

A BELMONT MANSION NOVEL • 3

*A Note Yet
Unsung*

TAMERA
ALEXANDER



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To Jack,
my little writing buddy.
It was so hard to finish this one without you.
We miss you still. . . .





“For the LORD sees clearly
what a man does,
examining every path he takes.”

Proverbs 5:21 (NLT)



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.