



When the Music Stopped

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Chapter One

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As the last glorious notes of the aria from *Madame Butterfly* faded away, Lester lifted his hands slowly from the piano and smiled at his twin sister. ‘You hit every note perfectly, Lillia, now let us try one from *La bohème* this—’

‘Enough!’ General Holdsworth stormed over to the piano and slammed down the lid. ‘This house is bedlam with you two in it! Come to my study immediately.’

The twins watched their father march out of the room and sighed in unison.

‘Here we go again,’ Lester murmured, standing up and taking his sister’s arm. Side by side they followed their father.

He was waiting just inside the door and slammed it shut as soon as they were in. The twins winced as a precious vase rattled on the mantelshelf, but they were used to his rages. He had no interest in music and they were sure he must be tone deaf not to appreciate it.

When he remained standing they became wary, knowing they were really in for an unpleasant episode this time.

‘You are both eighteen now and it’s time to think about your future. I have made a decision.’

‘But we know—’

‘Be quiet, Lillian! Lester – next week you go to military academy and train to become an officer.’

She heard her brother’s sharp intake of breath, and wondered what fate was planned for her.

‘Lillian – Lord Dalton has done us the honour of asking for your hand in marriage. I have accepted, for you cannot hope to make a better match.’

Now she was furious and felt her brother grasp her hand as they both glared at this parent who was so unlike them. And why did he insist on calling her Lillian? It was irritating. Lillia was prettier and she liked it.

‘We have both been awarded a place at the Royal College of Music, and term starts in September,’ Lester protested.

‘You can forget all that music stuff and nonsense,’ he shouted. ‘I have already told them you will not be attending. You will both do as I say, and I will not hear a word of protest from either of you. You need to be separated!’

The twins were too stunned to move or speak as their world crumbled around them. Lester – a soldier? Lillia – married to a middle-aged bore of a man? As brother and sister, they had been companions from conception. They knew each other’s thoughts, and if one were sick or in trouble, the other felt that as well. The pain of dismay now swamped them.

‘You may go and begin making preparations for your new lives.’

They practically ran back to the music room, shut the door and locked it. Then they faced each other, white with despair.

‘How did our lovely, quiet and sophisticated mother

ever come to marry a man like that?’ She clenched her fists as tears of fury filled her eyes. ‘He cancelled our places at the college. How could he do that? Doesn’t he know how hard we have worked for those places?’

‘To him, music is just noise.’

She nodded and wiped her eyes. ‘What are we going to do? If we still had our places at the college, we could have defied him and gone there anyway, but he has made sure we can’t do that.’

‘I don’t see we have any options but to let him believe we are going along with his arrangements.’

‘Oh no, I will *not* marry Lord Dalton! He’s old – and a politician! You know what I think of politicians!’

‘Exactly.’ A slow smile appeared on his handsome face. ‘Make him withdraw his offer.’

‘How . . . ?’ her eyes opened wide as it dawned on her what he was suggesting. ‘Of course! You are so clever. All right, so I can possibly get out of my predicament, but what about you? The army is not for you. If you go we shall be parted, and I could not bear that.’

‘It had to come one day,’ he said kindly, ‘and it will be hard for us, but it is what we must do. One day our careers would have taken us in different directions anyway.’

‘But the prospect of our chosen careers has been taken away from us!’ she declared angrily.

‘A temporary setback only. You work on convincing Lord Dalton you will make him a most unsuitable wife, and I will go to the military academy until I can find a way out.’

‘How will that be possible?’ she asked.

‘I will have to convince them I will never make a soldier,

let alone an officer. The next few months are going to be difficult, but we must succeed, and then we will try for another place at the college. We won't give up.'

'Of course we won't!' she rushed over to her twin and hugged him. 'I shall find it very hard without you, and you must write every day – please.'

'I will. Now, we must consult Mother and see if she has a way to deal with this. When did she say she would be returning?'

'Tomorrow. I'll wager he's done this while she's been away and without consulting her. She couldn't overrule him because I believe she is frightened of him, and that's why she visits her friend so often. How did we ever come to have a father like this?'

Lester shook his head in disbelief. 'We certainly haven't inherited anything from him, thank goodness. I often wonder where our love of music comes from. Although Mother enjoys music she has no talent for it and doesn't even play the piano.'

'We must be throwbacks from someone in our past, and we are the only twins in the family. We are unlike any other family member with our dark hair and green eyes. We really don't fit, do we?'

'We must try and find out more about our ancestors sometime,' Lester remarked, thoughtfully, lifting the lid of the piano and sitting down, his hands running lovingly over the keys.

She settled down and waited for her brother to start playing. When the first notes of a piece by Rachmaninoff filled the room, she sighed with pleasure. She could listen for hours to her brother playing. There was something quite

magical about his touch. She could play, but was lacking that something special he possessed. How could that dreadful man send him to become a soldier? There was only one place her brother belonged, and that was seated at the piano.

He looked across and smiled. 'Do you want to sing?'

She shook her head. 'No, just play.'

The next morning there was no sign of their father, much to their relief. They waited anxiously for their mother to return and rushed to greet her the moment she stepped inside the door.

'We must talk with you, please,' Lester told her. 'It is most urgent!'

The pleasure of seeing her children again quickly faded from Sara's face. 'Come to my sitting room. Have a tray of tea sent up,' she asked the butler.

'At once, madam.'

Their mother removed her travelling cape and tossed it on a chair when they reached her room, and then she faced her children. 'Do sit down, my dears. I know you are bursting to tell me something, and from your expressions it is clear I am not going to like it. But I will not hear a word until I have had a cup of tea.'

The twins sat side by side and waited until the refreshments had arrived and their mother was on her second cup.

She replaced the cup carefully on the tray, sat back and said, 'Lester, now you can tell me what has happened.'

When her son had finished the story of what their father had done, she stood up and walked over to the window. There was silence.

‘What can we do?’ Lillia asked. ‘What he has planned for us is dreadful.’

Their mother spun round, her face milky white and she was trembling with rage. ‘It is terrible! You are both musicians of extraordinary talent. That is what you were born to do!’

‘Not according to him.’ Lester stood up and guided their mother back to her chair, while his sister poured another cup of tea. ‘We didn’t mean to upset you so, but we desperately need your advice. Is there any way out of this? We do have our inheritance from Uncle Bertram. I know it doesn’t come to us until we are twenty, but is there some way it could be released sooner?’

She shook her head. ‘I’m so sorry, my dears, but it was under your grandfather’s control, and after he died I discovered he had used it to finance something your father was involved in. There isn’t anything left.’

‘That can’t be so!’ Lillia said angrily. ‘It was willed to us!’

Lester laid a hand on his sister to calm her down. ‘We understand it was out of your control, Mother.’

‘The sad truth is we are only just managing to maintain our lifestyle.’

‘But you had a fortune in your own right.’ Lester was dismayed by this news. He had always believed their mother was wealthy. ‘Where has it all gone?’

Sara was too distressed to speak for a moment.

‘He took it!’ Lillia exploded. ‘Did that man find a way to help himself to your money?’

‘Once a woman marries everything she owns becomes her husband’s. You know that, darling. There wasn’t anything I could do about it.’

‘All that is going to change when women get the vote!’ She stormed around the room. ‘It’s time our voices were raised against such injustice.’

‘If you raise your glorious voice, it will certainly be heard.’ Lester dredged up a sad smile, and turned calmly to his mother. ‘It appears we are not in any position to defy him.’

‘None I can see at the moment. I am dreadfully sorry. If I could put things right for you I would, but you know well enough that he is not a man you can reason with. If your uncle was still alive I could have gone to him for help, but there is no one I can turn to now. I can’t bear to see your lives ruined like this.’ Sara’s voice broke and she turned away to hide her anguish.

Seeing how distressed their mother was, Lillia calmed down and went to her side. ‘Have no fear for us. The fulfilment of our dreams will be delayed, but we will find a way out of this.’

‘Once you are married to Lord Dalton there will be no way you can pursue your career in music.’

‘I won’t be marrying him!’ A determined gleam came into her eyes. ‘I know of a way to make him withdraw his offer.’

Sara knew her daughter well. She was a prima donna to her soul and had the ability to make things go her way. The only person she had never been able to manipulate was her brother. If she said the marriage offer would be withdrawn, then there was a fair chance that it would be. She turned to her son. ‘Do you have a plan as well?’

‘We were hoping there would be a way out of this without resorting to underhand tactics, but it is clear there

is no easy answer. We have discussed this and now know we will have to take action. Lillia is going to prove she will be a most unsuitable wife, and I will show I will never make a soldier, let alone an officer.'

Kneeling beside her mother, Lillia took hold of her hands. 'How did you come to marry a man like this? He is way below your class.'

'I was faced with a desperate situation and had no choice. One day, when you are older, I will tell you why we are in this sad situation, and I pray you will not hate me for what I have done.'

'Mother!' they both declared. 'You could never do anything to make us stop loving you! Can't you tell us now?'

She looked at her children and gave a sad smile. 'You still amaze me when you speak together as one person. This is not the right time because it will only add to your burdens, but when the time comes I will tell you the whole story. Until then, I must ask you to be patient and do as he says. Believe me when I stress that we do not have a choice at this time.'

'We will do as you say.' Lester went over to his mother and kissed her cheek. 'We'll try not to do anything to make your life even more difficult than it is, but we must deal with this in our own way. Don't come to our defence or show disapproval at his decisions.'

'No, my dears.' Sara shook her head. 'I cannot stand by and see your talents wasted.'

'That is exactly what you must do,' her daughter told her. 'We will face his wrath, but we will not see it turned upon you. This is our fight and we are determined he will not win – indeed, he must not win!'

‘She is right,’ Lester agreed. ‘We are not helpless children any more, and with our chosen future in the balance we will fight him – whatever the consequences might be. And when we are famous we will be able to look after you.’

‘Can you not go back to your friend for a lengthy stay?’ her daughter suggested.

‘Certainly not! By suggesting that I do nothing you are asking too much of me. You are my children and this is not your fight alone – it is ours. I have always been careful to tread softly so you could have a happy upbringing, but I have stayed in the background too long. Now, tell me what you are going to do, for I am sure you have discussed this very carefully before approaching me.’

Without going in to details he said they simply had to convince everyone they were not suited to the roles their father had planned for them, and when he had finished he was pleased to see the colour return to their mother’s face.

She leant forward. ‘If you can do something without him being aware you are opposing his plans, then it might work, but you will both need to be very convincing.’

Lillia struck a pose of pure innocence and fluttered her eyelashes. ‘We are accomplished performers and all he will see are two dutiful children obeying his orders without protest.’

Sara smiled briefly at her daughter and then was serious again. ‘I may be able to support you, but what about you, Lester? You will be on your own, and once you are at the military academy it will be difficult for you to get out again.’

‘Have no fear; something will come along to make that possible. I can take care of myself. One thing I do ask

though: please don't let him touch my piano while I'm away.'

'He cannot. That was a gift to us before you were born and I have made sure it is in your names. He knows this well enough and dare not dispose of it.'

The twins were stunned and said in unison, 'Who gave it to us?'

'That again is something I cannot tell you. But rest assured that the piano is safe.'

'You are making my head swim with these mysteries,' her daughter declared.

Sara smiled. 'When you are both rich and famous, I will tell you all.'