

Chapter 1

December 8

“Taxi, ma’am?”

Jill paused on the sidewalk just outside her hotel. Taxi or subway? A taxi would get her to Seventh Avenue early, with plenty of time to sign in and get her bearings before the workshop began. It would probably cost a ton, though. Everything in New York cost five times more than she’d budgeted for this trip. Besides, her legs itched for a walk. She needed to work off some of the excited energy that had kept her up most of the night.

Carnegie Hall, here I come!

She fastened the top button of her coat beneath her chin and smiled at the hotel doorman. “No, thank you. They told me at the front desk there’s a subway station nearby.”

The man pointed a gloved hand down the street. “Just around that corner. Can’t miss it.”

Jill hitched the leather strap of her music portfolio higher on her shoulder and took off at a brisk pace over concrete wet with melted snow. Clouds the color of the fat pigeons she’d seen strutting through Central Park yesterday threatened to gift the city

with more snow before the morning ended. Of course she'd run out of her room without her hat. She shot an *I-dare-you-to-snow-on-my-parade* grin toward the sky.

Steam rose in thick ribbons from gutters to pollute her air-space with unpleasant underground odors, which she ignored. Yellow flashed in the corner of her eye and a taxicab sped past, spraying the sidewalk with dirty slush. A few heavy drops hit her left pant leg. She gasped and slid to a stop to examine the damage. Not bad, thank goodness. When she got to the Institute she'd run a wet paper towel over the black fabric, and they'd be good as new.

A completely un-Jill-like giggle tickled in her throat. Nothing could dampen her spirits today.

When she rounded the building on the corner, she spied the subway entrance halfway down the block. A handful of people, all of them bundled against the frigid weather, descended the concrete stairs. A couple of fat snowflakes floated in the air before her eyes and landed on her coat sleeve, instantly sucked into nonexistence by thirsty wool. Jill increased her pace, eager to get below ground before the snow began in earnest.

Down below, she purchased a MetroCard from an automated ticket machine and approached the cage-like turnstile behind a tall man in an overcoat. When she attempted to insert the card into the slot, the portfolio slid off her shoulder with a jerk and her fingers fumbled. The card slipped out of her grasp, danced like a jitterbug contestant on a phantom gust of air, and landed on the dirty floor inside the turnstile.

Jill gasped. "My card!"

The tall man turned and appraised her predicament in a second. "Allow me."

He retrieved the card and handed it across the thick metal

Lost Melody

bar with the courtly flourish of a gentleman returning a lady's handkerchief. Kind, dark eyes caught Jill's and sparked with ... something. She found herself smiling, drawn by his charming, old-fashioned courtesy.

"Thank you." She took the card and inserted it into the slot. Who said New Yorkers weren't friendly? The turnstile rotated, allowing her entry. "For a second I thought I might have to crawl under."

He dipped his head in a hint of a bow. "My pleasure to come to the aid of a beautiful woman."

Heat threatened to rise into her cheeks at the compliment. His words were perfectly articulated, and spoken with the faint accent of one who had long ago adopted English as his primary language. Jill looked closer at him as they walked together down a set of stairs toward the subway platform. He was at least twenty years her senior, maybe twenty-five. Roughly the age Daddy would have been if he'd lived. His round face was graced with a deeply clefted chin, and silver-streaked dark hair swooped away from a part on the side of his head. He wore a blindingly white scarf twisted with an elegant flair at his throat. His hands — she always noticed hands — were slender and long-fingered, covered with soft, fawn-colored leather.

The roar of an approaching train echoed up the stairwell.

"You are catching the W line?" he asked.

"Yes, that's right."

"As am I." He quickened his pace. "I believe our train is arriving."

Jill glanced at the sign above her head and verified that the train was the one that would take her to Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute. She hurried to catch up, and arrived at the man's side as the train pulled to a stop. The compartment was nearly

full of commuters. The doors opened, and only a few people exited. The rest compressed themselves to make room for those entering. Every seat was taken, so Jill filed as far inside as space allowed and grasped the overhead bar to brace for the forward motion, facing the stranger. The doors closed, and they began to move.

“I’m so glad we didn’t miss this train. I don’t want to be late today.” She snapped her mouth shut. What was the matter with her, babbling like an idiot? She must be more nervous than she realized.

Well, if she was, then who could blame her? Today was probably the most important step she’d ever taken in her career. To study with masters—no, with *legends* of modern classical music—was a dream come true. This weeklong workshop would culminate in an evening that she’d dreamed of since she was seven years old and first placed her fingers on the silky keys of a piano. She would play Carnegie Hall.

Okay, just a recital, not a real performance. But it was an important step, and one day she *would* headline one of the famous Carnegie Hall concerts herself.

“You have an important meeting, yes?” He nodded toward the portfolio hanging from her shoulder.

“Sort of. I’m attending a music workshop this week.”

A delighted smile lit his features. Even, white teeth appeared between the generous lips. “You are a pianist.”

Jill’s mouth dropped open. “How did you know?”

“I suspected the moment I saw you.” He straightened to his full height, his chin tilted upward. “You carry yourself like an *artiste*.”

She experienced a flash of pleasure. Back home, she was once accused of putting on airs, of walking down the street with her

Lost Melody

nose in the air as though she thought she was better than the other residents of Seaside Cove. Sort of like this man was doing right now.

His posture returned to normal, and his smile became conspiratorial. “Besides, I recognize the brand of your portfolio and surmised that it contains sheet music.”

His laughter filled the compartment, and she joined in. Heads turned to glance at them, then people returned to their private contemplations of books or newspapers, or their study of the graffiti-covered concrete tunnel walls rushing by outside the windows. The train swayed, and a dark-haired child standing in front of her clutched his mother’s hand. Jill tightened her grip on the overhead bar.

“What composer do you favor? Beethoven, perhaps, or Mozart? No, wait.” A slender gloved finger rose to rest on his lips as he studied her. “Liszt. Definitely Liszt.”

Delighted at the accuracy of his guess, Jill once again exclaimed, “How could you know that?”

Piercing dark eyes sparked with shared passion. “I see the love of the mystical in your eyes. Liszt’s spiritual nature, his ever-searching musicality, would appeal to someone like you.”

Jill’s smile warmed with a sudden kinship. He was a musician too. Of course he was.

“My name’s Jill.” She released the bar to extend her hand.

He captured her fingers, pressed them with his. “Robert.”

The screech of steel reached her ears in the split-second before she pitched forward. Something hit her hard from behind. She crashed into Robert, who tumbled backward. The cry of tortured metal drowned out the passengers’ startled shrieks. Glass shattered. Bodies sprawled. The dark-haired boy bounced off of the ceiling, his arms and legs flailing. But the

ceiling was where the wall should be. Then with a terrific crash, it wasn't there at all.

Screams.

Pain.

Darkness.



Jill woke minutes or hours later, she didn't know which. An agonizing pain in her left hip reduced her breath to tiny gulps. A tearful, high-pitched keening from close by filled her ears. For a moment she could hear nothing else, then other sounds gradually filtered through. A man's sobs. A woman's voice whispering the Lord's Prayer. Water trickling not far from her head.

She opened her eyes. A dim spot of light shone in the distance. Around her, darkness shrouded everything. Something lay across her chest, the weight crushing her, pinning her down. She tried to push it off.

Mistake. The movement sent shafts of agony slamming through her body. Stars danced in her vision, and she gasped in a hissing breath that expelled with a near-scream.

"Jill? You are alive." A voice near her head whispered something in another language, something incomprehensible. "Do you hear me?"

Something familiar about that voice. She tried to clear her head, to focus through the pain. Where was she? Who owned that voice? Memory returned in a rush, like a tide crashing onto the rocky shore back home. New York. The subway. The man who knew she loved to play Liszt.

"Robert." Her voice sounded raspy, faint. The weight across her body robbed her of breath. "There's something ... on me.

Lost Melody

Can't breathe. Can't see."

"On me too." A gentle pressure squeezed her right hand. Robert's fingers still grasped hers. "We are trapped together. Are you badly injured?"

"I . . . don't know." The pain in her left hip was so severe she couldn't focus on anything else at first. Gradually another throbbing ache seeped through to her consciousness.

No.

A sob caught in her throat. "My left hand. I—I think it's injured."

No, God, please. Not my hand.

Robert understood immediately. "For a musician, music is breath. Life. An intimate form of worship non-musicians will never understand. Do not despair. God will not take that from you." His grip on Jill's fingers tightened.

She returned the pressure. "Are you okay, Robert? Are you injured?"

A pause. "Don't be concerned for me."

Something in his voice alarmed her. His hand squeezed hers once more, then loosened. The sound of shallow breathing near her ear was faint, nearly drowned out by the cries that filled the air all around them.

From far away, a man's voice echoed through the subway tunnel. "Hold on! Help is on the way." The thump of heavy boots on concrete. A beam of light flashed in the distance. Rescuers.

She ignored the pain and drew as deep a breath as the crushing weight on her chest allowed. "Help." Her voice sounded pitifully small. She tried again. "We're trapped. Help us. Please."

The effort sent pain exploding through her skull. Darkness closed in, and Jill knew no more.