



Death Is the Cool Night

by Libby Sternberg

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With much love and gratitude, to Matthew

*Der Tod, das ist die kühle Nacht,
Das Leben ist der schwüle Tag.
Es dunkelt schon, mich schläfert,
Der Tag hat mich müd gemacht.*

*Über mein Bett erhebt sich ein Baum,
Drin singt die junge Nachtigall;
Sie singt von lauter Liebe -
Ich hör es sogar im Traum.*

Heinrich Heine

Dearest,

If you sign the papers and return them to my lawyer, that is sufficient. In the meantime, I am grateful for your letters, which are a welcome thread to the “outside” world. All I seem to be capable of doing is waiting

Do you know what I think of often? My hands and their hideous scars! That’s because you hear of so many injuries of one sort or another here, and I feel the need to hide my ugly hands—before, they were the mark of a disgraceful carelessness, but now they signify something not mine to claim. The other men will think I “earned” them in some way.

My sacrifice—a future as a “renowned” concert pianist—seems small compared to that of others. It seems so silly here, to have a dream of anything except reprieve.

I have to explain that no, my hands were injured eight years ago, when I thought pleasing my family was the path to peace. I know now such a path doesn’t exist, neither in my own life, nor the world’s. It is, after all, the spring of 1942, and like many of the men here, I’m tired and hungry most of the time. I’m sick of lots of things. But not of hearing from you, my darling. I hope you don’t mind if I call you that. Other men have sweethearts outside. Let us pretend you are mine.

Write again soon. Write every day. Every hour. When many letters come at once, it feels like Christmas morning

*Yours,
Gregory*

Chapter One

One year earlier: Fall 1941

“HE’S DEAD. I don’t know how yet. Just got the call this morning.”

You’d think I could have kept a straight face at such news—the death of the conservatory’s opera conductor, Ivan Roustakoff. You’d think I could have managed a pang of regret. Instead I found my lips curling up into a smile and my breath easy, as if news of a disaster being averted had just reached my ears.

Ivan, the bastard who made my life as rehearsal pianist miserable, was dead. *Well, well, well.*

I cleared my throat. “So sorry,” I managed to murmur, looking down. I’d had a quick shot of gin to fortify myself for the day and didn’t want my breath giving it away.

“It’s terrible, of course. He has a sister—she’s a wonderful supporter of the conservatory. And that fiancé of his—”

“Renee,” I said, providing the name to the conservatory dean.

Not Renee. Renata. But she, like many singers, had changed her name to appear as if she were a refugee from a more sympathetic country. Aggressor names were unfashionable. Despite a thick German accent, the tenor singing Calaf was Hank Miller. Teutonic blonde hair and shining blue eyes, and a father who served in the *Freikorps*, beating back forces of rebellion in Berlin. Hank! Hans was more likely.

Dean Whiley stubbed out a cigarette with perfectly manicured fingernails. He wore a suit so neatly tailored and pressed that someone might have finished the last seam just that morning. His thick gray hair needed no pomade to stay in place. His blue eyes reflected the color of his bloodline. He sat behind an ornately carved desk, probably some gift from a philanthropist’s trip to Europe. The desk was too large for most rooms, but the Dean’s office was spacious, with arched windows nearly to the ceiling letting in the cold light of morning.

“You want me to notify the cast and orchestra of the cancellation?” I asked.

We had been rehearsing Puccini’s *Turandot*, an overly ambitious piece for student performers. But Roustakoff himself had been consumed with ambition. His plan had been to entice the great Rosa Ponselle, retired and living at Villa Pace outside Baltimore, to his production, and to so mightily impress her with his ability to squeeze something sweet from these sour lumps of students that she would lend her grand name to an opera company he wanted to start. He hadn’t been stupid, though. He’d known he might be able to coax beautiful performances from chorus and comprimario players, but he wouldn’t risk the leads on neophytes—thus the contract players Renata and Hans—nor would he allow students to bumble

around the stage, demonstrating their lack of acting ability. It wasn't a staged production. It was opera in concert.

"Not a cancellation. A change in plans." Dean Whiley let a flicker of a grimace cross his face, telegraphing this was a decision with which he didn't agree.

"You have conducting experience," he said, looking me straight in the eyes. The gaze said something else. It said "you're not up to this."

"Yes," I said, countering his assessment. Conducting didn't require supple hands.

"Davidson is on some tour," he explained, referring to the other conservatory conductor. "And, of course, the rehearsal schedule is unusually long—several months, I believe. You'd have more than adequate time. And if you need more than what's already planned, I'm sure we can fit other practice days on the schedule."

"I can do it." Even if I couldn't, I'd not admit it to him. "I know the score. I'm ready. I knew I'd have to fill in if Maestro Roustakoff were ill. So I'm ready."

He looked surprised, as if I'd violated a rule of etiquette, talking about how capable I was.

"All right. I suggest we make the announcement at rehearsal. We'll compensate you, of course. Teaching assistant level, most likely." He waved the air as if these details weren't important. But they were crucial to me. My pantry was bare. I didn't wear tailored suits.

I knew not to press. These moneyed people thought talking about money was crass. I'd work that out with some paymaster in the basement.

He stood, and I followed his lead, holding out my hand as a gentleman, an equal. He smiled and nodded and reached for my hand to shake on this deal.

And for one second, or a sliver of a second, I saw him hesitate, just the tiniest retraction, the smallest revulsion. But who wouldn't be repelled by the gruesome mitt poking from beneath my frayed cuff? It looked something raw, caught in a meat grinder, a bulging red and purple scar covering the top, and white ridges on the palm. I was lucky I could feed myself, let alone play a piano at all.

"Good luck, Gregory," he said, hardly gripping my hand. He shouldn't have been afraid of hurting it. I'd grown used to the constant ache.

I spent the rest of the morning studying the score in a corner of the library—the big Peabody library with its four stories of wrought-iron balconies lining the walls. My hands floated in the air in my shadowed nook as I looked at each page, stopping to make notes on entrances, interpretation. I didn't need food. Puccini's glorious last opera sated me, playing in my mind's ear at a volume that kept the rest of the world in muted darkness. Only this creative burst glowed deep. From time to time, I sipped from my flask, letting the liquor burn my throat and clear my inner vision.

This all would have been ecstasy except for an occasional pinch of pain. Not pain in my hands—I was numbing that with the alcohol—but pain of remembrance. Or rather, lack thereof. I had lapses, you see, starting with the time after my accident when medicine and liquor combined to erase whole mornings, afternoons, and evenings from my history.

Now I struggled to conjure up memories of the last time I'd seen Ivan. At a practice with the leads. In the big hall on the second floor. He'd abused me as usual. And then. . .

What exactly had I been doing last night, the night Ivan died? Where had I been—oh yes, the practice building down the street with its four floors of studios. I'd been there. That was it. I could breathe.

From salvation to jeopardy, all in one day.

As soon as I entered the cavernous rehearsal hall that afternoon, a brown-suited man with pasty complexion touched me on the sleeve and asked for a word. I noticed he glanced at my hands but didn't comment on them. He must have been told by someone to look for the one with the damaged paws.

In the corner, by the door, he introduced himself.

"Sean Reilly." He flashed a badge. "Can we go somewhere not so noisy?"

Optimistic—that's what this Sean fellow was, if his suit was any indication. It pulled at the buttons and cramped his shoulders. Maybe he hoped to fit it one day. I nodded to the hallway, and we stepped outside.

"Where were you last night?" he asked after asking my name.

Funny—I'd been pondering that question all throughout the day. I thought I had enough detail to stand up to scrutiny. I'd soon find out.

Somehow I'd already guessed that Ivan wasn't just dead. He had been killed. How, I wondered, glad to be able to wonder. If I didn't know. . .

"Home." Yes, I'd gone home after sitting in the studio. That recollection was clear.

"Anyone with you?"

"No, I was alone."

Damn but I wanted a smoke. I wondered if I had time for one before rehearsal. I didn't want to light it and let it go to waste. And maybe lighting up a cigarette made one look guilty?

"You weren't here for the practice?"

So he knew about the practice, a private affair that had made me so angry I'd drunk myself to sleep after walking half the way home through misty rain.

Ivan had been there with his two stars—Renata and Hans—and that simpering vocal student Laura, who turned pages for me.

Ivan had told me to meet him at the conservatory at five and we'd all "get to know each other." I'd assumed he'd take us out to dinner. I'd counted on it. He'd made it sound so festive, so gay. But no, once at the conservatory, he'd immediately mocked me. I'd been dressed in my

best jacket, and he noticed. And when I'd divulged the reason—my assumption we were dining out—he'd guffawed. *This early, my boy? Oh that's right, you're used to sitting down to supper once the afternoon shift's over, I imagine.*

Nothing was too obvious or too low for Ivan, yet everyone laughed because they assumed he was clever. He forced them to believe it.

Here, hold this, will you? His blasted cola, his constant drink during rehearsals. Sometimes it smelled of rum, which didn't bother me, a fellow boozer, but made me envious of his ability to hide it so well. He joked about satisfying his sweet tooth, about it being his peculiar American vice. But it wasn't his only vice. My god, you only needed to look at Renata to see the other—he introduced her as his fiancé! Or the besotted Laura, who was nervous as a bird around him.

And so for more than an hour we'd pounded out Turandot. My hands, already sore from an afternoon of play at my friend Salvatore's house where I'd entertained his sisters with the latest popular tunes, rebelled. After too many octaves—that score wasn't made for piano, dammit, it was for orchestra—a pain shot through my wrist and up my arm like a knife sluicing through the skin. I'd cried out and retracted my hand, holding the wrist and sucking in my lips.

And Ivan—he must have seen the look of pity in Laura and Renata's eyes—he quickly doused their sympathy with lightheartedness, making a joke about how it was time to stop and put them *all* out of their misery. He knew his audience well. People don't like to think of my suffering. So he'd provided them with the distraction from those unpleasant thoughts, turning compassion into mere camaraderie. How he forced people to love him!

But that Laura girl, she didn't succumb. Not that evening. She'd asked me after the rehearsal if I was all right. I'd said yes, seething with anger. My hand shaking from anguish and rage, I couldn't even light my cigarette. She lit it for me. And later, I noticed her heading to the practice rooms in the building down the street. I followed her there—for what? For nothing.

I ended up in a studio alone, watching the rain fall on the city, listening to random voices in the stairwell, wondering what they meant. I don't remember how long I was there. It was a black swath of time with intermittent memories. And here was one:

Before sitting there alone, I'd had my own encounter with Ivan on the stairs. Away from his audience, he didn't sweeten his cruelty. *You're not up to the task. It will only get harder. I can use Chalmers to play instead.*

He'd fired me.

And then I'd gone home, poured myself a whisky, and fallen asleep at my kitchen table in the basement of my Baltimore rowhouse, a far cry from the expansive homes that Ivan and Whiley and even that Laura girl lived in.

All this—without detail, especially the one involving the firing—I told the detective. He wrote notes in a small pad he kept in his jacket pocket. He thanked me, asked me where to find a few folks, like Renata and Hans who were not on the schedule today, and stepped out of the way, as if looking for others whose names he didn't want to divulge.

Laura arrived and scanned the growing crowd as well. She was met by the detective. Someone must have described her to him as well—golden hair, porcelain face, green eyes. She was a beauty. She shook her head. She nodded. She said things too low to hear. He let her go, and she immediately approached me.

“Maestro Silensky,” she said.

“Please, call me Gregory.”

“I just told the detective that we were in the practice studios last night. I hope you don’t mind.”

Yes, but I’d not known she’d noticed me.

“Of course.” Now, however, I’d have to amend my story with the detective, letting him know I’d seen Laura there, implying perhaps, as she’d implied, that we’d actually been in a room together. Or had we? Had she visited me—had I visited her? Each other’s alibi. Was it a kindness she’d done for me, or one I was doing for her?

I was already uneasy—I didn’t want to make a fool of myself before the musicians—and now the smallest tentacle of another kind of fear began curling its way up my spine.

I shook it away and entered the rehearsal room. This was where I belonged. This, at last, was payment for my suffering.

I stood at the podium, baton at my side twitching out an unheard beat while with my right hand I flipped through the pages of the opera score.

Once a sculpture gallery, the hall was vast in proportions, its walls reaching up nearly two stories and its windows large enough for a crowd to stand in comfortably. In an attempt to dampen the room’s overly-live acoustics, some long-forgotten administrator had hung a large, faded tapestry on one wall. But still the room reverberated with sound. Students joked that they could sing duets with themselves in it.

At that moment, I wished I could sing. Immersing myself in the score had restored my equilibrium. Now Puccini’s glorious music filled my mind again, pushing out all other anxiety, framing bad memories as operatic scenes to be felt from an emotional distance.

Last evening in this hall, Roustakoff had humiliated me. The detective’s questions had brought back more memory and I now filled in the history.

Once in the hall, Roustakoff had lost no time, immediately calling out “The second act,” as if the room had been full of adoring students. He’d waved the downbeat and I had played the B flat minor chord that signaled the start of the section in which Turandot poses her three riddles to Calaf.

And as soon as my hands had found the first chords, I knew it would be a disaster for me, that I’d be soaking my hands all night because of the stinging pain.

The Reed girl had fed my irritation. She had stared at my hands when she thought I wasn’t looking. As soon as she sensed my gaze, she looked away.

“*Straniero, ascolta!*” Renata had sung into the empty hall yesterday. *Stranger, listen!* Her voice—dark and large, but a fast vibrato that made it warm, not sloppy.

As she sang the first riddle—“everyone invokes it, everyone implores it, but this phantom vanishes at dawn and is born again in every heart”—I had to reach up to turn the page myself because Laura was staring slack-jawed at Renata—no, not Renata, at Turandot herself, cold, bitter, yet eerily sympathetic, someone who had been branded by pain so deep that she struck out at those around her.

Then it had been Hans’s turn. As Calaf, the tenor had sung the line repeating the riddle, and victoriously rose to the answer, his voice growing tremulous with anticipation as he sang the high last line with the solution—“hope!” His voice was clear and bright, a honeyed texture rounding it out. So bewitched was Laura by his magnificent singing that she leaned back, her hands in her lap as Roustakoff whispered the chorus’s reply—“*la speranza,*” *hope.*

Roustakoff had dropped his hands at his sides. “*Bene!*” He beamed at the singers, then frowned at me. “Even without the help of artful accompaniment.”

Of course my playing hadn’t been “artful.” My hands had tormented me before I’d even sat at the piano, cramping where the skin pulled tight across the palm and between index finger and thumb. I’d reflexively rubbed my hands on my trousers to ease the pain, staring accusingly at the keyboard, once my comfort, now an instrument of torture, wishing I could risk a drink from my ever-present flask.

“Five bars before letter ‘G’,” announced Roustakoff, referring to the rehearsal cues on the singers’ scores. Lifting his hands in the air like a bear ready to pounce, the conductor swiftly gave the downbeat and I tried to lose myself in the lush music, biting my lower lip when I felt a cramp start in my right hand. Just as Renata was about to enter with her part, the hand twitched uncontrollably. I pulled away from the keyboard as if it were a scalding hot iron and waited for the inevitable curse from the conductor. It didn’t take long.

And that had been the moment when Roustakoff had poised the sword over my head ready to fall.

“Damn it, boy! If it’s beyond you, get someone else to play it!” Roustakoff turned back to Renata, and assumed his position, hands poised in the air. “Again!”

Gritting my teeth, I took in a breath and held it. I closed my eyes, having memorized the passage after many repetitions.

The first time Roustakoff had abused me in front of others, I had discovered a sad truth. People pitied me, that was true. But in pity is the seed of disgust. And when Roustakoff chastised me, the conductor was tacitly giving them all permission to feel comfortable with their disgust. Of course, they rarely showed it by looking at my hands. No, instead I noticed them quietly disapproving of my unfashionable clothes, disheveled hair, or rundown shoes. We wouldn’t mind his hands so much, their looks seemed to say, if he took better care of himself. They kept their distance.

Another half hour the conductor worked us. We accomplished little in the extra time, except a renewed appreciation for Roustakoff's sarcasm. I matched his sneering with my own, even whispering a comment—now forgotten—to Laura at one point.

"Silence!" Roustakoff's voice boomed into the space and I heard in my mind's ear the chorus as they sang the hissing "*Silenzio*."

Roustakoff didn't take his eyes off me. "You have used the breaks as an opportunity to mock me and other teachers here. I will not tolerate your insults during my rehearsal."

He'd turned back to the podium and begun again, but by then my hand decided to punish me as well. The slicing pain, the electric shock of abused muscle, sinew, and skin. I could play no longer. And that was when he'd won the day, with his "putting us out of our misery" comment, making my misery no more nor no less than that of the singers or even little Laura Reed turning pages beside me.

What a bastard.

Now Roustakoff was dead and I was alive, claiming his moment of victory. I could not resist feeling vindicated, no matter what troubles awaited me.

Noise in the hall grew exponentially as instrumentalists took their places and began tuning and practicing difficult passages. Choristers meandered to the chairs set up behind the orchestra while the men who would sing the roles of Ping, Pang, and Pong—providing comic relief in the otherwise serious opera—were in place in front, as was the soprano who was singing the slave girl Liu, and the bass who was singing Timur.

I turned, spotting the college president speaking with a petite dark-haired woman in the back of the hall. Ponselle. The great singer herself was here.

When the president came forward with Ponselle, I stepped down from the platform and smiled at the diva, taking her offered hand. Quick introductions followed, and then I returned to the podium and tapped my baton on the edge of the music stand—the age-old signal that the rehearsal was about to begin.

The room slowly hushed as all eyes turned to me. I was surprised that my voice trembled as I welcomed everyone, then introduced the "special visitors."

The president, a stately man impeccably dressed, moved forward and gracefully extolled the virtues of Miss Ponselle's career, her phenomenal scope, how fortunate they were to have her in this city and in this conservatory as an honored guest, and then led the room in a round of genuine, sustained applause. Ponselle nodded her head and smiled in acknowledgement.

The room hushed again.

"I am sorry to report," the president said, holding his hands in front of him, "that your esteemed conductor, Maestro Roustakoff, will not be with you for this opera."

The room seemed to grow quieter still as he went on. "He has passed away unexpectedly. Our sincere condolences go out to his loved ones."

There were a few gasps in the room, a whispered "oh, no."

But from the middle of the soprano section, I heard a faint gurgle of laughter. It was soft—but the hall amplified everything and my keen ears picked up its timbre, hanging in the air

like the first tones of a wind chime blown by a spring breeze. My gaze darted around as the president began an impromptu eulogy, summarizing Roustakoff's accomplishments as conductor and composer and how he would want the opera to continue.

At last, I found the source of the laughter—Laura Reed. Her face rosy from blush, she was smiling now and her eyes were closed as if in rapture. And then—as if on cue—she fainted dead away, sliding to the ground with a reverberating thud.

More gasps and fluster. Choristers moved away, another soprano bent over Laura and fanned her face. The president's mouth fell open and he said, "Well now" before ordering someone to call for a doctor.

Now the head of this troupe, I assumed the role of leader and pushed through the instrumentalists and singers, kneeling down beside her prone figure. Her golden hair splayed around her like a halo and my first inclination was a selfish one—to touch this cloud while I had the chance, but I stayed my hand and instead felt her forehead. It was clammy. Her eyes fluttered, then opened. They were shimmering green.

"Dead," she whispered, smiling.

"Be quiet," I said. "They've gone to fetch a doctor. Have you been ill?"

Her brows creased. "A little. I'm better now."

She raised her head slowly, and I ended up cradling her against my chest. Her hair smelled like roses, just as it had yesterday. When I looked up at the crowd, I saw admiration in the eyes of many of the choristers and instinctually felt myself puff up with bravado.

"Clear out," I said in a firm voice to the group. "I think we should postpone rehearsal. Same time tomorrow—be prepared to stay longer." I issued this last command with a touch of impatience. I was Roustakoff now.

As the singers and instrumentalists wandered away, the hall filled with noise once more. From the corner of my eye, I saw the president standing nearby with Miss Ponselle, his hands in his pockets as if unsure what to do. Once again, I took charge.

"Miss Ponselle, I apologize," I said, still on the floor with Laura. "But I think you should probably go. I hope you can return tomorrow."

She smiled and nodded, and the president looked grateful for the opportunity to lead her from the room.

"The nurse is on her way," he said gesturing to the door where a white uniformed woman hurried into the hall carrying a black bag.

When this little tugboat of medical efficiency came in, I was pushed out of the way. I heard hushed conversations and could tell the nurse was asking Laura about "female" things so I discreetly stepped to the window and pulled out a smoke, quickly lighting it while I looked over the park and toward the townhomes where Roustakoff lived. Had lived.

Someone must have loved him. His fiancé, his family, the German tenor who'd come to America at his bidding—they would be mourning. For them, I could feel some measure of sadness, reassured as this more natural response washed over me.

In a few moments' time, Laura was on her feet, and the nurse was snapping closed her case. I turned and walked back to the scene.

"Is there something I can do?"

Laura was pale—no bloom of rose painted her cheeks. But somehow this made her even lovelier. She looked like one would imagine angels appearing— her skin almost translucent, her eyes bright.

"I think she's fine," the nurse said. "Didn't eat anything for breakfast or lunch. Girls today are foolish about such things." She turned to Laura. "Do you have a way of getting home, dear?"

"I have my car."

"It would be better if someone could escort you." The nurse turned to me.

I had hoped to study the score.

"I don't want to be a burden," Laura said, not looking at me. "I'll find a way."

The nurse harrumphed and probed her further, but Laura kept insisting she'd be fine, she'd get someone to take her home, or have her mother drive in to town to fetch her. Satisfied at last, the nurse left.

But the more Laura had protested to the nurse, the more I now wanted to escort her after all. I couldn't help wondering if Laura was so quick to dismiss the nurse's suggestion because I wasn't part of that crowd, the landed gentry of this very divided city. Even that cad Roustakoff would be more welcome in her neighborhood. Would she be embarrassed to have me accompany her home, afraid to show up at her comfortable house with a ragtag musician with mottled hands?

"If you have your car, I will drive you," I said firmly. "It's no trouble, really."

She looked a bit surprised at first and ready to protest further, but she merely smiled, a little self-satisfied, too. "Thanks. You already know where my home is."

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