

A BELMONT MANSION NOVEL • 3

*A Note Yet
Unsung*

TAMERA
ALEXANDER



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group

www.BethanyHouse.com

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Alexander, Tamera, author.

Title: A note yet unsung / Tamera Alexander.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2017] | Series: A Belmont Mansion novel

Identifiers: LCCN 2016035450 | ISBN 9780764230066 (cloth : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780764206245 (trade paper)

Subjects: | GSAFD: Love stories. | Christian fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3601.L3563 N68 2017 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016035450>

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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Cover design by Jennifer Parker

Cover photography by Mike Habermann Photography, LLC

Background photography by Alexander Levitsky/Shutterstock

Author represented by Natasha Kern Literary Agency

17 18 19 20 21 22 23 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Preface

Music is an important part of our lives and comes in many forms. Most definitely, the term *one size fits all* does not apply when discussing the vast number of styles in this time-treasured art form.

As can be said pretty much across the board when comparing the mores of current society to those of times past, what was taboo then—be it for better, or worse—has now become the norm. In nearly every country in the world today, women are welcome to participate in orchestras, and their talent is lauded.

But such was not always the case.

In the nineteenth century, women were not allowed to play in orchestras or symphonies. They were considered too genteel and delicate natured for the rigors of practice and dedication required to master an instrument. (O ye of little faith . . .)

As I researched, I came across a popular opinion of the time that not only supported the preclusion of women playing in orchestras, but that also set forth that a woman playing a violin in public would be scandalous. Far too sensuous and suggestive. No proper woman would ever consider doing such a thing!

And from that . . . the idea for *A Note Yet Unsung*, a Belmont Mansion novel, was born.

Most of the novel you're about to read is fictional, though there are certainly elements of real history and people woven throughout. For

instance, there really is a Belmont Mansion in Nashville, built in 1853, that still stands today. And Mrs. Adelia Acklen, a character in the novel, is the dynamic, born-before-her-time woman who lived there.

Adelia had three defining loves in her life—art, nature, and music. So as I began writing the Belmont novels (of which you’re holding the third and final installment), their singular themes rose rather quickly in my thoughts: art (*A Lasting Impression*), nature (*A Beauty So Rare*), and finally, music (*A Note Yet Unsung*).

At times, as I wrote, it felt almost as if these stories and characters had been waiting for me to begin writing, and I’m so grateful they did. It’s been a pleasure and an honor to take these journeys with them.

In addition to Adelia, many of the other characters in the novel were inspired by real people who lived during that era—people who worked at Belmont and who visited there. But the characters’ personalities and actions as depicted in this story are purely of my own imagination.

A bonus to this book! On my website (www.TameraAlexander.com) I’ve included links to all the music “performed” in this book. So if you want to listen as you read, please visit the book page for *A Note Yet Unsung* on my website and click the playlist tab.

I invite you to join me as we open the door to history once again and step into another time and place. I hope you’ll hear the not-too-distant strains of Beethoven, Mozart, and other grand masters of music just as I did while I penned Tate and Rebekah’s story.

Thanks for joining me on yet another journey,
Tamera



NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

JANUARY 12, 1871

Rebekah Carrington stood shivering across the street from her childhood home, satchel heavy in hand, cloak dusted with snow. She counted the strides it would take to reach the front door. How could such a brief distance feel so insurmountable, so much greater a course to navigate than the ocean she'd just traversed? She wished she could blink and be back in Vienna.

After ten years, Austria felt more like home than the city in which she'd been born and lived the first half of her life. But the letter delivered nearly four weeks ago, only days before Christmas, had changed every—

The front door to the house opened.

Rebekah pressed into the shadow of a nearby evergreen, its pungent pine needles sharp and prickly with cold. She lowered her head to peer through the icy branches—breath fogging, hanging ghostlike in the air—and her stomach turned with something more than hunger.

It was *him*.

How many times since leaving Nashville had she pictured the man?

Yet looking at him now, a decade later, through a woman's perspective, he seemed so different than when she'd peered up at him as a girl of thirteen. Though thicker through the middle with age, he was still tall, standing nearly six feet, and still possessed a commanding presence.

But he wasn't quite the towering figure her memory had conjured.

For years, recollections of the encounters—and that one night, in particular—had haunted her. With time and distance, she'd moved beyond it. She was no longer that young, naive girl, and she wasn't afraid of him anymore.

So why was her heart all but beating out of her chest? She straightened her spine, pulling her courage up along with it.

Her stepfather climbed into a carriage, one far grander than what she remembered him and her mother owning years earlier. Perhaps a purchase he'd made with money he'd gained in a recent *inheritance*. That possibility only deepened her resentment toward him, and made her question, yet again, the untimeliness of her grandmother's recent passing.

Not a word from Grandmother Carrington about feeling unwell, much less being ill, and then the shocking news of her “sudden and tragic death.” It didn't make sense, and the ache of loss reached deep.

Rebekah eyed the carriage, and the silhouette of the man inside.

Barton Ledbetter was *not* an honorable man, she knew that well enough. But surely he wasn't so devoid of morals that he would have dared to—

“Who you hidin' from?”

Rebekah jumped and spun, her thoughts veering off track.

A young boy peered up from beneath the bill of a ragged red cap, his belligerent expression repeating the question.

She frowned. “I'm not *hiding* from anyone.”

The tilt of his head told her he thought differently.

“I was merely . . . considering my plans.” Hedging the truth, she found the tug at her conscience easily allayed by the fact that her actions were decidedly none of this boy's business.

A half-empty sack of newspapers hung from a slim shoulder. And as though he sensed an opportunity, he whipped one out, rolled it up in a flash, and offered it to her as though presenting the crown jewels of the Habsburg family.

“Nickel for a paper, miss. Make it *two*”—a smirk tipped one side of his mouth—“and I'll keep quiet 'bout what I seen.”

Rebekah eyed him. “And what exactly *is* it you think you've seen?”

“I caught you spyin’ On that family what lives right there.” He pointed to the house.

She looked back at the carriage. It was about to pass her! Her stepfather looked up, seemingly straight at her. And she froze. He and her mother weren’t expecting her until tomorrow. She’d arrived a day early due to fair weather while crossing the Atlantic, but—

She pressed into the spiky secrecy of the piñon pine, realizing she wasn’t ready to face him after all. She needed time to plan her next steps—steps that would take her away from him. And sadly, from her mother too. Unless . . . she could persuade her mother to leave with her.

The carriage continued, and only after it turned the corner did Rebekah breathe easier.

“Well, lady? What’s it gonna be?”

She turned back to find the boy still there, watching her, triumph in his expression. Recognizing an opportunist when she saw one, she leveled a stare. “You don’t even know who resides there, young man.”

“Yes, I do!” His tone and set of jaw were almost convincing. “That man there.” He pointed in the direction the carriage had gone. “Him and his wife. That’s their place. I see ‘em comin’ and goin’ all the time.”

Judging from his meager height and frame, Rebekah didn’t think the boy more than seven or eight years old. He was on the lean side, as though regular meals were a scarcity, and his threadbare coat was tattered at the collar and absent its buttons. But he had a shrewdness about him she recognized. Similar to that of boys his age who’d grown up on the streets of Vienna. It was a savvy she both admired and pitied.

No child should be without a home, a safe place from the world. And yet having a home didn’t necessarily guarantee a child’s safe-keeping, she knew.

An idea came to her, and she set down her satchel. She hadn’t been raised on the streets, but neither was she an innocent. She reached into her reticule, deciding that—either way this went—the decision about her homecoming would be made for her, and she would accept it.

“I’ll purchase *one* newspaper for myself.” She met his scowl with a firm stare. “Along with another. And I’ll give you an extra nickel if you’ll agree to do something for me.”

His eyes narrowed. “What’s it you’re wantin’ me to do?”

“Deliver the second newspaper to that house across the street. Knock on the door, and when the housekeeper answers”—which Rebekah felt certain she would—“ask her to deliver the paper to Mrs. Ledbetter. *If Mrs. Ledbetter is at home.*”

A grin split his face. “Told you, you was spyin’!”

She stared. “Do you want to earn an extra nickel or not?”

He adjusted his cap. “What if she ain’t home? You gonna try ’n cheat me outta my money?”

“Not at all. You’ll still get three nickels either way. Do we have ourselves a deal?”

He held her gaze, then nodded once, slowly, as though considering another, unspoken, alternative. “I’ll do it, just like you said.”

Rebekah took the newspaper from him and pressed three coins into his grimy palm. His brown eyes lit, and she gripped the hem of his coat sleeve, having seen how swiftly these boys could run. “I warn you, young man, I’m fast on my feet. Keep your word or risk being chased down the street by a girl.”

He snickered. “You ain’t no girl. You a lady. And ladies, they never run.”

She narrowed her eyes. “This one does.”

His expression sobered as he turned, but Rebekah was certain she glimpsed a trace of amusement—and admiration—in his eyes.

From her niche behind the tree, she watched him pause at the edge of the street, waiting for conveyances to pass. She pulled her cloak collar closer around her neck as the flutter of nerves resumed in her stomach, same as happened every time she imagined seeing her mother again after all these years.

Her grandmother had managed to visit Austria every two years, staying a handful of months when she did. But her mother? Not once did she visit, despite Grandmother Carrington’s offer to pay. Which had hurt more than Rebekah had ever revealed in her correspondence. Growing up, she’d always been closer to her father, responding to his warm, patient manner. The memory of her mother’s attention in those earlier years, while consistent and plentiful, was tainted with the memory of her cooler demeanor and a propensity toward the critical. As though nothing Rebekah had done was quite good enough.

Still, Rebekah couldn't remember exactly when her relationship with her mother had gone so awry. Sometime after her father died. But, no, that wasn't it, though that loss certainly had changed their lives.

It was after her mother married Barton Ledbetter. That was when she'd become more solemn, distant. And . . . far more censoring.

They'd exchanged letters through the years, of course. Letters that had grown less frequent as time passed. Yet Rebekah still loved her and knew the affection was reciprocated, in her mother's unique way. But the thought of seeing her again after all these years was an unnerving prospect.

She rubbed the taut muscles at the base of her neck, weary from travel and uncertainty. After having been back in the city scarcely two hours, she knew that Nashville—and her family home—would never feel like home again.

In a flash, the boy darted across the street, skillfully dodging a lumber delivery wagon and outwardly oblivious to the heated curses the driver called down on him. The boy headed in the direction of the house—then stopped cold.

Every muscle in Rebekah's body tensed.

She gathered her skirt, debating whether she'd truly give chase over two nickels, despite her threat, but the boy glanced back in her direction and grinned—*grinned*, the little urchin—before continuing on to the front door.

Rebekah let out her breath and felt a speck of humor, even though she wanted to throttle his scrawny little neck.

She followed his progress and then found her gaze moving over the house, which had not aged well in her absence. Though her family had never been landed gentry, her father had inherited several parcels of land surrounding their home, which had allowed them to raise animals and keep a substantial garden. A nicety when so close to the city.

But after her mother remarried, Barton sold most of that property. Though where all the money had gone, she didn't know. Now a mixture of clapboard houses squatted one after another along the street that had once been a country-like thoroughfare where low-limbed oaks, decades old, had lent such joy and adventure to childhood summers.

Rebekah pictured the rooms of the house as they were when she'd last lived there, and still found it difficult to believe Grandmother Carrington was gone. *Oh, Nana . . .*

Grief was a strange thing. You could try to avoid it, keep it at arm's length, even maneuver around it for a time, but grief was patient and cunning. And always returned. With a vengeance.

She sucked in a soft breath, her vision blurring.

The letter from her mother had been succinct, void of any detail other than "your grandmother passed unexpectedly, yet peacefully, in her bed," and had spelled out in no uncertain terms that it was time for Rebekah to return home. Then her mother had effectively cut off her funds.

Rebekah wiped her cheek. Dealing with the sudden loss of her grandmother—and benefactor, though of so much more than money alone—was difficult enough. But being forced to return to Nashville, and with the unequivocal expectation of her residing in that house again—with *him*—was unfathomable.

She couldn't do it. She *wouldn't*.

Yet she didn't have her paternal grandmother to side with her anymore. To insist on the importance of an education abroad. As if that had been the impetus behind her leaving for Vienna years earlier than originally planned by her father, God rest him. Her grandmother had believed her about the events of that horrible night. But her mother? "*Certainly you're confused, Rebekah. There's no way he would even think of ever doing anything like that. You're his daughter now. He's simply trying to be a loving father. Something for which you should be grateful . . . instead of misconstruing.*"

At her grandmother's urging, Rebekah hadn't confronted him about it. They'd all acted as though it had never happened. At times she wondered if that had been the wisest choice . . . or merely the easiest.

The boy rapped on the front door, three sharp knocks, and when the door finally opened, Rebekah's heart squeezed tight.

Delphia.

The woman was still as round and robust as Rebekah remembered, almost as wide as she was tall. Even at a distance, the cook's apron appeared perfectly starched and gleaming white, same as every day of Rebekah's youth.

Like pearls gliding on a string, her thoughts slipped to Demetrius, and she wondered if Delphia's older brother was there or on an errand, or perhaps in the garden out back that he loved so much. In nearly every letter her grandmother had written, she'd included kind regards from Demetrius, oftentimes along with something witty he'd said.

Of all the people she'd thought about since receiving her mother's letter, she'd thought most of him. Demetrius was the one bright spot about returning. And she could hardly wait to show him what she'd finally mastered, thanks to his patient kindness and all he'd taught her.

She reached into her cloak pocket and pulled out the wood carving she'd carried with her for nearly fifteen years now. The carving was of the dog she'd had as a child. The likeness to the cute little pug—Button—was amazing, as was everything Demetrius carved. He'd told her he simply saw things in pieces of wood and then carved until he'd set them free.

Rebekah watched as Delphia stared down at the boy, hands on her hips, and it occurred to her that she hadn't bothered asking the lad his name before sending him on this errand. Delphia took the newspaper from him—the boy talking as she did, though Rebekah couldn't make out what he was saying—and Delphia slowly shook her head.

So then . . . Rebekah sighed. Her mother *wasn't* home.

Part of her felt disappointment, while the greater part felt relief. So the decision was made. She'd just bought herself another day to work up the courage for her official *homecoming*, and to try to find another place to live, though the two dollars and twenty-four cents in her reticule wouldn't stretch far.

Grandmother Carrington had told her during her last visit to Vienna almost two years ago that, in the event of her passing, she'd laid aside some money for her. Rebekah didn't know how much, but she was grateful. Even a small amount would help until she found a way to support herself.

Delphia spoke to the boy again—this time glancing beyond him to the street—and Rebekah held her breath, waiting for him to turn and give her away.

But he merely shrugged his slim shoulders and tipped his red

cap in a way that drew a smile from the older woman. Something not easily done.

The little urchin was a schemer *and* a charmer.

When the front door closed, the boy retraced his steps to the street. He looked briefly in Rebekah's direction and gave his cap a quick tug, his smile claiming victory. Then he took off at a good clip down the street.

Rebekah watched him go, feeling a peculiar sense of loss when he turned the corner and disappeared from sight. Which was silly. She didn't even know the boy.

Yet she felt beholden to him in a way.

The growling in her stomach redirected her thoughts and dictated her first course of action, so she headed toward the heart of town in search of a place to eat.

But the Nashville she'd tucked into memory years earlier was no more. Everywhere she looked, she saw remnants of the heartache her grandmother had written to her about during those awful years of conflict. What few buildings she did recall seemed to have aged several decades in the past one, their brick façades riddled with bullet holes, the dirt-filmed windows cracked and broken or missing altogether. Such a stark contrast to the opulent wealth and beauty of Vienna.

But what she found most surprising was the number of Federal soldiers walking past or standing grouped at street corners. She had no idea so many were still assigned to the city. Surely their continued presence wasn't helping to mend any fences.

Finally, nearly half an hour later, she discovered a small diner and claimed an open table by the front window, grateful to be out of the cold. Having had only a package of crackers since yesterday afternoon, she splurged on a breakfast of hot cakes, scrambled eggs, and bacon.

By the time her meal arrived, she'd scanned the list of advertised job openings in the *Nashville Banner*, which left her more discouraged than before. She perused the first column again as she ate.

The majority of openings were for factory positions, all of which sought experienced seamstresses. She could sew—if her life depended on it and patrons didn't care if their garments fit properly. But an experienced seamstress? No one would ever accuse her of being that.

And the pay—ranging from thirty to seventy-five cents per week, depending on experience—was scarcely enough to buy food, not to mention a place to live and the barest of necessities.

The porter who had stowed her luggage at the train station warned her that life in Nashville would be far different than when she'd left. He hadn't been exaggerating.

December 2, 1860. The day she'd departed Nashville for Europe, and only a handful of months before war had broken out. And one year, to the day, following her dear father's unexpected passing.

The server returned and wordlessly refilled both Rebekah's water glass and empty cup. The coffee was strong and bitter, and the steam rose, mesmerizing, as she sipped and searched the remaining listings with greater care.

WANTED: EXPERIENCED CHEF FOR NEW HOTEL VENTURE.

She perused the lengthy requirements for the position, secretly impressed with anyone who could meet such stringent expectations. She sighed. She couldn't sew, she couldn't cook.

Why was it that what she knew how to do well seemed so useless? If she were a man, that wouldn't be the case.

As though poking fun at that very thought, a cartoon in a side column caught her attention, and she frowned. The sketch was an obviously satirical depiction of an all-female orchestra. Because the woman in the foreground, the most pronounced, was holding her trombone *backward*. Same for all the other female musicians with their instruments.

Rebekah read the caption beneath the cartoon and her eyes narrowed. *Ladies in Concert*. She huffed. The illustration had been drawn by a man, of course. Of all the—

Just below the cartoon was an article about the New York Philharmonic, a concisely written piece—only a few sentences long—that had originally appeared in the *Washington Daily Chronicle*, according to the first sentence. It announced that the symphony there had recently admitted their first female, a monumental feat of which Rebekah was already aware. But that was all the article said. No musician's name, no mention of what instrument the woman played. Nothing. And the article itself was *dwarfed* by the cartoon. Rebekah shook her head.

Yet she was grateful to the journalist for including even that much. She looked for the reporter's name and finally found it in almost minuscule print following the last sentence. SUBMITTED BY MISS ELIZABETH GARRETT WESTBROOK.

Feeling a sense of womanly solidarity with Miss Westbrook of the *Washington Daily Chronicle*, Rebekah returned her attention to the list of job openings.

SERVERS WANTED: YOUNG, ATTRACTIVE FEMALES ONLY. No description followed that listing, only a postal address. And it didn't take her imagination long to fill in the blanks as to what requirements that job might entail.

Just as she'd noticed the boys living on the streets of Vienna, she'd seen women, even young girls, standing on street corners after dark and loitering in alleys—and she'd glimpsed the same near the docks after disembarking in New York following the voyage. No matter the culture or continent, the baseness of human nature didn't ever seem to change. Which was particularly disheartening, under the circumstances.

She moved to the next column and felt a stab of melancholy at reading the last listing. A governess position. Now that, she was qualified for. She was good at it too, as the Heilig family would attest, if they could. She'd served their family for over two years. Though being a governess was hardly her heart's aspiration.

Especially considering—her eyes widened as she read—she'd be caring for six children. *Six!* She let out a breath. But the remuneration was almost a dollar per week, as well as room and board, and with less than three dollars to her name, she couldn't be choosy.

Not to mention the alternative staring her in the face if she didn't secure a job immediately was ample motivation. So a governess she would be, again, if she could manage to get hired.

She drained the last of her coffee, left enough money on her place setting to cover the meal and a little more, and stood. The young server, about her age, she guessed, was clearing dirty dishes from nearby tables, her apron soiled with stains. Her movements were efficient and experienced, but the stoop in her slender shoulders and the dullness of routine in her expression told a deeper, more touching story.

And suddenly, being employed to teach a family's children didn't seem so poor a prospect.

Rebekah gathered her reticule, newspaper, and satchel and crossed to the door, then remembered and returned for her cloak. Slipping her arms in, she acknowledged the truth hanging at the fringe of her thoughts. She should've stayed in Vienna. She should have searched harder for another way to remain there. She wrapped the woolen garment tightly around herself and shoved the buttons through the buttonholes, her frustration mounting.

But there was no way. She'd searched, she'd tried, however briefly, in the time she'd had. That was why she was standing here now.

She was almost to the door when a gentleman seated nearby opened his newspaper and gave it a good shake, then folded it back on itself. The noise was overloud in the silence, and Rebekah glanced his way. Then paused.

A bolded caption caught her attention.

She read it, then read it again, already telling herself she was foolish to feel hopeful. But the hope inside her paid no mind. With purpose, she returned to her table, withdrew the small glass bottle from her satchel, and poured the remaining water from her glass into it and capped the lid tight.

Once outside, she searched her copy of the newspaper until she found the article. She quickly scanned the newsprint, a cold breeze stinging her cheeks and making it difficult to hold the paper aloft to read.

Her lips moved silently as she devoured the text.

She pulled her father's pocket watch from her cloak and checked the time. Already half past twelve. She winced. She'd never make it. But she had to try.

After all, it wasn't as though she had anything left to lose.

Winded, she stepped into the dimly lit hallway and closed the roughhewn oak door behind her, grateful to be out of the wind and cold. Her legs ached from the freezing trek across town, and her confidence lagged. If only she'd seen the article in the *Nashville Banner* earlier, perhaps her chances of leaving here with a *yes* might've held more promise.

As it was, the advertised time for auditions had ended over an hour

ago, and she could well imagine what conclusions a man such as Mr. Nathaniel T. Whitcomb would draw about a person who was tardy.

Nathaniel T. Whitcomb. Even the man's name bled blue.

According to the newspaper, Mr. Whitcomb hailed from the highest level of society. No surprise there, considering his education at the prestigious Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore, then later at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. Whitcomb's lengthy list of honors was impressive, and was made only more so considering his age.

Only thirty-two. Nine years her senior.

Quite a feat, she had to admit, even if begrudgingly. Yet if past experience proved true—and she felt sure it would—the man was guaranteed to possess an ego to match. That always seemed to be the way with male musicians.

Conductors, in particular.

But far more important than the man's view on punctuality was his opinion about women in the orchestra. If only he was as forward thinking as the article had led her to believe. It indicated the Nashville Philharmonic was still in its infancy, and the newness of the organization could play in her favor. And surely it would help her case that the philharmonic societies of New York and Philadelphia had each recently admitted a female into their ranks.

Still . . .

The South had always been slower to accept change, especially when said change issued from the North. Years had passed since the war, but it was clear scars along those lines continued to fester.

"May I *help* you?" a woman announced, her tone sharp.

Startled, Rebekah turned to see a woman seated behind a desk to her right. The older woman's dour expression proved a good match to the mustiness of the building.

Palms clammy despite the chill, Rebekah approached, not having anticipated this particular hurdle—and silently berating herself for not. She was comfortable with symphony conductors, thanks to her experience in Vienna, but their gatekeepers . . .

They were a dreaded lot. And this one looked particularly formidable.

Best she phrase her request carefully, or she'd find herself back out on the street before she could blink. Her arm aching, she shifted

her satchel from one hand to the other. “Yes, ma’am. I’m certain you *can* help me. Thank you.” Rebekah offered a smile that went unreciprocated. “I’m here to inquire about—”

“The new position,” the woman said, her gaze appraising. “Allow me to guess. . . . You *adore* the symphony, and it’s always been your heart’s deepest desire to somehow be part of it.”

The woman’s none-too-subtle sarcasm assured Rebekah she wasn’t to be trifled with, but it was her slow-coming smile that made Rebekah feel as though the outside cold had somehow worked its way into the room.

Whatever her reason, the woman had apparently taken a disliking to her. Either that, or she simply didn’t like the idea of her applying for the “new position.” But were they even speaking about the *same* position? Instincts told Rebekah they weren’t, but she followed the woman’s lead.

“Thank you again for your offered assistance”—Rebekah glanced at the nameplate on the desk—“Mrs. Murphey. I’m so grateful for your help. And you’re correct. I’ve long appreciated the symphony and would love to be involved with it. In fact, I—”

“Precisely *how* did you learn about it? That’s what I’d like to know.” Rebekah hesitated. “Learn about . . .”

“The position for the conductor’s assistant,” the woman said slowly, as though addressing a daft child.

Rebekah forced a pleasant countenance. She’d learned at a young age that lying was wrong, but there was also such a thing as being too forthcoming. She’d learned that the hard way.

“Actually, Mrs. Murphey, I was speaking with someone this morning about Nashville, and we were discussing how much has changed in recent years. Then I read the article in the newspaper and learned about the new conductor and decided—”

“That you’d try and beat the others to the head of the line.” Mrs. Murphey gave a flat laugh. “Well, you’re too late, Miss . . .”

“Carrington, ma’am.” Rebekah forewent the curtsy she knew wouldn’t be appreciated. “Rebekah Carrington.”

The woman looked her up and down, her gaze hesitating a little too long on Rebekah’s jacket and skirt peeking from beneath the cloak. Rebekah brushed a hand over her attire. Being in mourning,

she'd chosen her dark gray *panné* velvet jacket with matching pleated basque skirt and bustle. It wasn't her most elegant ensemble, but it suited her circumstances. And besides, the fashions in Nashville—at least what she'd glimpsed thus far—were considerably less elegant than Europe, and Vienna, specifically.

“Well, Miss Carrington . . . It befalls me to inform you that scores of young women have already inquired about the position. Women from Nashville's finest families, not to mention daughters of our most generous patrons of the philharmonic. So with that understanding, may I suggest you turn your attention toward other more *promising* employment opportunities. Good day to you.”

Mrs. Murphey returned her focus to the papers atop her desk. But Rebekah didn't move.

Whether it was the woman's abrupt manner or the paralyzing truth about her own dire circumstances, she knew she couldn't leave without exhausting every last ounce of opportunity. And she didn't care one wit about the assistant's position. She'd come here with something far greater in her sights. Something that would turn the dear Mrs. Murphey's already graying hair to a shock of white. An entertaining prospect at the moment.

“Pardon me, Mrs. Murphey.”

The woman's head slowly came up.

“I appreciate your counsel, but I still request that you ask the conductor if he has the time to speak with me. A few moments is all I require.”

Mrs. Murphey stood slowly. “Perhaps I did not make myself clear enough, Miss Carrington. There's no reason for you to expect that—”

“You made yourself perfectly clear, ma'am. But I'm determined to speak with Mr. Whitcomb. So I can do that today. *Now*. Or . . .” Rebekah raised her chin. “I can come back first thing in the morning. And every morning after that.”

The woman's lips thinned. “He's a very busy man, with a most demanding schedule.”

Rebekah set down her case. “Which is why I don't wish to waste his time. Or yours.”

Her sour expression only grew more so. “Very well. Remain here until I return.”

Mrs. Murphey strode down the long corridor, her heels a sharp staccato in the silence.

Rebekah let out a breath, relieved . . . but also not. She stood for a moment, letting the silence settle around her as the musty smell of the opera house tugged at a cherished memory.

The image of her father dressed in his Sunday best, and she in hers, drifted toward her. She remembered that evening so well, although they'd entered through the ornate front doors of the building on that occasion. She'd never forget that night. Her first symphony. A traveling ensemble from New York, her father had explained. The experience had been magical, and changed everything for her. Her father had known it too.

What she wondered, and guessed she would never know for certain, was whether or not it had been his intention for the experience to change everything. Most certainly, it hadn't been her mother's.

Rebekah unbuttoned her cloak but left it on, still chilled, and let her gaze drift.

Peeling plaster walls and warped wooden floors belied the once rich opulence of the building. Yet somehow, the rear corridor of the opera house still managed a regal air, as though the timeless beauty of Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert had seeped into the brick and mortar until it haunted the corridors and side halls with a presence she could all but feel and was certain she would hear in the stillness if she listened closely enough.

A shame the structure was scheduled to be torn down.

The article she'd read earlier recounted the city's plans to have the old opera house demolished soon, then followed with a description of the *new* Nashville Opera House, as it was being touted, scheduled for completion that summer. The details gave every indication of the building being spectacular. But apparently, numerous mishaps had delayed the project's completion.

The most startling being when an upper balcony collapsed during construction. Several workers had been seriously injured, but thankfully, none killed. From the tone of the newspaper column, a bout of scandal had followed involving the city's then mayor and his son, the architect first assigned to the project. Both father and son

had lost their positions and, subsequently, a new architect—from Vienna, of all places—had been appointed to oversee the project.

And any structure in Nashville involving an architect from Vienna was one she intended to see.

As a young girl, she hadn't thought anything about Nashville having an opera house—modest though the building was when compared to those in Europe—but it was quite an impressive claim for so modest-sized a city. Nashville wasn't New York or Philadelphia, after all. But the delights of theater, opera, and symphony were still appreciated. Especially following such a dark time of war.

The journalist had alluded to an “unnamed Nashville benefactor's extravagant generosity” in the construction of the new opera house, which explained how the project was being funded amidst such a depressed economy.

She glanced down the hallway, saw no sign of the gatekeeper, and so took a seat to wait in a chair along the wall. She pulled out her copy of the newspaper and perused the article again, eager for anything that might help her in her meeting with this *Nathaniel T. Whitcomb*.

The reporter emphasized the conductor's penchant for original scores and his leanings toward newer techniques, which she found encouraging. But that it took this much effort simply to get an audience with the man didn't bode well for her chances. She only hoped—

The reprisal of staccato heels drew her attention. But it was the utter consternation darkening the older woman's face that dared her to hope.

Rebekah started to rise.

“Stay seated,” Mrs. Murphey commanded, her tone brittle. “The maestro is with someone at present, so you'll have to wait.”

Hope reared its encouraging head. But . . . the *maestro*?

Rebekah searched the woman's expression. Surely, even with all the acclaim he'd received so early in his career, the man had yet to merit the distinguished title. Still, Mrs. Murphey's expression held not a hint of misgiving.

Fifteen minutes passed, then thirty.

Rebekah waited under the woman's watchful eye.

But when Mrs. Murphey stepped away from her desk, Rebekah furtively reached into her satchel, opened the bottle of water, and

slipped a reed inside. Best to be ready, just in case. Her cherished oboe within wasn't her first instrument, nor her favorite, but it felt like an old friend, and—in light of public opinion regarding women playing the violin—the oboe was a far safer choice for this audition.

She rubbed her hands on her cloak, her nerves getting the best of her. Why was she so anxious? She'd auditioned for a symphony a thousand times—in her dreams.

But could she do it when it really counted?

Nearly two decades of playing or studying music—ten of those in Vienna—should have inured her to the panic in her stomach, especially considering her experience assisting one of Austria's most famous conductors. But assisting a conductor with score preparation and copying musical scores in his home—following dinner and after completing her duties as the governess to his children—was a far cry from being directed by one.

His dear wife, Sophie, once confided to her that Herr Heilig considered her quite talented—for a woman. But he also considered women to be *“far too delicate natured for the rigors of an orchestra.”* So Rebekah had watched—and learned—as much as she could, waiting for the day when she could prove to him that she was, indeed, strong enough.

But that day had never come.

“Miss Carrington?”

Rebekah looked up.

Mrs. Murphey nodded down the corridor. “The maestro is available now. Let's not keep him waiting.”

The sound of footsteps registered, and Rebekah peered down the hallway to see an older gentleman, hat in hand. He paused and glanced her way, his expression severe. Then, with a hasty gait, he departed in the opposite direction. She gathered that his meeting with the maestro hadn't gone as desired.

She only hoped she fared better.



Rebekah thought again of what she was about to do, and a knife of uncertainty cut through her. But this opportunity wouldn't likely come again. At least not for her. She expelled the stale air in her lungs in exchange for fresh and removed her cloak, then draped it over the chair and reached for her leather satchel.

"You *did* bring references with you, I trust, Miss Carrington?"

Rebekah hesitated, then swiftly smoothed her features. "I've brought everything that's required, I assure you."

She hurried down the hallway to avoid further questions, and felt Mrs. Murphey's disapproval boring into her. But it was an uncanny sense of being otherwise observed that drew her gaze to her right.

The eerily similar gazes of esteemed conductors, five in all, stared at her with resolute examination—Mozart, Handel, Beethoven, Bach, and Haydn—their portraits hanging in perfect symmetry, one after another. Each man wore an expression of triumph, as though having been deeply satisfied with his own accomplishments. And with good reason. Yet though their pasty complexions and slightly sagging jowls, captured with such detail by the artists, lent testimony to lives dedicated to perfecting their craft, a day or two in the sun would've done them all considerable good.

She slowed her steps, her gaze settling briefly on Haydn, a favorite Austrian son and the composer honored on the special evening her father had brought her to the opera house. Symphony No. 94 had been performed. One of her favorites. She'd tried to tell her mother

about the experience and recalled her mother's response. "*An indulgence that will come to no good end—mark my words.*"

Perhaps her mother would yet be proven right.

But her father—familiar longing tugged at her emotions—had been the kindest, gentlest man she'd ever known, passing away far too soon and leaving a hole in her life and in her mother's. Which her mother had filled too hastily and without knowing the true character of the man she'd married only five months after Papa died.

An empty space at the end of the row of portraits drew her attention, and she moved closer to read the engraved bronze plaque, similar in size and placement to those beneath the other portraits: NASHVILLE PHILHARMONIC, NATHANIEL TATE WHITCOMB.

Already they had commissioned a portrait of the man to hang beside the greatest composers in history? She shook her head. A dangerous undertaking to feed the ego of a symphony conductor, which that would most certainly do.

Gathering her nerve, she approached the doorway on the left, the one the man had exited earlier, only to find another hallway, shorter, beyond it. She stepped around the corner, eager to exit the scope of Mrs. Murphey's condescending gaze.

She smoothed the front of her bustled skirt as she mentally rehearsed her audition piece. Mozart's Oboe Concerto in C Major. She could play it flawlessly, and had, many times—alone in her room or when demonstrating proper technique to a young student.

But never when so much was at stake.

The partially open office door stood a mere four yards away, but her legs suddenly felt like lead.

It wasn't the audition she feared so much. She knew she could play. What she didn't know, and couldn't predict, was the new conductor's decision. If he said no, where would she go? What would she do? Be a governess? *Again.*

The weight of that possibility, and what it meant for her future, hung like an anvil about her neck.

But anything was better than returning home.

Beneath the weight of the moment, she paused, feeling self-conscious for not having done this in too long a time. *If you're listening, Lord, if you're really as patient and generous-hearted as my father always said,*

then let this Mr. Whitcomb prove more open-minded than his peers. More like the conductor she'd read about in New York last year, or perhaps like Herr Dessoif, a true maestro from the Vienna Philharmonic. *Help me to play with confidence. And please . . . please let him say yes.*

Lifting her head, she fixed her gaze on the door, covered the distance, and raised her hand to knock—

“So you’re telling me your performance Saturday meets your definition of ‘playing with full emotion?’”

Rebekah stilled. The voice coming from the other side of the door was decidedly male—and decidedly displeased.

“Because if that’s the case,” the man continued, “I fear you’re one of the most emotionally *trammeled* musicians I’ve ever encountered.”

“But, sir, I—”

“I trust you’re familiar with the definition of *mezzo forte*?”

Sarcasm thickened the rhetorical question, and the very air seemed to crackle with it.

“Of course, I am, sir. But—”

“*Moderately loud* is the meaning of the term. And yet you play as though the bars in question were marked *pianissimo*. I could scarcely hear you. *You* are the concertmaster! I expect you to display the leadership and ability a musician of your experience should possess. And to play as though you actually have an ounce of passion for the music, instead of merely *regurgitating* the notes on the page.”

“But, Maestro, I’m quite certain that I, along with the other violinists—”

“Did you or did you not hear what Edward Pennington, the director of the symphony board, said to us just now? Our performances must be *sharper, better, more evocative*.” An exasperated sigh. “Confirm with the section leaders that everyone received the new rehearsal schedule. Monday’s practice will now be at seven o’clock in the morning, and no excuses from *anyone* about the schedule conflicting with jobs. Each man made a commitment when I accepted him into this orchestra, and I expect each to live up to his word. That will be all.”

Dismissal punctuated the man’s already sharp tone, and alarmed at the possibility of being discovered standing out here listening, Rebekah scurried to put distance between her and the office—

When the door opened wide.

A man strode from the room, face flushed, features dark with anger. But seeing her, he stopped.

Rebekah knew instantly that he wasn't Nathaniel Tate Whitcomb. Because this man was no stranger. She knew his face. Or more rightly, a younger version of it.

His eyes narrowed, as though he, too, were sifting back through time to more youthful years.

"*Rebekah?*" He said the name almost like a curse, surprise thinning his voice. "Rebekah Carrington." He spoke with certainty this time, and even greater displeasure.

But it was the look in his eyes—the animosity Rebekah remembered only too well—that caused the slender thread of hope she'd had for this audition to snap clean in two.

"Darrow Fulton," she said softly, the name resurfacing despite years of attempting to forget it. Her childhood nemesis, at least in a musical sense. The same age as she, he'd taken violin lessons from Mr. Colton just as she had, his hour coming always right before hers. And somehow Darrow still managed to be there to torment her as she was walking home.

How many taunts had he thrown her way? How many bows had he broken? Her skill had never exceeded his, as Mr. Colton had always reminded her. The violin master had made it clear that he thought teaching girls was a waste, but her father's generous payment for lessons had somehow served as adequate persuasion. But the fact that she'd been close to Darrow Fulton's equal—at least at one time—had more than rankled her childhood nemesis. It seemed he had hated her for it.

The scrape of a chair in the office beyond broke the tense silence between them, and Darrow briefly glanced back in that direction. A flicker of embarrassment crossed his features before his expression went hard again.

"Finally back from Europe, I see. After all these years." A smile formed, though not a friendly one. "Dear ol' grandmother kicks the bucket and the money runs out." He made a *tsking* noise. "Pity."

The emotion that had threatened earlier wrapped around her throat like a three-strand cord and pulled taut. But she kept her composure, choosing to focus instead on the abuse he'd inflicted

in her youth. Only now she had the strength of womanhood—and perspective—to fight back.

“I’ll tell you what’s *pitiful*, Mr. Fulton.” Her voice held steady despite the hammering in her chest. “That after all these years, it appears you haven’t changed. Not one bit. Now *that* is what I find most pitiful.”

The creak of a door sounded.

“Mrs. Murphey, I instructed you to—”

Rebekah looked past Darrow and found herself staring at Nathaniel T. Whitcomb. Only, he looked nothing like she’d expected, or like any other symphony conductor she’d ever seen. This man wasn’t the least bit pasty or weak. And nothing about him sagged either.

With a firm-set jaw, lean, muscular build, and piercing blue eyes, he seemed better suited for cross-examining a witness or ripping trees up by their roots than penning a sonata or conducting Beethoven’s Fifth. Except for the beard. The beard, a cross between neatly trimmed and days-old stubble, gave him an air of casual distinction that firmly placed him in the category of musician.

Commanding was the first thought that came to her mind—*exceptionally handsome* was the second—and the combination threw her off-balance.

Darrow Fulton brushed past her, giving her a look that said their conversation wasn’t over, and Rebekah swiftly found herself standing alone with the man who unknowingly held the bits and pieces of a dying dream in the palms of his hands.



Not another daughter of a rich patron . . .

Tate growled inwardly. How many of these vexatious creatures did they expect him to tolerate?

When Mrs. Murphey had told him that a young woman was here to interview for the assistant’s position, he’d cut her off midsentence, tempted to refuse the meeting altogether. Time was scarce. And he was certain he’d already interviewed every young woman in the state of Tennessee.

But he needed the funds the wealthy patrons supplied and knew what he had to do to mollify them—meet their daughters. Though granted, this particular daughter was particularly lovely and had an air of maturity the others thus far had lacked. His gaze lingered briefly on her high-collared shirtwaist and jacket.

She wasn't flaunting her womanly *charms* as the others had either. At least not yet. Sometimes the longer these meetings went, the more *warm-natured* the young women became.

"I'll grant you five minutes, Miss . . ." He couldn't remember her name, if Mrs. Murphey had even told him.

"Carrington, sir," she supplied a little too eagerly. "Rebekah Carrington."

The last name didn't strike a chord with him, but he was still becoming familiar with this circle of society, and the list of Nashville Philharmonic benefactors. The list was surprisingly lengthy, ranging from one-time givers to those more committed, though the list needed to be lengthier still, considering the construction costs of the new opera house and the plans for growth the board had proposed.

Which meant the inaugural symphony in June—scarcely six months away—had to be an overwhelming success in every way. Winning the public's support was paramount, as were lucrative ticket sales and, of course, excellent musical content.

The musicians under his direction were fair at best. But what could he expect when he'd been handed an odd collection of music teachers, college professors, and amateurs to form Nashville's first philharmonic? Despite numerous practices over the past few weeks, they needed to be *so* much better than they were. Same for the symphony he was writing.

Or rather . . . attempting to write.

The philharmonic board had agreed to give him time to compose. But their directive was clear—they wanted a symphonic masterpiece in exchange. No pressure there.

He could feel the lifeblood of the music deep within him, but the notes refused to find their way onto the page. At times, mainly in the wee hours of the night when the world was still and the muse stubbornly silent, he wondered if he could do it. Then wondered if, in the process, he might be going a little mad.

For the umpteenth time that day, the dreaded *tick-tick-tick* of the infernal clock inside him rose to a deafening thrum.

“After you, ma’am.” He gestured the young woman inside his office, eager to be done and on his way to the train station. He glanced at the clock on the mantel, then at the box from the apothecary in the corner, thinking of another place a world away.

He could *not* miss the last train today.

“Thank you, Mr. Whitcomb, for agreeing to see me.” The young woman flashed a nervous smile as she claimed the wingback chair opposite his. “Mrs. Murphey conveyed that you’re quite busy, so I appreciate your sparing the time for me.”

He nodded and smiled, a useful gesture he was swiftly perfecting.

“The way you describe what it’s like to conduct an orchestra, sir, the methods you use . . .” Her eyes widened. “I read this morning’s article in the *Nashville Banner* and found it most enlightening. Especially the section the reporter included about how you—”

“Miss Carrington . . .” He held up a hand. “I’m honored you read the article. But . . . I’m aware of its contents. And you have only four minutes remaining. So perhaps it would be best to get directly to the subject at hand.”

Her smile dimmed, and the eager sparkle in her eyes dissolved to desperation. “Of course.” She clutched the brown leather satchel in her lap. “From what I’ve gathered, sir, you’re a forward-thinking man. A true visionary in terms of the symphony and conducting. The strides you’ve made are so admirable and . . .”

Tate watched her as she spoke, gradually feeling more and more disappointed, yet unable to pinpoint why. Then it came to him. He’d somehow hoped for so much more from this woman. She was attractive—exceptionally so—with reddish-blond hair that set off keen hazel eyes. And her attire was quite elegant, even by Nashville’s wealthiest standards.

But it was the intelligence in her expression, the way she held her head erect, and the direct manner in which she met his gaze—straight on, not in the least demure or simpering, as though she considered herself his equal—that had led him to hope for more. But as it was . . .

She apparently needed some help. And though it was out of character for him, he decided to lend her a hand.

“So having said all that, Mr. Whitcomb, I—”

“Are you well studied in the area of music, Miss Carrington?”

Her mouth, momentarily clamped shut, slipped open. “Yes, sir. I am. But what I’m trying to tell you is—”

“And can you transcribe a concerto?”

“Of course, but what I’m here to—”

“And a good cup of coffee. Stout, not bitter. Is that also in your repertoire?”

She searched his gaze. “Have you been listening to what I’ve been saying, Mr. Whitcomb?”

He heard a spark of displeasure in her voice, and genuinely smiled. Intelligent *and* spirited. He wished now that the decision of whom to hire as his assistant was really up to him. The board insisted it was, but everyone knew the truth, which made the charade of meeting their daughters even more infuriating. The position would ultimately go to the highest bidder, and he had a good idea of whose daughter would be awarded the position.

The very thought filled him with dread.

“Of course, I’ve been listening, Miss Carrington. I was merely outlining some of the duties required of my assistant. However . . .” He regretted this more than she would, he was certain. “I’m afraid the position has already been filled. But,” he added quickly, “if you’ll leave your address with Mrs. Murphey, we’ll be certain to contact you should the situation change.” Which was doubtful, but a fellow could hope.

He started to rise.

“Mr. Whitcomb.” She lifted her hand. “I need to say something to you, sir.”

More than slightly impressed with her assertiveness, Tate settled back in his chair, his interest sufficiently piqued.

“I didn’t come here today, sir, to interview for the position of your assistant. However *important* and esteemed a position I’m certain that is.”

He didn’t think he imagined the trace of sarcasm in her tone, yet he couldn’t account for it either. Had he offended this woman in some way? Apparently so, but . . . *how*? Eager to find out, he gestured. “Continue.”

“I’m here . . .” She paused to open her satchel, then withdrew a case. “To audition for you. For the open seat of oboe. *If you will allow me, Mr. Whitcomb.*”

There weren’t many ways to surprise him anymore. But this woman had managed to find one. “*You want to audition for the open oboe chair?*” As soon as he said it, he heard the disbelief in his voice and could well gauge what reaction that would draw from her.

Her brow knit tight, and determination swiftly replaced the desperation in her expression. “That’s correct. I’m a fine oboe player and would appreciate the opportunity to audition for you. I know the formal auditions are officially over, but I only found out about them this morning.”

She opened the case and began assembling the instrument, which looked slightly shorter than the usual oboe. The fingering system looked different as well.

“Miss Carrington, I—”

“Don’t decide anything until you’ve heard me play. *Please,*” she added softly.

“Miss Carrington,” he said again, growing less impressed with her assertiveness as the seconds ticked by. All she’d said at the outset was merely flattery to prime the pump. He realized that now. But what she was asking was completely out of the question.

He’d be run out of town on a rail if he allowed a woman in the orchestra. And if the continued success of his own career didn’t hold enough importance to discourage him from such a foolhardy consideration, the circumstances in his personal life certainly did.

Regardless of his opposition to the idea of females being admitted to symphonies in general, for a host of reasons—not the least of which was what it would do to the already tenuous concentration of the current members under his direction—admitting a woman, no matter how talented, would be the equivalent of throwing away everything he’d worked so hard for—including the symphony he was writing for the upcoming inaugural concert.

Seeing the intensity in her expression, he continued. “The Nashville Philharmonic is comprised solely of males, of which I’m quite certain you’re aware.”

“Yes, sir, I am.” She continued to adjust the upper and lower joints

of the instrument. “But things don’t always have to stay the way they are. Isn’t that what you said? In the article?”

Now the woman was quoting his own words back to him?

She withdrew a reed from a bottle of water and placed it on her tongue, holding it between her lips as she finished tightening the connections on the oboe. Tate had seen this simple gesture performed countless times by musicians, but watching her do it was different, and garnered his attention in a way the simple routine hadn’t before. Which made him infinitely grateful she wasn’t watching him as he was watching her.

She held the upper joint, inserted the reed, and licked her lips, pressing them together intermittently as she did. “I’ll be playing Mozart’s Oboe Concerto in C Major.”

“Miss Carrington.” Tate shifted in his chair, still mesmerized by her mouth. “I would prefer it if you wouldn’t—”

She began playing, and he fell silent. Not because the music she played was so exquisite—though it *was* beautiful—but because he could see her fingers trembling as she played, yet the music itself reflected none of that fear.

She played pianissimo at first but with a deepness and clarity not only of note, but of soul. Her skill was hardly flawless, but he could *feel* her passion for the heart of the piece and wished Mr. Fulton was here to witness it too.

This was what he’d been trying to describe to the man, but had failed, judging by Fulton’s confused expression. Darrow Fulton’s skill with the violin was exemplary. He was the finest musician among the fifty men who comprised Nashville’s newly formed philharmonic. Darrow simply didn’t love the instrument as a man with his level of talent ought. And the remainder of the musicians were ragtag compared to this. *To her.*

Drawn deeper into the music, Tate could all but hear the orchestra’s accompaniment playing behind her, and Miss Carrington kept in perfect tempo. Her timing was excellent, and her vibrato . . . pure pleasure. She managed the descending arpeggio with practiced ease, and he closed his eyes and allowed himself to be carried along on the fluidity of the score.

This particular concerto was a personal favorite, and he anticipated

each shift—*allegro aperto, adagio ma non troppo*, and finally *allegretto*—and wasn't disappointed once. Disappointment came only when she finished.

And even then, the silence seemed to hover on the edge of the last lingering note, as though sharing his momentary regret.

Not wanting to open his eyes yet, he did so anyway, and discovered hers still closed, the instrument resting in her lap.

"Miss Carrington . . ." He spoke softly, aware of the rapid rise and fall of her chest and recognizing the blissful aftermath of having experienced the power of music flowing through her. Just as this music had flowed through Mozart a hundred years ago, and through myriad other musicians who'd performed the piece in the years between. Though he'd wager few had performed it with this woman's skill and passion.

Still . . .

All he could think about was . . . *What a gift*. Followed by a second thought that stung even before it was fully formed . . . *What a shame*.

Finally, she opened her eyes, their hazel color having taken on a deeper hue, and he read a singular question in her gaze—one he wished he didn't have to answer.

"Well done." His voice sounded overloud in the silence between them. "That was . . . exquisite. Thank you."

She smiled, and he was surprised at how much he would have given in that moment to be deserving of such warmth and gratitude from her.

"But," he continued, the weight in his chest bearing down hard, "what you're asking, as I said before, is not possible. I'm sorry."

She blinked, and the beauty of the moment faded. "But . . . you just said—"

"I know what I said, Miss Carrington. And I meant it. Every word. But the fact remains, you are a woman. And women—"

"Aren't allowed to play in orchestras."

He let the silence answer for him.

"Are you aware, Mr. Whitcomb, that the philharmonic societies of New York—"

"—and Philadelphia have each admitted women into their memberships. Yes, I am aware."

“And yet?” she responded, incredulity edging an even tone.

“And yet we are in Nashville, Tennessee. Not in New York or Philadelphia. And the fact remains that the majority of people in this city, and certainly those who have pledged to financially support the symphony, as well as those we hope to draw to the box office, are not of that same mind. At least not for the present. But who knows what the future will bring, Miss Carrington.”

“It won’t bring anything new, Mr. Whitcomb, if those of us in the *present* don’t work toward change. Toward bettering our society and *all* of those who comprise it.”

Tate studied her, admiring her zeal—and courage—while also wondering how on earth he’d ever gotten himself into this situation. He blamed the reporter and that blasted article. Nothing good ever came from speaking with a journalist.

He rose from his chair, hoping she would follow his lead. She did, slowly, and with a sadness that caused his chest to ache.

The clock on the mantel chimed the half hour, and he glanced over.
Half past four?

The last train left in one hour, and he had to be on it.

“Miss Carrington, I offer you my sincerest apology, ma’am, but I must ask you to excuse me. I have a pressing appointment that I cannot reschedule. So again, accept my thanks for the pleasure of hearing you play, and know that I, most sincerely, wish you all the best.”

The words felt patronizing coming off his tongue, and—judging by her injured expression—she took them as such.

“I appreciate your time, Mr. Whitcomb. And I certainly don’t wish to detain you further.” She quickly disassembled the instrument and slipped it back into the satchel. “Good day.”

Tate accompanied her as far as the hallway, though she didn’t acknowledge him, nor did he blame her.

He retrieved his packed suitcase and portfolio from his office, grabbed the box filled with bottles of laudanum, and raced to the train station.



Rebekah hurriedly retraced her steps down the rear corridor of the opera house, disappointment clawing the back of her throat. *“Accept my thanks for the pleasure of hearing you play, and know that I, most sincerely, wish you all the best.”*

Could the man have been more condescending?

Gaze fixed on the exit ahead, she was grateful beyond words that Mrs. Murphey was nowhere in sight. Now, if she could only make it outside before the knot in her throat broke loose and—

“Bite your tongue, Matilda Murphey! I wouldn’t wish being employed by that woman on my worst enemy, much less—”

From an open side door, Mrs. Murphey stepped into the hallway, and Rebekah stopped abruptly to avoid colliding with her.

Their gazes locked, and Rebekah found that even without words the woman could still wound.

“Ah, Miss Carrington . . .” Mrs. Murphey’s eyes narrowed, and her expression dripped with unmistakable *I told you so*. “I take it your interview didn’t go as hoped?”

Rebekah glanced at the door at the end of the corridor. So close, and yet still so far. “No, ma’am . . . It did not.”

Another woman stepped from behind Mrs. Murphey, about the same age, it appeared. Rebekah sensed her focused attention and braced herself to meet it as she shifted to face her. But she found only kindness there.

“Oh, my dear, are you all right?” The sweetness in the woman’s voice was nearly Rebekah’s undoing.

“She’s fine, Agnes,” Mrs. Murphey supplied. “I tried to warn her about interviewing for the assistant’s position but she would have none of it. She insisted on wasting the maestro’s time.”

“Well . . .” Agnes gave Rebekah’s arm a brief squeeze. “Who can blame a lovely young woman for wanting to improve herself with new experiences? Not to mention vying for a chance to work with such a fine man.” Her cheeks puckered as she smiled and winked. “But never you mind, dear, I’m sure you’ll find another position soon enough.”

Eyes burning, Rebekah managed a nod. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“The name’s Mrs. Bixby, dear. And you’re so welcome.”

“Well . . .” Rebekah dipped her head. “If you’ll both excuse me, I best be on my way.”

She was halfway to freedom when someone called her name. The patronizing tone assured her it was Mrs. Murphey. The woman must have taken lessons in intonation from *the maestro*. Remembering what he’d said—“*Well done. That was exquisite*”—only deepened the ache in her throat. Why say such things when he didn’t truly mean them?

Clenching her jaw to stem the tears, she turned back to find Mrs. Murphey smiling. Rebekah’s guard instinctively rose.

“I’ve only recently—in the past hour, in fact—been made privy to a position that’s currently open. I thought you might be interested. Considering your lack of success here.”

“Matilda, *no*.” Mrs. Bixby shook her head. “I don’t think—”

“That Miss Carrington is qualified?”

Agnes Bixby frowned. “That wasn’t what I was going to say at all. It’s only that—”

Mrs. Murphey shushed her with a wave of her hand. “Do you have experience being a governess, Miss Carrington?”

Rebekah looked between the two women, reading concern in one expression and irrefutable challenge in the other. Clearly, Mrs. Murphey had an agenda, and Rebekah was certain the woman didn’t have her best interests at heart. Far from it. But she needed employment and was willing to sacrifice her pride in order to gain it. Because employment was the only way to escape living at home.

With *him*.

“Yes, ma’am.” She lifted her chin. “I have experience, and references.”

“Well, then . . .” The sparkle in Mrs. Murphey’s gaze turned almost catlike. “This is, indeed, your lucky day. Inasmuch as you’re not averse to hard work, of course, and to truly applying yourself.”

Imagining again the shock of white hair on the woman’s head, Rebekah added a face full of wrinkles to match. And maybe a wart or two. “I’m not afraid of hard work, Mrs. Murphey, and I *am* in need of employment. So if you’re privy to a position with a family, I’d be obliged if you’d share the information with me.” She only hoped it wasn’t the family with six children she’d read about in the *Nashville Banner*.

“Oh, I’ll do better than that, Miss Carrington. I’ll write it down for you.” With a jaunt in her step, Mrs. Murphey crossed to the desk and put pen to paper.

“I still think”—Mrs. Bixby came alongside them—“it would be best if Miss Carrington were to—”

“It’s best to let her decide for herself, Agnes. If there’s one thing I’ve learned very quickly about Miss Carrington, it’s that she prefers to make up her *own* mind. Isn’t that correct . . . Miss Carrington?”

Mrs. Murphey handed her the slip of paper. On it was a name and an address, neither of which were familiar to her.

Rebekah slipped the piece of paper into her pocket. “Thank you, Mrs. Murphey.” The words came more easily than she’d imagined. “And to you as well, Mrs. Bixby. Your kindness is much appreciated,” she added softly, gaining a bit of satisfaction when seeing Mrs. Murphey’s frown.

Eager to leave, she retrieved her cloak and hurried outside. She paused on the street long enough to slip into her cloak and wrap the woolen garment around herself. A cold wind bit her cheeks, making her eyes water, helped along by the memory of what Mr. Whitcomb had said. . . .

“I meant it. Every word. But the fact remains, you are a woman.”

Was it possible that a portion of his compliments had been sincere? That he’d considered her skillful—only . . . not skillful enough? Or was it solely her gender that had informed his decision?

Whichever it was, she guessed it didn’t matter. Because in the end, whatever the reason, she hadn’t earned her place in the orchestra. And yet . . .

It did matter. It mattered a great deal.

She made her way down the street, frustration and chill quickening her pace. The thoroughfares were less crowded than earlier, the skies a touch grayer, and her outlook far less hopeful. How would she ever be able to overcome an obstacle she couldn't change?

The question wasn't a new one for her.

God had made her a woman. He'd planted the love of music in her heart from the very beginning, her father had always said. He'd recounted for her the many times he'd caught her sitting at her open bedroom window, late at night, listening to the music coming from the slave cabins just over the hill. God had gifted her with the desire and ability to play, an ability she'd worked for years to perfect.

So why would the Creator have placed that love inside her if not for a purpose? And why put people in her life to help her toward that goal—*dear Demetrius*—if performing wasn't part of God's plan for her life?

Thinking of Demetrius made her think of home, and home reminded her of decisions—and confrontations—that awaited. While she couldn't delay returning home forever, she could at least postpone it one more night. She checked her pocket watch. It was too late in the day now to call on the family about the governess position. But tomorrow was Friday, so she would seek an interview bright and early in the morning. Best find a place to stay for the night.

First, however, she needed to return to the train station to make arrangements for the trunks she'd left in the porter's care. He'd made it clear she couldn't leave them there overnight, but a man in his position would be able to recommend a reputable hotel or boarding room. She'd have him deliver the trunks there.

She headed back in that direction, her satchel heavy in her grip, her mind churning.

Nathaniel T. Whitcomb.

Perturbed when her thoughts returned yet again to the man, a third suitable descriptor for him came to her, besides *commanding* and *exceptionally handsome*.

The man was *supercilious*, most definitely thinking quite highly of himself. The way he'd stared at her, as though he couldn't believe she would deem herself worthy to audition for him.

The maestro, indeed.

Then again, the one time she'd chanced to briefly open her eyes while she played, she'd discovered his own eyes closed, and his expression leaning toward what was almost certainly appreciation. Even pleasure. At least at the time. Until the flippant manner in which he'd chosen to end her audition. And her dreams.

"I must ask you to excuse me. I have a pressing appointment that I cannot reschedule." She laughed beneath her breath. A pressing appointment. At the very least, he could have been honest and simply asked her to leave.

She rounded the corner, and the question that had reared its ugly head earlier returned with renewed vigor.

What if she had been given this ability, this desire to play, for some purpose other than playing in an orchestra? What if scaling a descending arpeggio on her oboe—her fingers expert on the keys, the music flowing from deep within her through the instrument, born of her very life's breath—was simply intended for her own pleasure? Or when she cradled the violin, holding the instrument firmly but gently, as one might hold a fragile bird—with enough conviction so it wouldn't skedaddle away, yet gentle so as not to crush it—what if that was for her delight alone?

Yet how did she balance that with the fact that when she played—the violin, especially—she felt more alive, purposeful, closer to God, and at home within herself than at any other time in her life?

The shrill blast of a train whistle jerked her back to the present, and she paused for a second, waiting for her thoughts to catch up. She was only three or four blocks from the station at most.

Wishing again that the afternoon wasn't so far gone and she could call upon the family about the governess position, she pulled the slip of paper from her pocket and read Mrs. Murphey's tight, even script.

Mrs. Adelia Cheatham. Belmont Estate.

Rebekah stared at the name, searching the distant past for any shred of remembrance. She did the same with the estate, which seemed vaguely familiar to her. But . . .

Nothing firm.

Her grandmother, God rest her, had been faithful in her letter writing through the years. Remembering her handwriting—shakier

as she'd gotten older—tightened Rebekah's heart with grief. Yet she'd also been faithful not to share overmuch about Nashville and the families in their acquaintance. Which proved just as well. Because whenever Nana had shared, the majority of the news had included countless deaths of fathers and sons in the war, followed by the losses of family homes and property.

Another blast sounded, and a telltale plume of smoke and cinders rose above the buildings in the near distance. Rebekah hurried on, mindful of the icy streets and eager to retrieve her luggage from the hold and secure lodging for the night.



Winded, Tate reached the station platform just as the final train whistle blasted and sent a billow of smoke lofting into the late-afternoon sky. The gray clouds were beginning to make good on their threat, and a fine mist fell like icy lace over the plank wood beneath his boots. He paused to allow an elderly couple to precede him on the walkway.

The detour he'd taken by his house had cost precious time, but after promising Opal he'd bring this—he patted his coat pocket—with him on his next trip, he couldn't very well show up without it. Her smile would be worth it.

A porter knelt to pull up the step, then saw him and paused, and said something to him. But the man spoke so softly, Tate couldn't understand him.

"Beg your pardon?" Tate offered, having seen the man before.

"I said . . . You almost missed it, Maestro Whitcomb."

"That, I did." Tate glanced at the name sewn on the front pocket of the man's jacket, knowing he should be familiar with the employee's name by now. "I appreciate you holding her for me, Mr. Barrett."

The man beamed. "My pleasure, sir. Headed to Knoxville again? Important symphony work, I imagine."

Tate briefly looked away. "The symphony keeps me busy."

Barrett nodded. "Nice article in the paper this morning, sir. I'm saving up to surprise the missus by taking her to one of your concerts. She's

always wanted to go.” His expression turned sheepish. “I’ve never been too keen on that kind of music myself, but . . .” He stood a little straighter. “No reason I can’t give myself a little extra culture for one night.”

Tate laughed. “There’s a concert three weeks from tonight. An evening with Ries and Bach.”

“They local fellows?”

Tate smiled, deciding not to elaborate. “Visit the box office before the show. There’ll be two complimentary tickets waiting for you.”

The man’s expression faltered. “No kiddin’, sir?”

Tate clapped him on the shoulder. “No kiddin’, Mr. Barrett. Only thing is . . . now I’ll be nervous knowing you’re there.”

Tate climbed aboard, the porter’s laughter following him inside. He kept his gaze averted from the other passengers and chose a seat toward the back, away from others. Not that any of them would recognize him. Anyone who might would more likely be traveling toward the back, in the first-class passenger cars—far from the bothersome soot and cinders.

Hence, why he’d chosen this one.

The air in the passenger car was frigid, and also ripe with humanity. So after stowing his bag in the overhead rack, he cracked open his window a little and settled in for the trip. Nearly four hours, but the distance and time traveling never bothered him. He’d always slept well on a train. And after the week he’d had, sleep sounded marvelous.

He leaned back, crossing his arms and brushing an envelope protruding from his coat pocket—the note Mrs. Murphey had shoved into his hand as he left the opera house. Sighing, he rubbed his eyes.

Guessing who the missive was from, he debated whether to open it now or leave it for later. But considering the donation the sender had recently pledged, he lifted the flap.

The fine deckle-edged stationery confirmed his suspicions, and as his gaze moved over the page and down to the elegant signature in closing, he heard the woman’s genteel, yet somehow strikingly authoritative voice . . .

Dear Maestro Whitcomb,

It is with extraordinary pleasure that I congratulate you once again on your impressive accomplishment in being named the Nashville

Philharmonic's first official conductor. We are most honored to have you in our midst, and I consider it a privilege to partner with you in laying a firm foundation for our symphony. Your exemplary leadership coupled with lavish support from the most loyal patrons will be the brick and mortar of our success. But, of course, you understand that full well.

Tate had to smile. Mrs. Adelia Cheatham was certainly diplomatic—he gave her that. Better she simply say, “I’m giving the symphony exorbitant amounts of money and, in exchange, expect the new conductor to be at my beck and call.”

Curbing a slight scowl, he continued on.

Thank you for agreeing to be an honored guest at my upcoming dinner party, and also for your gracious offer to arrange a string quartet for the evening of this Saturday, only two days hence.

Gracious offer? He still had no idea how she'd managed to rope him into doing it. In fact, thinking back on it, he couldn't remember saying yes. She'd simply acted as though it were a given.

If the woman wasn't so rich, he would've been tempted to check his wallet when she'd left his office that day.

Is there any more ethereal music than that of the violin and cello? If such a sound exists, it has yet to fall upon these ears. Please remember to include Mozart's Spring Quartet, for it is among my favorites.

You, of course, will be an honored guest, and I will consider it my personal duty to introduce you to everyone in attendance. While several of the guests have already agreed to partner with the symphony, many have not. We will combine our efforts to make converts of them yet!

The event begins promptly at eight o'clock, so please arrive with your musicians no later than one hour prior, as my husband, Dr. William Cheatham, and I wish for the timeless strains of the masters to greet our guests as they step into the entrance hall. Is there anything more welcoming on a cold winter's eve than the warmth of candlelight in a window and Beethoven beckoning you in?

Personally, he could think of a few things. Yet there *was* a certain Mozart concerto—and musician—that came to mind as being

exceptionally pleasing. Thoughts of Miss Carrington challenged his concentration as he scanned the last paragraph of the letter.

In addition to Mozart's Spring Quartet, Mrs. Cheatham requested several other pieces to be performed, but he gave her preferences little heed. The woman could command a performance, but not what instrumental pieces to perform.

He had to maintain *some* control.

He folded the letter and returned the envelope to his pocket as another woman took precedence in his thoughts. He welcomed the change, even if the similarities Miss Carrington shared with the author of the letter were a tad alarming. Both determined and decisive, the two women knew what they wanted and weren't afraid to pursue it.

But Miss Carrington's pursuits were so far outside the boundaries of acceptable, not even the independent-minded Adelia Cheatham would approve.

Miss Carrington had entered his office with an agenda, yet left with it decidedly unfulfilled. Which had given him no pleasure. Where had she learned to play like that? With such precise yet fluid grace? At none of the conservatories he'd attended, that was certain. Women weren't admitted, and rightly so. They would be a distraction. Just as she most certainly would be in his orchestra. She was . . .

Exquisite was the word that came to mind. And it suited both her talent and her physical attributes. She was—

"But I requested that you keep the luggage *here*, sir! I only gave you that address in the event that I—"

"I'm sorry, miss. But it wasn't me. I did like you said and set the luggage aside. Another porter must've seen it and had it delivered a while ago. Again, my apologies."

The conversation drifting in through the window caught Tate's attention, but it was the exasperated sigh that brought his head around.

It was *her*.

He leaned forward to peer through the rivulet-streaked window, the icy mist having turned to rain.

"I can arrange for a carriage, ma'am," the porter continued, tone earnest. "Stand over there beneath the awning, and I'll—"

"No." Miss Carrington shook her head. "I don't need a carriage,

sir. What I *need* is for my trunks to *not* have been delivered to my—” Her lips firmed. She closed her eyes, and Tate felt more than saw a shudder pass through her.

The train lurched forward, and he fought the urge to get off and go to her. Try to help, if he could. Not that she would welcome his assistance. Not the way things had been left between them. And since someone else was waiting for him at the other end of the tracks, someone who *would* welcome him . . .

He turned in his seat to watch her as the train pulled away. She bowed her head, her shoulders gently trembling.

Soaked from the rain and trembling with cold, Rebekah raised her hand to knock on the front door—

The door jerked open.

She steeled herself for the wounded—no, *furious*—expression on her mother’s face. But found herself instead staring into depths of deep brown love and warm concern instead.

“Land sakes, child!” Delphia grabbed her by the arm and drew her across the threshold into a hug that would’ve crushed a slighter woman. “It’s about time, Miss Rebekah! We been waitin’ on you.”

“I’m s-sorry for being late. And”—Rebekah’s chin shook—“for b-being so wet.”

“A little water ain’t killed me yet, child.” Delphia’s breath was warm against her cheek. “Oh, it’s good to have you home, Miss Rebekah.”

Unable to remember the last time she’d been hugged this way, Rebekah relished the warmth and the woman’s familiar scent—like warm sugar cookies and love. A savory scent intermingled with the sweet, and in a blink, Rebekah was carried back to earlier years.

“But, Lawd . . .” Delphia held her at arm’s length. “I got one thing wrong for sure.”

Rebekah searched her expression.

“You ain’t no child no more. Is you, ma’am? Just look at them curves.”

Rebekah smiled. “But *you* look exactly the same, Delphia. You look wonderful.”

The woman’s grin shone bright when she laughed. “If by wonderful

you mean fat and full o' sass, then that I am." She squeezed Rebekah's hands. "Gracious, you chilled to the bone. You shoulda sent the porter to fetch the carriage." Delphia shook her head. "But you here now, and that's what matters. Now, let's get that door shut 'fore the freezin' moves in and gives us all the fever."

Rebekah stood in the entrance hall, regretting the water marks she was leaving and feeling even more like a stranger in this house than she'd feared.

Crystal and bronze oil lamps flickered on mahogany side tables that had been shined to a high polish. The tables had belonged to her paternal grandparents, crafted from a tree her grandfather had felled when he and her grandmother first married. Rebekah remembered playing beneath the tables as a child, and the countless times her father must have clearly spotted her during their games of hide-and-seek, yet never let on.

Odd, the childhood moments one remembered.

Odder still that, though she knew better, she half expected her grandmother to walk around the corner at any moment, arms outstretched to greet her, smile at the ready. Still so hard to believe she was gone.

The clock on the mantel faithfully marked time's irrepressible march, while matching the cadence of a phrase repeating in her mind. *I should have stayed in Vienna. I should have stayed in Vienna. I should have stayed in Vienna.*

And for the thousandth time, she attempted to silence the voice.

She was here, *home*, with her mother likely only a room away, and all she could think about was leaving again. The distant relationship between them wasn't right. She'd always known theirs was a different sort of kinship, and she hoped to change that now that she was grown. But how to begin such a long and uncharted journey? Especially when she wasn't sure whether her mother shared that desire.

"Give me that cloak, Miss Rebekah, and let's start gettin' you warmed up. I'll tell Rosie to get a fire goin' in your bedroom too."

Rebekah surrendered the sodden garment and waited, shivering, for Delphia to return. When she did, Rebekah's earlier suspicion about her grandmother's death rose again to the surface.

"How did she die?" she asked quietly, hoping to get more details.

"I found her in her bed upstairs. It was still early, sun just peekin' up. Your grandmama always did like a cup of hot tea first thing. Said it helped her wake up with the day." Delphia sighed. "Only, she didn't wake up that mornin'."

"Had she been sick? Or not feeling well?"

Delphia stilled and looked at her, then hurriedly hung the cloak on the coat rack. "Not that I recall, ma'am. But . . . you know how it is. All our days are numbered by the Lawd. It was just her time, I guess."

Not fully convinced, Rebekah nodded.

A moment passed, and Delphia's arm came around her waist. "But look at you now, Miss Rebekah . . . All growed up and lookin' so much like her."

Rebekah's heart lightened. "Really? You think so?"

"Sure do. You got her smile and that way of lookin' at a person that makes 'em feel listened to, like they matter. You both always had that way about you." Her brown eyes glistened. "Not to mention you's all filled out and ladylike. Not too skinny, not too plump. And them fancy clothes! *Mmm-hmm* . . ." Delphia shook her head. "Like you come straight from some kind of palace or somethin'."

"No palace. I promise. Although Sally and I *did* live a few streets away from one." She smiled. "The house we rented was small. Only three rooms, but it was nice."

"Oh, that Sally . . ." Delphia's expression softened. "I still ain't believin' what your letter to your grandmama said." Delphia laughed. "Sally done gone and found herself a man! A foreign one too!"

"More like Sebastian found her and wouldn't take no for an answer. He has a family home they'll be moving into soon."

"Awfully kind of you to let her stay, Miss Rebekah."

"*Sally* was the kind one. Leaving here like she did all those years ago. Leaving everyone behind." Not that the woman had had any choice in the matter. Sally, twice her age, had been a slave in her grandmother's household. But after Nana left Austria—having stayed several weeks to see them settled and Rebekah's education under way—Sally had served not only as handmaiden and guardian, but eventually as confidante and dear friend as well.

It was a relationship her mother would never have approved of. But Nana had, and that's all that mattered.

“Is . . . she here?” The question was out before Rebekah could call it back.

The briefest shadow eclipsed Delphia’s kindness. “Missus Led-better, she restin’ for a bit. But you better know she’s all afire and kindlin’ to see you again.” As swiftly as Delphia’s laughter bubbled up, it settled. “But them trunks arrivin’ afore you did . . . well . . .”

Delphia shot her a look that Rebekah had all but forgotten, yet instinctively understood. She would pay a price for choosing not to come straight home. Yet she wasn’t about to admit where she’d been that afternoon and what she’d been doing. Not even to Delphia.

“She a proud woman, your mama. But she good too. Just don’t take too well to change. And surprises . . . well . . . they get her a mite flustered.”

“That’s putting it mildly.” Seeing Delphia’s frown, Rebekah lowered her head. “I’m sorry, Delphia. I . . .” She clenched her jaw, peering up. “I had some errands I needed to take care of in town. I never intended for the trunks to be delivered early.”

Delphia brushed a wet curl from Rebekah’s temple, much as she’d often done when Rebekah was a child. “We all have us our own ways of dealin’ with things.” Wisdom deepened her gaze. “That’s one thing that ain’t changed through the years. And likely never will.”

Rebekah nodded, sensing an answer to her earlier thought about altering the relationship with her mother. Only, it wasn’t the answer she’d hoped for.

Delphia escorted her to her old bedroom, where a fire crackled in the hearth. With Delphia’s assistance, she changed into a fresh jacket and skirt—dark brown with deep blue piping. Not nearly as elegant as her now-wet traveling ensemble, nor as nice as her mother would be expecting, but nothing could be done about that.

Rebekah fished through one of her trunks until she found her hairbrush and combs.

“You need me to send someone up to help with your hair, ma’am?”

“No, thank you, Delphia. I’ll manage. But before you leave . . . Is Demetrius here? How is he? I’m so eager to see him again.”

Delphia paused beside the chifforobe. “Demetrius, he . . .” She smoothed a hand over the damp skirt, opening her mouth to speak, then her lips briefly firmed. “He ain’t here right now. But I know he’d

like nothin' more than to see you too." Her smile held reminiscence, and a flicker of something that tugged at Rebekah's heart. "Now I best get back downstairs to the kitchen. Get y'all's dinner fixed up."

As Delphia closed the door behind her, Rebekah settled at the dresser and did her best to set her still-damp hair to rights. So much for making a good impression upon returning home.

The special haven of a bedroom she remembered from childhood was gone, stripped bare of every last memento, as though someone had tried to erase the memories—and her—from the home. In its place was a lovely bedroom with which she felt absolutely no connection, which made the once-cherished space seem even more lonely.

Her styling efforts finally exhausted, she left the bedroom and paused on the second-floor landing, grateful to find it empty. She crossed to her grandmother's bedroom. The door was closed, and she hesitated, wanting to open it, yet not wanting to all the same.

The knob turned easily in her grasp, and the first thing her gaze touched was the old cherrywood rocker by the window—absent the colorful crocheted quilt that always occupied the seat or was draped across the back. Her focus went next to the bed, where the hand-stitched coverlet Nana had pieced together and sewn from several of Grandfather Carrington's shirts always rested. Only, it wasn't there either. In its place lay a simple white coverlet. Pristine. And sterile.

In fact, the entire room was sterile. Absent of any of her grandmother's things. It was as if Nana had never lived there. A rush of grief—and anger—swept through her. Why would her mother have gone through her grandmother's things without her? She should have known that—

"Rebekah."

She froze at the voice behind her. And despite all the mental and emotional rehearsing she'd put herself through in preparation for this moment, she still felt taken aback.

Feeling his gaze, she turned—and quickly realized that distance had distorted her estimation earlier that morning. Barton Ledbetter was still an imposing man, with eyes darker than she remembered and more assessing. Sharp prickles needled up her spine as memories of that night rushed back.

Watching the slow curve of his smile, she broke out in a cold

sweat and her stomach knotted tight. She consciously unclenched her fists at her sides, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of seeing her discomfort.

“Barton . . .” Voice tight, she still refused to call him *Father*, as he’d asked when he and her mother first married. Only one man would ever hold that distinction in her heart. So they’d settled on a first-name basis instead. “I didn’t hear you there.” His intention, no doubt. She glanced beyond him to the open door of the fourth bedroom across the hall.

As though reading the question in her mind, he gestured, his smile turning oddly sheepish. “Some evenings when I arrive home later than planned, I find your mother already abed. So I stay in there out of concern for her rest.”

“Of course.” Rebekah nodded, not believing him for a minute. Several reasons came to mind as to why a man would be out so late at night. None of them respectable.

He moved toward her, and she tensed, the memory of his hot breath on her neck and the stench of liquor and sweat all too vivid.

He stopped a few feet away, his gaze appraising. “Let me be the first to welcome you home, Rebekah. It’s been far too long, my dear, and the house far too quiet without you. This is a very happy occasion for your mother and me. One we’ve long awaited, I assure you.”

She wasn’t fooled by his greeting or the oily sincerity of his tone. In fact, his falsity aligned perfectly with the kind of man she knew him to be. And with what he’d done to her—or would have done. If not for Demetrius.

Demetrius . . . Thinking of him gave her renewed boldness.

“From my perspective, Barton, my homecoming is hardly a joyful one, considering the circumstances. Though I *am* looking forward to seeing Mother again. Speaking of . . .” She glanced toward what had been her parents’ bedroom, eager to be rid of his company. “Do you know where she is?”

He didn’t answer her immediately. “I believe I heard her leave the room a few moments ago. She’s likely waiting for you downstairs. In the parlor.”

Rebekah turned toward the staircase.

“I must add,” he continued, “looking back on things now, I do

believe your grandmother, God rest her, was right when she suggested you go abroad for your education when you did.”

Rebekah paused at the head of the stairs. She didn’t look back but knew he’d moved closer, because she could smell his sickeningly sweet shaving soap. Cherry laurel. How she’d grown to hate that scent.

“You know I didn’t agree with your grandmother—at first. And was adamantly against the decision, to be truthful. It hurt to see your mother so wounded. To have her only child taken so far away . . . But in light of the war and the horrific events that soon followed your departure, I believe it *was* best for you to be removed from this city. The years in Europe were far kinder than those you would have experienced here. And I can’t help but believe, especially upon seeing you now—such a striking and . . . beautiful young woman—that it was, indeed, for the best.”

Unable to believe what he was saying, she slowly turned back—and found he’d all but closed the distance between them.

She’d expected him to behave as if nothing had happened, as he’d done before she’d left. But for him to *intentionally* bring up the subject of why she’d gone away and then lay the wisdom of the decision on the war . . .

It gave new meaning to the word *gall*.

She stared up at him and, in the space of a blink, she saw him through the eyes of her younger self, and realized how she’d been so taken in by him at first. He was *smooth*, as her grandmother had once described him. Some might have called him handsome too. And he possessed a charisma that he used to cultivate trust on the one hand, while skillfully manipulating with the other.

“If there’s anything I can do, Rebekah, to make this adjustment easier for you, dear, please don’t hesitate to make that known. You need time to heal, I realize. The news of your grandmother’s passing must’ve come as a great shock to you, as it did for us. It was so sudden. So unexpected.” He shook his head. “But the doctor assured us Ellen died peacefully in her sleep. Which is of great comfort. And not a bad way to depart this world, compared to some.”

His false piety and pretension she could stomach. She was accustomed to that. But hearing her grandmother’s name from his lips ignited her anger. “Why have all of Grandmother Carrington’s

belongings been moved from her room? And what's been done with them?"

"Your dear mother found it too difficult to deal with at the time, so I took care of it all for her."

"You *took care* of it?"

His focus never left her face. "Yes. Understanding that your grandmother was always such a . . . gracious and benevolent woman, I made sure her clothing and belongings went to those in need. I'm sure you'd agree that that was what she would have wanted."

The news arrowed through her. "You got rid of *everything*? Her clothing? Her quilts? Her jewelry?"

"Don't think of it as having gotten rid of it, Rebekah. Think of it as . . . blessing those less fortunate. Much as she did for you by sending you abroad."

Her eyes threatened to water as she thought of all those pieces, those precious, tangible memories of her grandmother . . . gone. But she steeled herself, not wanting him to see how much it hurt her. "I don't know what kind of charade you think you're playing, Barton, but know this . . . You don't fool me. Not anymore. I know what kind of person you are. I know what you're capable of."

His expression turned pain-stricken. "My dearest, sweet Rebekah . . . I've obviously done something to offend you, child. But I'm at a loss as to what that could be."

Her face went hot. "How dare you stand there and pretend that—"

"Miss Rebekah? You comin' down, ma'am? Your mama, she waitin' for you. Wantin' to see her baby girl."

Hearing Delphia, Rebekah took a deep breath and steadied her voice. "Thank you, Delphia. I'll be down momentarily." Waiting for the telling retreat of the woman's footsteps, Rebekah faced him again, every inch of her body tense and ready to strike. "I'll say this once to you, Barton, and once only. *Stay away from me.*"

She turned and took a step, only to find the floor wasn't there.

Realizing her miscalculation, she grabbed for the bannister—and missed. She fell forward, and saw the stairs rushing up to meet her. She braced herself for the impact—when an iron grip encircled her upper arm.

Barton pulled her back against him. "There, there, child. I've got you."

Regaining her footing, Rebekah jerked away. “Let go of me!”

He gave her quick release. Trembling, she glared up at him, furious with herself. And with him.

“Careful, my dear.” His smile came slowly, even affectionately. “Best watch your step.”

How did he do it? Not a trace of deceit in his eyes. No guilt or remorse either. Though she doubted he was capable of the latter.

Heart pounding, she descended the stairs, the sickening scent of cherry laurel clinging to her clothes.

The entrance hall lay ahead, the front door just beyond, and she wished more than anything that she could throw it open and keep on walking. But her love for a mother she scarcely knew anymore—and the love of a father that still beat steady and strong inside her—dictated otherwise.

She stepped into the central parlor to see her mother sitting posture perfect in the wingback chair by the fireplace, in a pose strikingly similar to one Rebekah remembered from their final moments together before she’d left for Europe. And for some reason, the observation warmed her heart.

“Mother . . .”

Her mother turned, and her eyes lit. “Dearest Rebekah . . .” She held out her hands, and Rebekah went to her and knelt before her chair. Her mother squeezed her hands tightly.

Her mother had never been one for displays of affection, so Rebekah counted this as near exuberance, and an indicator of better things to come.

“I’m so grateful you *finally* decided to come home. You’ve been dearly missed.”

“I’ve missed you too.” Rebekah’s heart swelled. “It’s good to see you again.”

The last ten years had left some not-so-gentle reminders of their passing in her mother’s appearance. Her blond hair, slightly darker than Rebekah’s, shimmered in the candlelight as it always had. But through the soft curls at her temples, time had woven coarse strands of silver. And at the corners of her eyes and mouth, nature had left definitive quotes, as though determined to accentuate a lifetime bent toward the more negative, including fear and worry.

“Although . . .” Her mother gently pulled her hands away, her smile waning. “I must admit . . . if you’d come home sooner, as I requested—many times—you could have seen your grandmother again. Which would have given her such great joy, as it would have given me. But as it is . . .” She sighed, her eyes glistening even as they narrowed slightly. “We must all learn to accept the choices we make and live with the consequences, however painful, must we not?”

The warmth in Rebekah’s heart cooled by a degree, and disappointment knotted at the back of her throat. “Yes,” she finally managed. “As difficult as those choices—and consequences—may be at times.” She hesitated to broach the next subject, but decided it best to get it out of the way. “I went into Grandmother’s room just now, and saw that all of her things are gone. I wish you could’ve waited for me to—”

“Your stepfather very kindly volunteered to take care of that difficult task. And you should be grateful to him, just as I am.” Her mother’s already perfect posture stiffened even more. “You have no idea how I suffer at times, Rebekah. The aches in my head, in my back, the unsettledness in my stomach. I simply couldn’t face that dreadful undertaking. It needed to be done, and you weren’t here, so Barton saw to it. I should think you would show your gratitude instead of complaining.”

A defense on the tip of her tongue, Rebekah bit it back, knowing it would only do more harm. “Do you know if he kept anything?” she asked gently. “One of her quilts? Her journal?”

Her mother frowned as though only now considering these more personal items. She pressed a hand to her temple. “I can’t remember for certain. There may be a box somewhere . . . from your grandmother. Perhaps it’s in the closet in your bedroom.”

“Dinner’s served, Missus Ledbetter.” A young woman stood in the doorway, offered a brief curtsy, and disappeared back down the hallway.

Grateful for the reason to hope, Rebekah stood, only to find her hope short-lived when Barton entered the room.

“May I have the honor of escorting you two lovely ladies to dinner?”

With smile restored, her mother stood and accepted Barton’s

invitation, slipping her hand into the crook of his arm, gazing up at him. Rebekah walked ahead as though she hadn't heard.

Dinner was an awkward blend of stilted conversation and strings of overlong silences, but eating Delphia's cooking once again was nothing short of heartwarming.

While Austria's *Wiener schnitzel*, goulash, flaky apple strudel, and their scrumptious Viennese culinary specialty, the *Sacher torte*, had more than satisfied, Rebekah had never forgotten Delphia's skill in the kitchen.

She spooned her last bite of Delphia's warm sweet potato pie topped with candied pecans and fresh whipped cream into her mouth—no small feat after consuming fried chicken, field peas with potatoes, and pan-fried buttered corn—and she savored the sweetness and the memories it brought.

How many nights had she crept downstairs after bedtime to find Delphia and Demetrius in the kitchen eating cold sweet potato pie? Right from the pan. She couldn't wait to see him.

"It's part of maturing, sweetheart."

Rebekah looked up from her plate to find her mother eyeing her from the foot of the table, apparently continuing the chosen topic of dinner conversation—*her* life.

"Part of coming to terms with what's most important." Her mother arched a brow. "Which I hope you've managed to do despite being away from those who love you most. It's so important to maintain one's standards. People are always watching."

"Oh, I'm certain she has, Sarah." Barton gestured, and a servant standing off to the side refilled his glass with bourbon. For the third time. "I'm convinced our lovely Rebekah has matured in that way. As well as in every other."

He lifted his glass in a silent and solitary cheer.

Rebekah confined her gaze to the table, counting the minutes until she could politely excuse herself. Convinced the moment had come, she feigned a yawn, which encouraged a real one. "If you'll both excuse me, I'm very tired from the journey and would like to retire to my room."

Her mother sat a little straighter. "I was hoping you might wish to take tea with me in the study. We have much to discuss regarding

your homecoming. There are plans to be made. Barton and I have conversed at length, and—”

“Plans?” Rebekah looked between them.

“Yes.” Barton set down his glass. “Plans about what you’ll be doing now that you’re home.”

Rebekah gave a short laugh. “Pardon me, Barton. But I don’t see how my plans are any of your concern.”

“Rebekah Ellen!” Her mother’s face flushed crimson. “You will not speak to my husband in that disrespectful manner. Is that understood?”

Clenching her jaw, Rebekah forced a nod.

“Now . . .” Her mother tucked her folded napkin by her plate. “Much has changed in our circle of society, and you need guidance as to how to reenter that world. Never fear, there *are* still eligible gentlemen who are open to considering a woman who is . . . a little further along in years. But don’t let that concern you,” her mother added quickly. “I’ve already begun sowing seeds that I’m certain will bear fruit.”

“Mother, I don’t mean to seem ungrateful but—”

“Your mother has been preparing tirelessly for your return, Rebekah. And I know you’re not eager to disappoint her.”

Feeling the walls closing in around her, Rebekah found herself swiftly growing to loathe Barton Ledbetter even more than she already did. Yet she checked her temper, knowing better than to cross him in front of her mother.

“And yet, Sarah . . .” Barton leaned forward in his chair. “Considering all that Rebekah has been through in recent days, and all you’ve been doing—so unselfishly, I might add—I do believe it would be best if we save these discussions for tomorrow. Don’t you agree, my love? After all, we’re finishing dinner later than usual, and you do need your rest.”

Feeling slightly ill and knowing it had nothing to do with the food, Rebekah watched her mother as Barton’s suggestion gradually found a foothold.

“Of course, you’re right, Barton. As always. It’s best we wait. Rebekah, we’ll see to this tomorrow instead.”

Barton rose and moved to escort her mother from the room. Her

mother had always been a dutiful wife—Rebekah remembered that from childhood. But when had she ceased having her own opinions whatsoever?

Whatever the answer, at least the discussion about the “plans for her life” had been postponed, and *her* plan was to make sure it stayed that way. But there was one more thing she needed to know. And though now likely wasn’t the best time to broach her next question, she doubted a right time existed.

“Mother, before you go . . .”

Her mother paused, her hand tucked into the crook of Barton’s arm.

“Grandmother Carrington . . . she said she’d laid aside some money for me. On the event of her passing,” Rebekah smiled to soften the abruptness of the topic. “Do you know who I need to contact in that regard?”

Her mother’s expression clouded, and then she peered up at Barton, who looked at Rebekah and sighed, with a little too much feeling.

“Rebekah, I fear your grandmother spoke out of turn. Though I wasn’t going to share this with you, and wanted to spare you any embarrassment . . . upon your grandmother’s death, I was forced to cover her outstanding debts. Which I did happily, considering what a fine woman she was, and how special a part of this family.”

His smile, meant to appear condoling, she knew, felt like a punch to the gut. Rebekah pressed a hand to her midsection, glad she was still seated. “Her debts?” Her voice came out small. “Grandmother Carrington didn’t have any debts.”

“You’ve been gone a long time, Rebekah.” Barton’s deep voice gained an edge. “And it’s been a difficult few years. But don’t worry. I’ll take care of you—just as I take care of your dear mother.” He patted her mother’s hand and shifted to look Rebekah in the eye. “Perhaps tomorrow, Rebekah, you and I can find a few moments to speak at length about this.”

Rebekah bowed her head and didn’t look up as they left the room, her hands trembling in her lap. He’d taken it. The money. He’d taken it all. But what could she do? She had nothing in writing from her grandmother. Nothing to substantiate her claim. And even if she did, where was the money now? Nowhere she could get to it.

She pressed against the pounding in her temples. It would seem the bulk of her hope now lay with Mrs. Adelicia Cheatham at the Belmont estate. Because it certainly didn't lie with Nathaniel T. Whitcomb.

She had no doubt such a man had never had to work for anything in his life, that it had all been given to him on a polished silver platter. And though it wasn't a charitable thought, she hoped that one day he would drink from the same cup of disappointment he'd served her earlier that day.

And that she'd just been made to drink of again.

Determined to put him out of her mind, she found Delphia and two other women—neither of them familiar to her—in the kitchen. Gone was the houseful of staff from before the war. At dinner she'd learned it was only Delphia now, along with two day servants. And Demetrius, of course, though her mother and Barton had not spoken of him.

She visited with Delphia, Rosie, and Nissa as they worked. The playful banter between the women helped to lift her spirits.

Once the dishes were washed and the kitchen straightened, the day servants left for the night. No sooner had the kitchen door closed than Delphia pulled a covered dish from the cupboard—and grinned.

"The last of the pie!" Rebekah said in an exaggerated whisper. "You and Demetrius always saved me a slice."

"*He* always saved you a slice. I woulda eaten it soon as look at you."

Rebekah laughed, knowing that wasn't true. "I've missed you, Delphia."

"And Lawd knows I've missed you, Miss Rebekah. It weren't the same here without you. Weren't the same at all!"

"So where is he?" Rebekah accepted the sliver of pie on a linen napkin, unable to believe she still had room for it. But she did.

"Where is *who*?"

Rebekah turned to see her mother standing in the doorway and nearly choked on the bite of pie.

Delphia rose from her chair and brushed the crumbs from her apron. "Somethin' I can help you with, Missus Ledbetter?"

"I thought you said you were tired, Rebekah."

Rebekah swallowed. "I was. I mean . . ." She cleared her throat. "I *am*. I came in here to say good night to Delphia, and . . . we started talking."

Her mother's gaze trailed to the pie plate, then back to her. "Who is it you're looking for, Rebekah?"

Rebekah placed her napkin on the table. "Why don't we talk about this tomorrow?"

"Where is *who*?" her mother repeated.

"You know who," Rebekah answered.

Her mother looked pointedly at Delphia, who confined her gaze to the floor.

"Mother, please. Let's not play these games. I just want to visit with him. To see how he is. Tell him about Europe and about how I finally—"

"Demetrius is dead, Rebekah. He died shortly after you left."

As though suddenly seeing her mother from down a long tunnel, Rebekah stared, her world tilting. She shook her head, trying to bring it aright. "Th-that's not true. That's not possible."

"I told your grandmother when it happened that we should tell you, but she insisted"—her mother's lips formed a thin line—"that it would be too much for you to bear. Then as time went on . . ."

Her mother's sentence trailed off into silence, and Rebekah looked over at Delphia, knowing she'd find reassurance and the truth. But the tears pooling in Delphia's dark eyes told her just the opposite.

And Rebekah felt her knees give way.