

**THE LOST CONCERTO**  
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APRIL 1, 2017 FIRST CHAPTER PDF SUBMISSION FOR FWA Royal  
Palm Literary Awards, First Place/Suspense:

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**OVERTURE**

**(in music: an opening, preceding a larger work)**

“The bright day is done, and we are for the dark.”  
Cleopatra

Shakespeare, Antony and

**BRITTANY, FRANCE. LATE SUMMER.**

They fled from Rome on a rain swept August night.

First in the black Citroen, speeding north into the darkness. Then two trains, the small fishing boat, the final climb up a steep path through thick, swirling mist. Moving from shadow to shadow for two days, until they stood before the high, locked iron gates of the sixth century Benedictine convent. *Couvent de la Brume*... The Convent of the Fog. The nuns welcomed them in silence.

She had chosen their hiding place well. The tiny Breton isle lay seven kilometers off the French coast, lost in the immense blackness of the ocean. Isolated by dangerous

reefs and haunted by rolling, dense grey fogs, the island was a world apart - a final sentinel before the vastness of the misted sea.

The woman thought they would be safe, finally, here at the very edge of the world.

For five days, they hid in the convent, sheltered by thick stone walls and the island's fog.

Each morning the woman stood at the arched window, keeping watch. Outside, beyond the small cloister, the island appeared and then was gone as mist swirled like veils across the hills. She watched the nuns plant vegetables in the garden, scrub whitewashed walls, kneel by the stone cross in the cloister to pray.

Each night, the woman sat vigilant in the watery darkness, listening to the soaring Gregorian chants, the muffled thunder of waves against jagged rocks, and the small breaths from the cot under the eaves.

Generations of seafarers had called the place Ile de la Brume. Fog Island.

She thought it was the last place on earth a man would look for his missing wife.

\* \* \* \*

On the first day of September, the soft cocoon of fog began to shimmer with light. The woman watched with growing dread as, one by one, the cottages and pines and bright boats beyond the convent walls emerged from the haze. Too soon the sky turned clear as glass, and she hurried to gather their belongings while the sun spun like a golden coin toward the sea.

When all was ready she waited at the window, willing the sun to set. The light shimmered on the black pearls around her neck and caught her marble-pale face, once beautiful but now etched by fear and despair. *Hurry*, she pleaded with the glowing sky. *We need the protection of the night.*

But still the bright day lingered, fighting the dark.

Bells called the nuns to evening prayer, and she watched them cross the ancient cloister, their white wimples shining like bird's wings in the changing light.

A trawler's horn sounded a warning. Startled, she looked toward the harbor, saw the man leap easily from the deck of a fishing boat just as the setting sun flashed on the mirrors of his glasses.

Terror, sudden and sharp, exploded in her chest.

She slammed the shutters closed, reached for her cloak and backpack. Then she woke her companion, settling a small knapsack over his thin shoulders. They clattered down the narrow stairs as the sky became a great sea of light, awash with the fiery crimson and burnished brass of one last summer's sunset.

Against this glimmering curtain, the two figures running across the deserted beach showed black and distinct. They were perfect silhouettes. Perfect targets.

The island cliffs rose like black ships before them. Just below the rocks, on a small crescent of sand, a tangle of wind-battered sea pines promised shelter.

On they ran. *One hundred meters. Fifty. Twenty.*

They disappeared into the shadows.

Only then, deep within the pines, did the woman slow their pace. She raised her eyes to search the cliffs. There. On the rock face some sixty feet above them, a lamp flashed orange in the splintered half-light.

The stone chapel clung to the cliff like a wild bird's nest wedged into the rock. The blinking light shone from the medieval belfry, casting its warning to unwary sailors far out over the hunched and shining reefs. She could hear the crash of waves, fierce against the rocks. Soon the rising tides would completely cut off the tiny chapel of *Notre Dame du Sauf-Retour* from the shore. Our Lady of the Safe Return.

It was the perfect refuge.

Very gently, the woman set a Red Sox baseball cap on the dark head by her side and pointed to the distant light. "That's where we're going," she whispered. "To the very top."

She clasped the hand of her child tightly and they followed the ancient track through the sea pines as the last brightness fell from the day.

\* \* \* \*

The hunter moved away from the window under the eaves. In his hand he held a heavy cardboard tube, some fifty centimeters in length, that had been left behind. *Empty.* He hurled it to the floor, watched it roll across the stones.

He had only missed them by a few minutes. The door had been left open, the sheets on the rumpled bed still warm.

No matter. He had seen their flight across the beach. Now he knew where they were headed.

He lifted the mirrored glasses and bent to study his map of the island, following the shoreline as it left the village, curved towards the forest, then climbed the headland toward the cliffs. His finger stopped on the symbol of a small black cross.

“There,” he murmured.

\* \* \* \*

The mother and child stood silently on the black cliffs. Worn steps disappeared over the edge into a deep void of thundering surf. Their faces glowed briefly as the lamp in the tower blinked on and off in the darkness.

“Are we there yet?”

The woman smiled at the ageless question. “Our Lady’s chapel,” she whispered, gesturing toward the church.

The small boy was young, not more than five years old. The dark terrors of the night were forgotten as he watched the blinking light. “Like fireflies, Mama!”

“Just like fireflies,” agreed the woman, reaching to caress his cheek. A large sapphire ring flashed blue in the moonlight, jarring with the simplicity of her Breton clothing.

“Mama!” cried the boy. “I want to -”

“Hush, Little Firefly,” she said quickly, touching his lips. He nodded, understanding beyond his years, his small fingers reaching trustingly for her hand. Sudden fear for her son engulfed her in waves.

*I won't let him hurt you ever again, my darling.*

In need of reassurance, the woman slipped her hand into the deep pocket of her cloak. Money and passports. A flashlight and cell phone. And the small journal. Her fingers lingered on the smooth leather.

“Come, Tommy,” she urged. She tipped the baseball cap back from his head and, very gently, brushed a dark curl from the child’s eyes. Then she drew the thin journal from her pocket. “We should go into the chapel. I have a very special hiding game for you.”

The boy’s eyes widened. “Can Paddy play, too?” he asked in a stage whisper as he tugged a worn stuffed bear out of his knapsack.

“An excellent idea. But you and Paddy must make me a promise, too. You must promise to never, *ever* tell our secret...”

Sofia Orsini drew her son toward the chapel as she described their game.

Behind them, the mist crept like smoke over the edge of the cliffs.

\* \* \* \*

Enclosed in a blinding white shroud, the hunter stood motionless and listened. Was that a child’s voice, trapped and echoing in the mist?

Below him, the incoming surf pounded on the old steps that hugged the cliff, reaching for his boots. He pressed his hands against the wall of rock.

She was close by. He sensed it.

He always knew when she was near. So many times, when she was unaware of his presence, he’d watched her at the villa in Rome. Her scent, the low voice, the graceful movement of her skirt. Once, late at night when he passed through the villa’s gardens, he’d seen her through a lighted window as she brushed her hair with long, smooth strokes in front of a mirror. Her bare arm moving up and down... The way the silky hair sparked with black fire in the lamplight.

The hunter touched the needle-sharp Laguiole knife in his belt and felt the excitement stirring in his body as he climbed higher. Toward Sofia and the little boy.

Far below him, the sea crashed against the rocks. “Like as the waves make toward the pebbled shore,” he quoted softly, “So do our minutes hasten to their end.”

\* \* \* \*

The chapel smelled of lingering incense and the sea.

Sofia Orsini sat with her son in one of the shoulder-high pews. She had lighted the tapers set in heavy candlesticks, and now they flickered next to the red sanctuary flame on the stone altar. The statue of *Our Lady of the Safe Return* glimmered in the dusky light.

*Sanctuary...*

Her eyes swept the carved pulpit, the cracked baptismal font, the faded frescoes of ships that decorated the walls. Hollow plaster statues stood in narrow niches, their suffering eyes raised heavenward. An arched door led to the medieval belfry. In a dark corner a musty curtain of once scarlet velvet hid a small confessional. Someone, she noticed, had placed fresh chrysanthemums on the white altar cloth. High above the altar, a round rose window waited to filter the morning's sunlight down onto the gentle-faced virgin.

So many places to hide a small journal. She nodded with satisfaction.

With a long sigh she looked down at her son. The boy slept deeply, his head nestled in her lap, the stuffed bear still clutched in his arms.

She had found such infinite joy with this child, conceived so unexpectedly and late in her life. He was the very center of her world - her son, her heart. Perhaps one day he would forgive her for hiding him from his father...

Her fingers traced the purple bruise that marred the pale skin of her son's cheek. Someday, she told him silently, when you're older, you will learn about your father. Then you will understand why I didn't have a choice.

Beyond the chapel walls, the opalescent fog swirled, muffling the cries of the seabirds as they were frightened from their nests in the cliffs.

\* \* \* \*

The Madonna stood in a halo of light, holding out her hand. Sofia Orsini raised pleading eyes to the statue as she held her son close. Protect us, she prayed. Keep my child safe in your -

*The sound came from the right.*

A dark figure stepped into the light and grasped her son, swinging him away from her arms.

“Mama!” cried the boy, struggling to free himself.

She lunged toward the man, but froze at the sight of the silver dagger, held so close to the boy’s ear.

“God in Heaven, what are you doing? Let him go!”

Familiar, frightening mirrored glasses glittered at her. “I’m taking him back to Rome where he belongs.”

“He belongs with me.”

“So you thought you could just disappear with him? A beautiful woman and a boy in a too-big baseball cap.” He shook his head, taunting her. “People remembered you.”

“His cap...”

“You have a fatal flaw, Sofia. You are far too trusting. And once again you trusted the wrong person to help you escape.”

Her eyes were locked on the knife. “Please, if you’ll just let him go, I will...”

“I want the journal you stole. And that manuscript...” The dagger flickered with candlelight and the boy whimpered. “You see? You have made him afraid of me.”

The mother looked down at her son. His eyes were wide with uncomprehending terror.

*Get the knife away from her child.*

“Please,” she pleaded. “He is just a child, he cannot hurt you!”

“But *you* can, Sofia.” The words were chilling. “You’ve read the journal, haven’t you? You’ve discovered the truth.”

She closed her eyes. “Yes. I know.” She reached into the depths of her cloak. “Just let Thomas go, and I’ll give you what you want.” Her fingers closed around an object in the deep pocket.

“Give them to me, Sofia.” The hunter smiled as the tip of the dagger touched the boy’s skin.

The child cried out.

She hurled her flashlight at the mirrored lenses.

The man flung his hand up. She lunged, grabbed her son’s sleeve, spun him away from the knife. Twisting, she raked sharp nails across the hunter’s face.

Bright blood ran down his cheek. “A mistake,” he said softly. His fingers reached out to caress her neck as he smiled down at her.

The child had buried his face in the folds of her cloak. One last time, Sofia Orsini held her son fiercely against her body and bent to press her lips to his hair. “Hide,” she whispered. “I’ll find you.”

The hunter moved. Desperately she pushed her child away, toward the shadows. “Run, Thomas!” Her voice was an anguished command.

Clutching his stuffed bear to his chest, her son ran.

As the man lunged for the child, the woman wrapped her thin arms around his neck. Pouring all of her strength into the struggle, her teeth sank into his ear. She heard his curse of pain and felt his fingers brutally gripping her hair, pulling back her head. “Hide, Thomas!” she screamed.

Breath coming in sobs, she hit out wildly. Her fingers touched the candlestick and in an instant the heavy brass club was in her hand. She struck out at the back of his head and an animal sound erupted from his throat as he fell to the floor.

She whirled to search the high pews. “Tommy!”

The hunter surged up from the floor and grabbed the hem of her dress.

\* \* \* \*

“No!”

The boy ran out from behind a choir stall. He saw his mother and the man he feared locked together, their giant shadows wavering like monsters from his nightmares against the stone wall. They fell against the statue of Mary and it toppled to the floor.

The crash was loud, terrifying.



A sharp cry. A man's hand, held high.  
A terrible flash of silver in the candlelight.  
A gasp. A heavy thud.  
His mother's voice, murmuring his name in a strange, choked sound.  
The child stared at the cloaked figure, motionless on the stone floor.  
"Mama! Mama!" His cries echoed throughout the chapel.  
He ran down the aisle, out through the heavy doors into the black night. He could hear the sounds of footsteps running after him. Coming closer!  
*Hide! Hide from the man with the knife.*  
The roar of the surf grew louder and then the earth fell away. He felt himself tumbling over and over into a vast and silent darkness.

\* \* \* \*

The young nun found the woman at dawn, crumpled and still on the cold stones amid the scattered shards of the Madonna statue. Black pearls rolled and crunched loudly beneath her shoes as she moved toward her.

Morning flowed through the stained-glass window. Sofia Orsini lay in a brilliant halo of light, splashes of emerald and amethyst and blood-red ruby lighting her ivory face and shining like fallen stars in the dark stain on her breast.

Her ring-less hand was stretched toward the scattering of toys that spilled from a small torn knapsack.

There was no sign of the child.