

ECHOES ON THE WIND

By Helaine Mario

A Maggie O'Shea Mystery, Book 4

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*"There are four things in this life that will change you:
Love, Music, Art, and Loss.*

The first three will keep you wild and full of passion.

May you allow the last to make you brave."

Erin van Vuren, Poet

OVERTURE

"Like so many things that matter, it began with an accident." *David Ignatius, 12/28/98*

NOVEMBER, 1943. THE NIGHT TRAIN TO PARIS

Light and dark.

The bleak November landscape rushed past the train's window. Black tree branches against the dark night sky, then a sudden flash of light. Then blackness again.

The blackout had claimed the streetlamps and cottage windows. Clair Rousseau stared out the rain-streaked glass, waiting for the next glimpse of light. A lone lantern. Car headlights tilted down, a sliver of gold beyond a cracked curtain. Sheet lightning over distant hills, a glimmer of light on water. But all she saw was the blurred, pale oval of her reflection staring back at her. Dark hair scraped back, framing huge eyes beneath winged brows, sharp cheekbones, the too-wide mouth.

No hint of the emotions flowing through her, except for the deep purple shadows beneath her eyes.

The dim, four-person compartment was cold, and she pulled her coat more tightly around her body. The seat beside her was still empty, thank God. Across from her, two German officers. One asleep, snoring loudly, his hands slack between thick gray-green uniformed knees.

The other awake, a *Gauloises* cigarette clamped between thin lips, a jagged line of white scars marring his left cheek. The narrow fox-like face stared at her through thick round glasses and wreathes of curling blue smoke. His jacket was heavy with insignia, oak leaves, medals. Military Intelligence, she thought with a sudden chill. A high rank, SD or Abwehr. What was he thinking?

The watchful, unblinking eyes made her afraid. Like a snake's eyes, waiting to strike. She looked away, forcing herself not to reach for her satchel, touch her identity papers for reassurance.

The carriage's glassed door slid back and forth with an unnerving rattle as the train rocked around a bend. From the hallway came the sharp scent of burning coal, wafting back from the old steam engine several cars ahead. A cloud of steam billowed past the window like sudden fog.

She could feel the vibration beneath her, hear the rumble of the train's wheels speeding along the tracks. The lonely call of a train whistle, echoing in the night. A quick flare of light, illuminating the rain like silver threads streaming down the window.

Light and dark. Light and dark.

Movement at the edge of her vision. A tall figure appeared in the hallway, beyond the door. Her chest tightened. Would she ever feel safe again?

A sharp crack of thunder, a sudden bright flash lighting her face.

"Mademoiselle Clair?"

Startled, her head came up. The stranger had stopped, was staring into the compartment. Across from her, the watchful German stiffened and slid pale eyes toward the voice.

Be careful.

There was something familiar about the gaunt face, the faint, questioning smile just visible above a thick woolen scarf. She stood quickly, stepping between the German and the carriage door to block the officer's view.

"*Oui*," she said softly, peering into the dim hallway. The man nodded and moved closer. Something about those gentle eyes, the arch of silver brows. Memory surged. *Father Jean-Luc*.

She flashed him a warning glance for silence and stepped into the train's narrow corridor, closing the door firmly behind her. "*Mon Père*, is it really you?"

"*Oui, ma petite, c'est moi*." The priest pulled the scarf down to offer a glimpse of his white Roman collar, then lost his smile as he gazed over her shoulder and saw the Germans. "But we cannot talk here. Come with me."

He slipped a hand beneath her elbow and guided her to the end of the dark passageway, where an open exit door led across shifting metal plates to the train's next car. She felt the sudden bite of night wind on her face, cold and wet with mist. Here the clatter of the train wheels was loud enough to hide their conversation.

They sheltered just inside the doorway, in the shadows, away from the rain. Outside, the countryside of France rushed by, then disappeared in a billow of black smoke. In the dim corridor, the planes of the priest's face were lit by a tiny, flickering overhead bulb.

Light and dark. Light and dark.

The priest looked down at her, shook his head. "Little Clair Rousseau," he murmured. "Now such a beautiful young woman. It's been – what? – four years since we met? You were just thirteen, I think. Playing the piano in your parents' apartment. Bach, yes? It was so beautiful, so stirring. I hope you are still playing?"

She shook her head. “You need hope to create music, *Père*.” She looked back toward her carriage compartment. The hallway was empty. “But I remember that day. The war was coming. You asked us to help you remove the stained-glass windows from Sainte-Chapelle. To save them from the bombing.”

“You were fearless, Clair. I remember watching you, swaying at the top of that impossibly high ladder. The morning light was coming through the stained glass, spilling over you like shimmering jewels. I’ll never forget it. I told myself, Clair means light, she is perfectly named.”

He leaned down. “And I can still see your sister, Elle – too young to help us, *bien sûr* – dancing around the altar.”

Her expression softened. “Elle loved to dance. It was the last happy day I can remember.” She lifted her eyes to his, took a breath. “Paris was another lifetime, *Père*.”

“You cannot lose hope,” he told her. “The glass pieces are in a safe place. Beauty and goodness cannot be destroyed. You will see the stained-glass windows back in Sainte-Chapelle when the war is over. I know it.”

She shook her head. “I wish I had your faith.”

“God has his plans. There is a reason we’ve met by chance on the night train to Paris.” Concern flashed in his eyes. “But you’ve been in Brittany? Dangerous times for a young woman to be traveling alone, Clair.”

She looked out at the black trees rushing past the doorway, and felt the blackness deep in her heart. “I am alone now, *Père*.”

“*Mon Dieu*. What happened?”

“My father knew that war was inevitable. Not long after we saved the glass my parents moved us from Paris to the coast near Saint-Malo to be safe. Such irony. They had no idea how dangerous Brittany would become. And then...”

She could not stop the sudden rush of tears that filled her eyes. “The Gestapo shot my father last year, in a retaliation roundup for an act of sabotage by the Resistance. He was with the Liberty Network, they had bombed a train track. He stepped forward, admitted it, hoping to save the others. But still they took thirty innocent people from our village, murdered them in the square.”

“Oh no, Clair.” The priest made a quick sign of the cross. “I am so sorry. And your mother, your sister?”

“I don’t know, *Père*. I was studying in Paris, I begged them to come stay with me. But *Maman* refused. When I returned last month to see them, the house was empty. They were just... gone. The neighbors said the Germans took them, in the night. The mayor was told they were being relocated to Poland.”

The priest paled. “*Désolé*. I will pray for their souls.”

Anger erupted, spilled out. “Prayers did not help my family! I have no time for prayer now. Or sorrow. Even avenging my father will have to wait. I need all my energy now to find my mother and my sister.”

He bent toward her. “I am afraid you are still too fearless for your own good. Tell me what you’re doing, little one.”

She turned once more to scan the dark hallway, then leaned closer. “I excelled in languages in my *lycée* studies these last years,” she whispered. “I am fluent in several languages, including German and English. I hope to find a new job, in the Hotel Majestic in

Paris, where the German High Command is quartered. Then I will join the Resistance, find a way to get news of *Maman* and Elle. I must *find* them!”

He gazed down at her for a long moment, then put a hand on her shoulder.

“Perhaps I know of another way,” he murmured.

The sound of a door opening. Wavering shadows spilled into the train’s corridor. Then the red glow of a cigarette, a spiral of smoke. She froze as the German officer turned toward them.

“Find me at Èglise Saint-Gervais, in the Marais,” the priest whispered quickly. “I am with the Resistance there. You could work with me, we need someone like you to –”

A sudden terrifying screech of metal wheels. Clair felt herself thrown to the floor as the train braked, slammed to a shuddering stop. Stunned, Clair reached out, felt the still body of the priest beside her. “*Mon Père...*”

Shouts in German in the darkness, the clatter of heavy boots. When she raised her head she saw flashing blue lights against the night sky.

Light and dark. Light and dark.

PART 1

"An echo of the past..."

Victor Hugo

CHAPTER 1

THE PRESENT

PERFORMING ARTS CENTER, MARTHA'S VINEYARD

Light and dark.

The stage was shadowed, lit only by a handful of overhead lights. One of the lights began to flicker, a bright flash illuminating Maggie O'Shea's face for a brief moment, then casting her into darkness.

Maggie sat at the Bechstein grand piano, marveling at the power, the responsive touch, the unique tone of the beautiful instrument. Prokofiev deserves no less, she thought.

The score propped above the keyboard was marked by penciled notations, heavy lines, arrows and slashes. Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 2 was the ultimate challenge for a pianist, but Maggie had chosen it because it was so emotional, so personal. So incredibly beautiful.

It has the most to say, she thought.

And, oh, she had so much she wanted to say. Always, since she'd been a young child whose bare feet did not yet reach the pedals, she had spoken through her music. Told the piano her secrets long before she told anyone else.

Her earliest memory was of being curled beneath the grand piano, listening to her mother play, surrounded – cradled – by music. Then later, sitting on the piano bench by her mother's

side. The smoothness of the keys beneath tiny fingers, the sound that seemed to magically flow from her shoulders to her fingertips. Seeing the colors, making the piano sing. Making the rest of the world disappear.

But this piece – face it, *every* piece lately – was giving her trouble. Something, some emotion, was just out of reach. Her mentor, the legendary pianist Gigi Donati, would say she was taking the easy way out by mastering technique but not the emotion. She could hear Gigi's smoky, exasperated voice in the shadows. *No, no, no! You are not growing, Maggie, your music is lifeless. Imagine you are kissing your lover goodbye for the last time. What do you feel? Now, again!*

Maggie sighed. She had been playing the first movement for an hour, with nary a lover in sight. Without *Espressivo*, as Gigi would demand. She would say, *You don't know the music yet. Take the time. Grow with the music. Illuminate its secrets. Make it yours.*

The light high above the stage flickered again, slipping her out of the light into darkness.

Light and dark, thought Maggie. The story of my music. The story of my life.

She closed her eyes, took a deep, shaky breath, and began to play the next phrase of music.

Look into the heart of the music, whispered Gigi from behind her. *Find its light. Find its soul.*

A few more chords, and suddenly Maggie's fingers stiffened, locked, slipped off the keys. Shaking her head, she gathered the sheet music and dropped it to the bench.

I just can't, Gigi. I know what's wrong, why I can't play. I just don't know how to fix it.

But deep down, she did know. What she needed was to *feel*. But once again, part of her was frozen.

You will not give up, she told herself. You have so much joy waiting for you. Raising her left hand to stretch tensed tendons, the engagement ring on her finger flashed emerald in the theater lights.

The flash of emerald green in a shadowed cabin. The memory washed over her and once again she was back in the moment. She saw Michael's face, as craggy and strong as the mountains he loved, his granite eyes locked on hers.

What are you doing, Michael?

It's called offering you a ring, Maggie. The color of your eyes, the color of the mountains. It's been hidden in my sock drawer for months.

I know it's a ring. I mean... What are you doing?

Jumping off a cliff, it seems. Don't make me get down on one knee, darlin'. I'll never get back up.

Silver eyes blazing like a torch. Marry me, Maggie.

I... You... Oh, Love.

I'll take that as a yes, ma'am.

She smiled. Colonel Michael Jefferson Beckett. A man who had fallen in love with her when he didn't want to, a man she hadn't wanted to love back.

And yet.

It just *was*. Like music. And right this minute he was back in those beloved mountains of his, at his cabin in Virginia's Blue Ridge. Working on a secret project, he'd told her, with Dov, the Russian teenager in his care.

She pictured the battered, rugged face she knew so well. The quirk of his mouth, the spiky silver brows, eyes like river stones locked on her. His stillness, as if he was carved from the mountains he loved. The way he listened...

Michael, standing behind her, wrapping her naked body in a woven blanket.

Michael, beneath her in the shadowed bedroom, whispering her name against her lips while her hair fell like dark rain around his face.

She breathed out in a long sigh. It had been an emotional several months but now, finally, she was letting go of the past. Moving on. Ready to marry again. To spend the rest of her life with the Colonel, Dov and their rescue Golden, Shiloh. She had never expected this gift, this second chance at love.

She shook her head, barely recognizing the woman she'd become. For so long she'd thought of herself as a city-girl. But the small cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains was becoming her center. Her home. She heard music differently in the quiet of the mountains. Listened better.

Suddenly wanting to hear Michael's voice, she dialed his cell. Message.

"Hey you, it's me," she whispered. "Call me tonight, I'll wait up. I have so much to tell you."

If only...

If only she didn't have to tell Michael the secret she'd been keeping from him these past few weeks. That once again, a vicious murderer was threatening all she held dear. Dane, with his scarred, wolf-like face and mirrored sunglasses hiding his eyes. The one nightmare she could not put behind her.

Because now Dane was back in her life.

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Over 4,500 miles to the East, the man who called himself Dane could not sleep. Still hours before dawn, shadows lay sharp across the tiles of the villa's bedroom, angling from the terrace doors. Dane sat in a cushioned chair, crutches propped beside him, staring out the glass at the black Aegean far below – waiting for the sun's light to spill over the horizon and fill the dark water with gold.

A sudden shift of the moon, and he caught his breath at his reflection in the window. All the mirrors in the villa had been shattered years ago, by his own hand. As shattered as his life. Now, caught off guard, he stared at the disfigured face of the stranger wavering in the glass.

Without warning his mind flung him back several years. He had been standing in the Kennedy Center's Grand Foyer, his French knife secure under his tuxedo jacket, when he had caught a glimpse of himself in the floor-to-ceiling mirrors. Tall and god-like, he'd had muscles that rippled beneath the silk, a strong carved face, flowing hair the color of wheat, streaked by the Provençal sun. A diamond in his left ear, mirrored aviator glasses that hid tiger-colored eyes. His stride had been long, fast and as powerful as the Jaguar he drove.

And then he had crossed paths with Magdalena O'Shea.

First, the badly burned hand, thanks to an encounter with Magdalena's Colonel at a Provençal abbey. He held up his right hand, now encased in a tight black glove. Then the botched plastic surgery in Italy after being forced into hiding. The scarred, distorted face, the loss of an eye. And then, months later... He looked down at his withered legs. The fall. The

sickening feeling of spinning into the void. The excruciating pain that followed. The months of unbearable physical therapy.

All because of one woman. Magdalena O'Shea.

He glanced at his Rolex. Early evening in the states. Firas should have arrived in Martha's Vineyard by now. He smiled. Until the time came, Firas would be his legs.

The image in the glass wavered, dissolved, and Dane turned away. "For death remembered should be like a mirror," he whispered. "Who tells us life's but breath, to trust it error."