



American Anthem

by B.J. Hoff

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From Chapter 16: "A Man and His Music"

In his music, consecrated,

The Divine is celebrated,

As his seeking heart embraces

Heaven's high and holy places.

-Anonymous

New York City

The theater shimmered with gaslight and candle glow, dimmed only by the reflection of the ladies' jewels and glistening gowns. A palpable sense of excitement hung over the concert hall, an anticipation so keen it could be felt above the shuffling and conversation of the audience.

"Papa will be coming out any minute now, Aunt Susanna! And he'll be so handsome! Wait and see!"

Seated between Caterina and Rosa Navaro in Michael's private box, Susanna smiled at her niece. She, too, was excited about the opening of tonight's concert. This would be her first time to attend a performance by Michael's orchestra, but that was not the sole reason for her anticipation.

In Dublin, she had often attended the symphony with the Mahers, her former employers. Her last outing with them had been over a year ago, but until tonight, she had had little time to reflect on the lack of music in her life, or the emptiness that lack engendered in

her soul. Now, awaiting the concert, she realized now how very much she had missed the experience.

Indeed, there had been precious little time to reflect on anything since she'd arrived in New York. The days had been filled with the effort of settling into her new home and acclimating herself to the routine of the household.

She had determined early on that considerable adaptability was expected from everyone at Bantry Hill, even from those who lived on the periphery of Michael Emmanuel's life. If she had once envisioned her brother-in-law as a brooding recluse, spending his days in self-imposed seclusion while he labored over his music and massaged his inflated ego, it hadn't taken long to send those preconceptions packing.

In truth, she had seen very little of Michael during the weeks since her arrival. He had been in rehearsal, staying in the city almost every night, some days coming home only long enough to spend a few hours with Caterina before rushing off again.

Other than what she'd learned from Deirdre's letters, Susanna had been forced to glean the little she knew about the man from Rosa Navaro and Caterina. Her own contact with him had been sporadic, and at times frustrating. Although he was invariably gracious and never failed to show a concern for her comfort and well-being, he was most often preoccupied, even more remote than he'd been the day she'd first arrived at Bantry Hill.

More perturbing still, he had yet to offer a full explanation of Deirdre's death. By now, Susanna was almost convinced that he was deliberately avoiding the subject.

If that was his tactic--and she was increasingly suspicious that it was--he would soon realize that she wouldn't be put off indefinitely. He had promised her answers, and she had every intention of getting them.

She was determined to know what had happened to Deirdre. It was true that they had never been close; actually, there had been times when she wasn't even sure she liked her older sister. Nevertheless, they had been sisters, and there would be no peace for her until she learned the truth about Deirdre's death.

She had already decided that if Michael persisted in his evasion, she would take her questions elsewhere, perhaps to Rosa Navaro. She had even thought about going to the authorities but didn't quite know how to begin. Perhaps when Michael saw that she was a fair match for his stubbornness, he would finally give in and tell her everything.

And if he didn't?

She would face that particular dilemma only if and when it became necessary.

The concert hall quieted. The lights dimmed as the crimson velvet curtains opened on the orchestra. Paul Santi, the concertmaster, rose with his violin and gave the other musicians the note of A, and dissonance reigned until all the instruments swelled to total agreement.

Then silence again descended, and Paul exited the stage.

"There he is! There's Papa!" Caterina tugged at Susanna's sleeve, then bounced forward on the edge of her seat.

Susanna looked from the excited child to the stage, where Paul Santi was escorting Michael to the podium. The collective hush that had fallen over the audience now gave way to an unrestrained burst of applause as Michael took his place at the conductor's dais.

She saw him touch the toe of his left foot to the metal strip he used as a marker. He acknowledged the audience's welcome with a small bow and the quick, youthful smile that never failed to catch Susanna unawares. She had caught only brief glimpses of that smile, yet every time she encountered the sudden, unexpected expression of boyishness and warmth, she felt the same stab of confusion she'd known at their first meeting.

As it happened, Michael's stage presence was even more unsettling than his smile. Up until now, Susanna had seen him in only weekend or informal attire--often in his shirt sleeves or a worn sweater, his dark hair carelessly tousled, his demeanor sometimes brisk, sometimes relaxed, but always distant. She had come to think of him as a very casual man in his preferences, not much concerned with appearances and seemingly more inclined toward the natural than the artificial.

But the man on stage this evening was anything but casual. In truth, he was downright resplendent. In black tails and vivid white linen, he had foregone the dark glasses. The black, shaggy hair had been brushed to some semblance of control, the dark beard neatly trimmed, and with his towering height and Tuscan bearing, he was positively regal.

Susanna's throat constricted as she knotted her hands in her lap, acknowledging to herself, albeit grudgingly, that perhaps it wasn't so difficult after all to understand how Deirdre might have been dazzled by this man.

"Didn't I tell you, Aunt Susanna? Isn't Papa handsome?"

Caterina's loud whisper brought Susanna's thoughts back to the present. With her niece's small hand clasped warmly in her own, she smiled, then turned her attention back to the stage.

As she watched, Michael turned to the orchestra and gave an almost undetectable tapping of the baton. Then, with an authoritative lift of his wide shoulders, he signaled the musicians, and the three majestic chords of the overture to Mozart's opera, *The Magic Flute*, sounded.

The orchestra followed this overture with another, Gluck's *Alceste*, an intense, surging work of great nobility and depth. Then, with the assistance of Paul Santi, Michael again exited the stage, to return after only a moment or two.

He bowed again, then lifted his baton, and the first notes of the introduction to Beethoven's Seventh Symphony ascended and filled the hall. Susanna loved the Seventh but had been somewhat surprised at Michael's choice for the major work of the evening. She would have expected him to opt for the better-known and more ambitious Fifth or even the monumental Ninth. The Seventh was a more impetuous, emotional work, at times lively and deceptively lighthearted, then building to a frenzied, almost volcanic explosion of energy and power. It was also one of the tortured composer's more controversial, less predictable symphonies.

Critics often sought to offer an analysis of the work, but Susanna shared Michael's recently voiced opinion that, in his view, the Seventh went beyond explanation, that perhaps the fact that it could not be explained or analyzed was actually a fundamental part of the work's appeal.

Now, watching him, it struck Susanna that the man on stage was quite possibly as unpredictable, as inscrutable, as the capricious symphony itself.

By the time the music reached the driving, march-like second movement, Susanna had temporarily suspended her misgivings about her brother-in-law.

Indeed, she had almost lost sight of Michael and the orchestra as separate entities. The two had somehow become one, melding into a single mighty instrument of rhythm and motion and sound, sweeping the hall with a somber but heroic processional that made her pulse thunder and her spirit sing with the magnificence of it all.

"Is he using a score?" she whispered to Rosa Navaro, unable to comprehend how such a herculean work could possibly be transcribed to Braille.

The older woman offered her opera glasses to Susanna, saying, "Michael doesn't need a score. It's all here," she said, lightly tapping her own forehead, then her heart.

Incredible.

Susanna lifted the opera glasses to her eyes. Under the direction of a less brilliant conductor, the Allegretto could easily have become a funeral dirge, but Michael and his musicians had honed it to a persistent, exultant paean of praise.

She became aware that Caterina was gripping her hand more tightly, but when she looked, she saw that the child's gaze was positively riveted to the stage. The sight of the little girl so completely absorbed in the music gave Susanna an inordinate sense of

pleasure, perhaps because it had been the same with her. She couldn't remember a time when music hadn't been an overwhelming, even spiritual experience for her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noted that Rosa Navaro, to her left, was blinking furiously, as if trying to hold back tears of emotion. Indeed, many among the audience seemed to be fighting to keep their feelings in check as the orchestra unleashed the full force of Beethoven's colossal work.

She could see from Michael's profile that his eyes were closed, his face damp with perspiration. Susanna sensed that so absorbed was he in this bold epic of musical struggle and celebration that he was no longer a conductor of the music...he had in some incomprehensible way become the music.

As the insistent, driving pulse of the Allegretto finally gave way to the more exuberant Presto, a faint, collective sigh rose up from the audience. Susanna expelled a long breath to relieve her own tension; at the same time she felt Caterina relax the grip on her hand.

She could not help but be transfixed by the man at the podium. Not one of his movements was superfluous, from the slightest roll of the wrist to the powerful shuddering that seemed to run the length of his tall frame as he demanded--and received--the ultimate in musicianship from his orchestra.

There was no melodramatic posturing, no obvious air of self-aggrandizement or showmanship. Instead he appeared to be a man lifted out of himself, transported to a higher plane as he reached for some sublime but elusive splendor, some unseen touch of glory, while the music gathered force and became a power in and of itself.

By the time the orchestra had plunged into the Finale, an energized, abandoned outburst of power and exhilaration, Susanna felt certain that the entire audience, herself included, had been left breathless. Watching Michael, seeing the unmistakable signs of the intensity, the physical and emotional demands this particular work placed upon a conductor, she would not have been surprised had he collapsed before his final bow.

She leaped to her feet with the rest of the audience as a violent explosion of cheers and applause erupted. For an instant, Michael seemed to hesitate where he stood. When he turned to face the delirious crowd, he appeared almost stunned for a moment, as if he might be struggling to place his surroundings. But then the familiar winning smile broke forth, and he made a deep, sweeping bow of tribute to the orchestra.

He and Paul shook hands, and then at last he lifted his face toward the box and, smiling even wider, gave a deferential bow in their direction.

"Papa always bows to me at the end," Caterina said with obvious pride. Bouncing on the balls of her feet, she blew a kiss to the father who could not see her.

Flowers were flung wildly onto the stage, an enormous bouquet was presented, and the demand for an encore went up like a roar. Finally, Michael gave a consenting nod and turned back to the orchestra.

The piece they plunged into was new to Susanna. Her first thought was of a folk tune or an old world dance, but the music suddenly shifted to a medley that might have been martial in quality, had the rhythms not been so unrestrained. It ended with a hymn-like theme of great beauty, its final cadence sustained by the trumpets and horns and tympani. The entire work virtually shouted of something new, something distinctly and utterly American.

Again the audience rose to their feet in a wild ovation. Rosa Navaro touched Susanna's hand. "That was one of Michael's own compositions," she said. "Part of a larger work, a symphonic suite."

"Did you like it, Aunt Susanna?" Caterina piped in.

"It was wonderful," Susanna replied in all sincerity. "Your Papa is a very gifted man."

The little girl's face dimpled in a wide smile as she gave a vigorous nod. "He's the cleverest man ever. And the best papa in the whole world, too!"

Susanna studied her niece for a moment. Caterina obviously adored her father. Might her own feelings of distrust be unfounded after all? Could a man capable of such transcending emotion and brilliant artistry--and such obvious devotion to his child--also be capable of the kind of treachery of which she had long suspected him...and of which Deirdre had accused him?

Michael returned to the stage for two more encores. As Paul Santi led him to the wings for the final time, he seemed to falter and even stumble. Instinctively, Susanna lifted a hand out as if to steady him.

She caught herself, but not before Caterina had seen. "It's all right, Aunt Susanna," the little girl said, her features solemn. "You mustn't worry about Papa. He trips sometimes, but he never falls. Even if he should, everyone will pretend not to notice. They wouldn't want to hurt Papa's feelings, you see."

Susanna looked at the girl, sensing the total conviction with which she spoke. For one bittersweet moment she could see a reflection of herself in her niece's eyes. Like Caterina, she had adored her own father, had placed in him the same total, unshakable confidence, and had held the same childlike belief that others naturally revered him as she did.

But her father had been entirely worthy of a daughter's faith and devotion. For the sake of the trusting little girl beside her, she fervently hoped the same could be said of Michael Emmanuel.

Yet, somewhere at the outer fringes of her mind a dark, familiar whisper taunted her with the possibility that Caterina's confidence might just possibly be misplaced.

It was late when they boarded the night ferry. Only Rosa Navaro accompanied Susanna and Caterina up the river. Michael had stayed in the city, in preparation for the following night's concert.

They had barely settled themselves when Caterina, lulled by the darkness and the rocking of the boat, curled up next to Susanna and fell asleep.

In the dim glow of the lanterns, Rosa, seated across from them, smiled and nodded toward Caterina. "It seems that you have become very important to her."

Susanna smiled down at the sleeping little girl. "And she has become very important to me. She's really quite wonderful."

Rosa nodded. "The child needs you in her life, Susanna. It's good that the two of you have taken to each other so quickly."

Rosa's accent was mild, not nearly so pronounced as Michael's, but even in the soft shadows of the night, her strong, distinct features and snapping dark eyes were unmistakably Mediterranean. She lifted a hand to pat her hair, setting off a delicate chiming sound from the heavy gold bracelets encircling her wrist. Not for the first time, it occurred to Susanna that Rosa was really a very striking and exotic woman in appearance.

But it was Rosa Navaro's kindness she appreciated most. The opera diva had a warmth, a comfortable way about her that made her easy to be with and seemed to invite the confidence of others. Although Susanna hadn't forgotten some of the unpleasant things Deirdre had written about "that Navaro woman" in her letters, she chose to form her own conclusions--and she had decided to accept the friendship that Rosa seemed more than willing to offer.

"So, Susanna--did you enjoy the concert?"

Susanna blinked, hoping she hadn't been staring. "Oh, yes, very much."

Rosa nodded. "Nobody understands the Beethoven like Michael, I think. He is a brilliant musician."

Susanna studied her. "I wonder, though--doesn't he miss the opera? It must have been very difficult to give up such an illustrious career."

Rosa glanced away for a moment. "Michael finds his work with the orchestra fulfilling. He seems content."

"Did he stop performing because of his blindness?" Susanna knew she was pressing, but her curiosity overcame her customary reserve.

Rosa turned to look at her. "Only Michael could explain his reasons." She paused, then added. "I do know he wanted more time for his own music. Composing is very important to him."

"Yes...I'm sure it is."

Susanna deliberated over whether to raise any further questions. This woman was, after all, a good friend to Michael. She clearly doted on him, much as an older sister might. No doubt she would resent any attempt to pry into his personal life.

But what about Deirdre's life?

"Rosa?"

The older woman's expression had become somewhat guarded.

"Would you mind--I was hoping you might tell me more about Deirdre's accident. I've never really understood what, exactly, happened the night she died."

Rosa's normally open, good-natured countenance now took on an unfamiliar, closed appearance. "But surely you already know about the accident, the buggy overturning--"

"Yes, I know about the buggy," Susanna said, catching a breath in an effort to curb her impatience. "What I don't know," she went on, choosing her words carefully, "is what Deirdre was doing in the buggy, at that time of night--in the middle of a thunderstorm."

The lantern light flickered, bathing Rosa's face in shadows as she turned her gaze downward. "You should ask Michael about this, Susanna."

"I have asked Michael about it--"

Caterina stirred just then, and Susanna broke off. But the child showed no sign of waking up.

"There never seems to be a...a convenient time for him to talk with me," Susanna continued. Even to her own ears, she sounded petulant, but Rosa's features remained unreadable. "He always insists it will have to wait until later."

"You must try to understand," Rosa replied. "No doubt it is still very difficult for Michael to speak of the accident. I think you will need to be patient, to wait."

"It seems to me that I have been patient," Susanna said, swallowing down her resentment. "I've been here for nearly a month now. How long should I have to wait?"

She realized her voice had risen, but although Caterina moved slightly, she slept on.

"Rosa," she tried again, "Was my sister--happy? In the marriage, I mean?"

The older woman regarded Susanna with a studying look, then lifted a hand to smooth her hair. "How well did you know your sister, Susanna?"

Surprised by the question, Susanna stared at her. "I...we were sisters."

Rosa's gaze never wavered. "But there were a number of years between you. And you had been separated for some time, no?"

"Yes, that's true. But she was my sister. I cared about her. That's why I want--why I need--to know what happened."

"These are not questions for me to answer, Susanna," Rosa replied, her tone firm but kind. "I'm sure Michael will explain. In time."

The ferry was docking now, and Caterina began to stir again. Susanna was surprised when Rosa reached to take her hand. "Give Michael time, Susanna. As difficult as it was for you to lose your sister, you must remember that he lost his wife."

In the carriage on the road home, they maintained a polite but meaningless exchange. Rosa's obvious reluctance to talk about Deirdre had only sharpened Susanna's suspicions. Where else could she go for the truth? She was beginning to feel as though she were locked outside a door to which there was no key--perhaps a door to which someone had deliberately hidden the key.

She stared out the carriage window into the thick darkness of the night, then glanced at the drowsy little girl snuggled against her. If only Caterina were older. Perhaps then she could learn the truth from her, the truth about what had really happened to her mother.

And why it had happened.

Suddenly weary, Susanna leaned her head back against the seat. She could feel Rosa's watchful gaze on her, but she closed her eyes and pretended to doze until she felt the carriage slow in its approach to the Navaro mansion.

Susanna straightened, careful not to rouse Caterina, who slept curled up like a kitten, her head in Susanna's lap. Rosa was smiling at both of them, but as she started to step from the carriage, she turned back and again reached to clasp Susanna's hand.

"Try to trust Michael, Susanna," she said, her dark eyes intent. "I'm sure that in his own time, he will tell you what you want to know. But if I may, I would caution you to be absolutely certain you truly want your questions answered."

She paused, still gripping Susanna's hand. "Sometimes," she said, "the answers to our questions are so painful to hear that we end up wishing we had never asked."

Then she was gone, leaving Susanna more disturbed than ever as she absently stroked Caterina's hair the rest of the way to Bantry Hill.

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