breaks into cheers, and Vladimir shrugs.

Coda

The last song my grandmother listened to before she died was Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. It was also the last musical lesson she taught me. She died the next day.

"Beethoven was completely deaf when he composed this," she said. The dissonant music issued from the record player. "When it was first performed in Vienna he insisted on conducting it. I can just see them saying to him, 'But Maestro, you cannot hear.' 'It is my life. I must,' he would have said to them. Imagine, a composer losing his hearing. It would have been devastating. Like a singer losing his voice. But they cannot stay away from the music. They *must* not." She glared defiantly over me. I shrank from the invisible person trying to deprive her and Beethoven of music. She calmed, looking back at me. "He needed to be on stage, to be in the spotlight, to experience the music the only way he knew how. So he reached a compromise with his patrons—he would stand to the side and conduct the music in his mind while the real conductor stood in front of the orchestra. The musicians were told to ignore Beethoven." She shook her head sadly. "The Ninth Symphony was his last symphony. In typical Beethoven style, he wrote the first movement in a fatalistic mood. Begin the record again. Yes, there. It sounds like the orchestra is tuning? The beginning of the Symphony is the beginning of a concert—I think it is the dawn of the world, the very elements of a beginning.

"Now move the needle to the second movement. You remember that there must be a dance movement in a symphony? Even though Beethoven had transitioned to a Romantic composer, and he was trying new things, he kept the form of the symphony.

He switched the dance movement to second. But this is too fast to dance to. It is humanity doing its mad dance upon the world.

“Now take it to the third movement. No—that’s still the second. There. This is the slow movement. *Adagio molto e cantabile*. It’s very hymn-like. “We can skip through to the fourth. You will like it best. This is what they call the ‘horror motive.’ Awful, isn’t it? Yes. Now listen to the basses and cellos. They are talking with the rest of the orchestra. Listen—do you recognize that?”

I nodded. “From the first movement.”

“Yes! But listen to the basses and cellos—they don’t like it. It’s not the kind of life they want. Ah! Remember this? Second movement, right! In the flutes and oboes. But no, the cellos and basses reject it too. And here is the third movement from the rest of the orchestra. The basses and cellos are thinking about it. But no. Not good enough, they say. What else do you have? And here—listen! You know this, don’t you?”

I listened in surprise as the Ode to Joy issued from the orchestra.

“The cellos and basses like it! They are playing along!”

The simple, sweet melody was shared by the orchestra, each section taking a turn. The brass came in and the music swelled.

“Imagine hearing this for the first time, Michael! It was only one hundred and fifty years ago—that’s not so long. You can understand why Beethoven wanted to be on stage for it. But wait, he has another surprise coming. Ah! Here we have the horror motive again. There has been a crisis. And here is the answer—”

The music stopped and a man’s voice came over the speakers.

“O Freunde, nicht diese Töne! Sondern laßt uns angenehmere anstimmen und freudenvollere.”

“This is a song of firsts! The first time anyone heard the Ode to Joy and the first time someone sang in a symphony. He is saying, ‘Oh friends, no more these sounds! Let us sing more cheerful songs, more full of joy!’ And here we have the Ode to Joy again. It’s a poem by Friedrich Schiller. Beethoven always wanted to set it to music.”

Grandma joined in as the choir joined the orchestra.

“Ja wer auch nur eine Seele Sein nennt auf dm Erdenrund!” Her voice filled the living room, every note perfectly placed. She sat up straight in her bed, moving her arms in grand operatic style. Suddenly she stopped.

“But Beethoven couldn’t hear any of this. They say he was gesturing furiously—shrinking down to the ground, raising himself far above the stand. They say it was like he wanted to play all of the instruments himself, to sing every part in the choir himself. When the symphony had ended, he was still conducting the music in his head. The contralto walked over to him, stopped his conducting, and turned him around so he could see the applause. And what applause! How would you clap if you were the first person to hear the Ode to Joy? They gave him five standing ovations, waving their hats and hands and handkerchiefs in the air so he could see their applause. The police had to suppress the audience—standing ovations were only for royalty in those days.”

She looked past me again, hearing the applause of hundreds. Her cheeks glowed in the applause as the record ended. She leaned back and closed her eyes, singing the words to the orchestra in her mind.