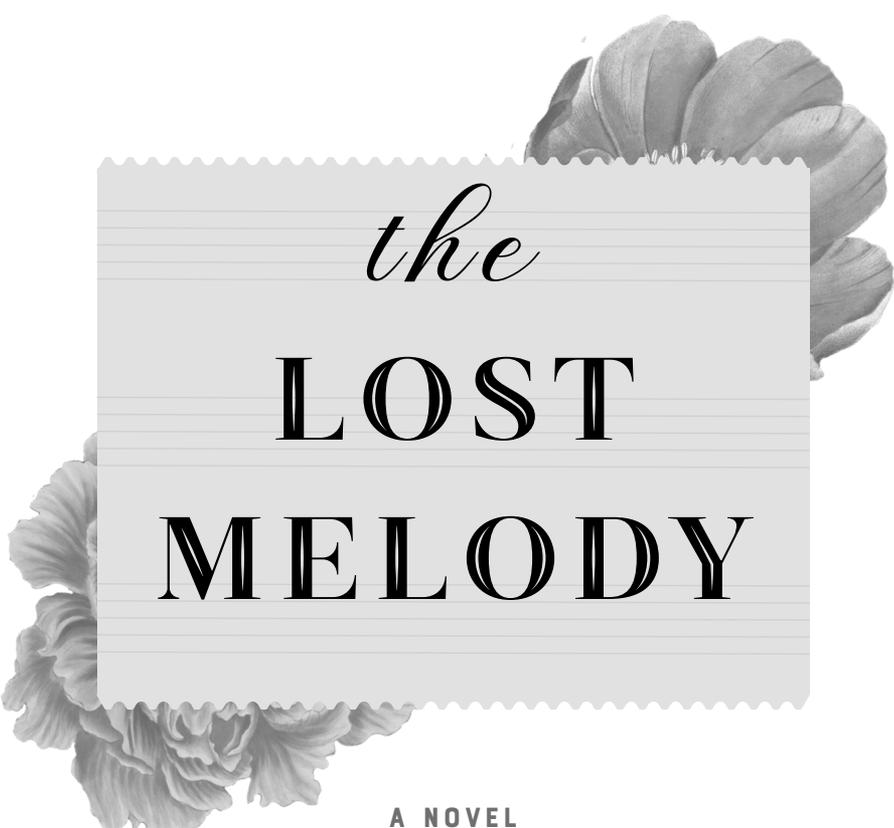


the
**LOST
MELODY**

A NOVEL

JOANNA DAVIDSON
POLITANO



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The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it.

John 1:5 NIV



This story is for my wonderful grandfather,
the musician who “saw” everyone and loved them well.
Miss you, Grandpa.

FIRST MOVEMENT

And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who did not hear the music.

~Friedrich Nietzsche

HURSTWELL ASYLUM

One day in late May of the year 1886, I found myself imprisoned in the Hurstwell Pauper Lunatic Asylum. This was unconscionable—I had *never* been a pauper.

I woke in a damp little room, and the music of the place was entirely wrong. I'd fallen asleep in a Beethoven sonata, white and airy, wrapped up with silky delight, and woken in the dark heart of Berlioz's eerie *Symphonie Fantastique*, my head thudding with deep bassoon, the echoing rhythm of rain hitting stone. As my mind surfaced, I scrambled to collect the memories of the place, the bassoon solidified into a voice—one quite near the foot of my bed. I did not open my eyes to check.

“Don’t go too near. She’s moving.”

“Waking?”

“Not for several hours. Involuntary muscle spasms, most likely.”

Indeed. They’d overestimated whatever drug they’d injected into me. Or they had, as people often did, underestimated *me*. An odd thing happened when one carried a giant weight of troubles all her life—she built up a great deal of strength.

“Will we keep her?” A light timpani voice contrasted with the first.

“I’m not certain yet. It’s a rather odd case, and she’s already proved volatile. We cannot let her go free.”

I had fought, hadn’t I? My mind swirled with memories—an urgent need to escape. The failure to do so. Yes, I remembered. This is what came of trusting one’s best friend. I may not even marry him now.

“Has she a name?”

“Cora . . . Cora something.”

No. No, that wasn’t right. I wasn’t Cora.

“I’ve forgotten. Her last name is of no consequence. She doesn’t belong to anyone.”

Ouch. A pin into a live pincushion.

Scribbles on paper. “What is her condition?”

“Delusions,” came the deeper voice. The bassoon. “She hears music.”

“Rather a nice malady to have, isn’t it? Hearing music?”

“Not when there isn’t any.”

“Right, of course. Any other details?”

“We’ve only to decide if she’s acute or chronic—and that depends on her.”

“Well, her committal was . . . *oh*.”

“Yes. Oh.”

What? “Oh” what? my mind cried out. I recalled my childhood, my father, my home. Pianofortes. Performances. But the recent events, the details of this place, eluded me. Shrouded in the thick mist of the moors.

“Well, well. Look at this,” said the lighter voice.

Papers rustled. I wanted to snatch them and see for myself.

A frantic rapping just outside interrupted the meeting, and the door squeaked open. A breathy female voice inserted itself. “Pardon, Doctor. It’s the man in the male long-stay ward—he’s suffered another attack.”

“Very well.” After a blustery exhale, footsteps shuffled, then the door slammed shut.

But it did not lock.

Did not lock.

My heart pounded, three beats for every second that swept on silently, drawing those men and their footfalls farther from my cell and its unlocked door. My skin grew clammy, a line of moisture gathering along my legs where they lay cemented together. No one came.

I slowly activated my stiff muscles and pushed up on the bed, swinging my heavy limbs down and feeling about the cold floor for shoes as I fought the oddest sense of imbalance and heaviness. I could feel the blood recirculating, as if I’d lain comatose for a week.

Maybe I had.

Whiteness closed in around the edges of my vision as I lifted my head a bit too quickly. I saw two of everything, then four, then two, then back to one again, and the air felt thick. I forced myself to stand, holding out my arms for balance.

I could do this. I could. The woman who played an entire piano concerto without a scrap of music, who drew more listeners than her male counterparts, who survived a man like my *father*, could certainly stand up and walk out the front door of this rotten place. Especially since no one had a valid reason to keep me here.

They didn’t.

Stretching my neck, my legs, I eased myself up, preparing for whatever would come.

“You’re getting on quite well.” A voice to my right slid under my skin and chilled my bones.

I turned on wooden legs to see the bassoon-voiced doctor, who had apparently sent his partner on, remaining to observe me from against the door.

Thornhill. This was Thornhill, the superintendent, and a shadowy fear began to overtake me. Why, though? I couldn't remember the details. The gears of my mind groaned into movement. Such fog, clouding what I needed to remember. "Where . . . Who . . . ?" I worked my mouth, but there wasn't enough voice to come out. My throat was dry. A cotton-lined tube.

"Hurstwell Asylum, and your father."

"My . . . *father*?" I clutched the back of a wooden chair. I began to shake. Impossible. *Impossible*.

Now I knew for certain this was all a catastrophic mistake. He couldn't do this to me—not anymore.



I carry a deep sadness of the heart which must now and then break out in sound.

~Frantz Lizst

THREE MONTHS EARLIER, MANCHESTER

I was playing a piece by Berlioz the night my father died, the second movement of *Symphonie Fantastique* with arpeggios smooth as a horse's gallop. Footsteps stopped and a figure hovered in the doorway, and I knew what was coming before our maid even spoke the jarring words. "He's gone, Miss Vivienne."

"I see." I did not smile, for that would have been wicked, but I did relax, more than I had allowed myself to in many years.

Her steady footsteps crossed the carpeted room past where I sat, and she threw open the drapes on every long window—drapes that had remained drawn for years to keep my father's headaches, and his resulting temper, at bay.

It was dark outside, still very early morning, but so many hours had passed in the waiting. The maid turned, those wise old eyes cast my direction. "Night is passing, and day is soon to come for you, Miss Vivienne."

We shared a solemn smile. Then she gave a brief curtsy and left me.

A breezy emptiness infilled my soul at the sudden silence, a sense of unfettered spring air blowing through hollow places. Gone were Father's company and his uncanny business sense, but so were the sting of fresh lashes across my fingers as I practiced, that voice bellowing through the halls, the silent fight always knotted up in my belly with nowhere to go. Suddenly, it had all gone slack. It was over, and I was alone in the world.

I grieved the man, but I couldn't say I was unhappy. I looked over the vast spread of pianofortes that awaited restoration laid out before me with a new sense of ownership, of delight. It was *my* repair shop now, and darkness would have no place here anymore. *God, you are the master of this house now. The master of me. No one else shall ever be.* I felt his heady presence with the coming dawn and I welcomed it.

After several deep breaths to acknowledge the passing of a soul, I lifted my fingers to the ivories in the flickering candlelight and began the piece again from the beginning. The song was the perfect end to our tumultuous years together, powerful dissonance brimming with deeply textured tones that climbed to a rich climax as the dawn crested, colorful light brimming through the room, then simply stopped at the obvious point of conclusion, and the room was empty. Quiet and peaceful in morning's rosy glow.

Within the hour, familiar footsteps—masculine ones—sounded somewhere in the foyer, and my breath caught. I kept my fingertips poised on the ivories, feeling the oddness of Richard's presence in this house. Things were shifting already.

I continued playing as his footfall entered the room and crossed to me. He stopped at the pianoforte and sat beside me, the bench creaking under his weight. The slight bump of Richard's shoulder as he slid close was all that passed between us, but it was plenty. I paused, for I suddenly couldn't remember what came next in the piece.

Oh, how Father would hate this.

I almost began to play again, but Richard's arm came around me, solid but cautious. I felt every inch of its gentle weight. We'd known each other all my life, and this was the first time he'd ever dared. I looked up into his face, and he smiled down at me—a solemn, affectionate look that expressed every word he didn't need to say. The regret for my loss, the relief at my freedom, the uncertain hope of what was to come between us.

I played on for several minutes, and he listened without a word, as he always did. The song came to a gentle conclusion and I sat motionless, fingers still perched on the keys. The enormity of his masculine presence nearly undid my calm. What would happen now? Father was gone. There was nothing stopping Richard from . . . well, anything. I could feel his keen scrutiny on me. Deciding.

I looked up at him, and he leaned nearer, those familiar crescent-shaped eyes and clean-shaven chin, and laid his forehead on mine.

I ran my tongue over my lips that had gone dry and met his gaze. "So, now what?"

His hand lifted to my cheek and stroked it. "Everything's different now, isn't it?" A gentle smile. "What will you do with your life?"

I closed my eyes. "Oh, I have a few ideas."

His finger came down the side of my face and teased my lips. "Anything that includes me?"

"Perhaps." I looked up. "How are you at handling horses? I've been meaning to hire a driver."

His look was amused and sympathetic all at once. Oh, how I adored this man. "Better than handling certain redheads."

I smacked his arm, and somehow it relieved the night's tension. Filled the cracks with a bit of joy.

"I bet I can guess your plans." He leaned back. "After your mourning period, you'll go out and continue to perform, maybe even better than before, and with a newfound joy that no one will truly understand. You'll appear in concert hall after concert hall

all over the Continent and amaze your audiences . . . then come home to a quiet house and live the simple, uncomplicated life you were always meant to have. One you fully deserve.”

I gave a polite smile but said nothing to contradict him. I’d known for years what I’d do with myself when I finally possessed freedom, but I dared not shock Richard with it. Not yet. I’d at least let him kiss me first.

“You’ll have your pianoforte shop, perhaps a few students, and your friends. Modest and simple and delightfully musical, a life of high quality is what fits you best.”

Few people actually knew me, as it turned out. I was a Chopin nocturne—surprising, complex, and impossible to master.

Many tried. I’m happy to report that they had all failed.

Well, nearly.