

Religious guilt, recurring nightmares and a crumbling marriage prompt a journalist to seek assistance from a gay hypnotherapist while investigating the startling breakdowns and bizarre deaths of some freakishly gifted divas in the kinky world of opera.

Chaste Goddess

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BY

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Chapter One

Fleas! The opera house was infested with them.

Everybody knew and nobody said anything. It wasn't even news; it had been that way for decades.

Some of the operaphiles who attended regularly in the top balcony secretly enjoyed it. It was, after all, the most democratic kind of pestilence. Whether you had a pricey orchestra seat or were risking nosebleed in the last row of the balcony, you weren't exempt. On opening night of the opera season, the major social event of the year, countless original designer gowns went home at the end of the evening inhabited by more than the owner.

There was an especially delicious irony in it all for Jeremy Blatz, who was attending the opera that evening as the critic from the major daily for the first time. While still in grade school, Jeremy would amuse himself by pretending he possessed an entire orchestra of trained fleas, a portable philharmonic he could pull out of his pocket and conduct to his own satisfaction anywhere, even in public, without drawing any notice. Lacking any sympathetic friends who shared his interest in classical music, the lone child had concocted an elaborate fantasy life that provided him with all the excitement, glamour and culture he felt lacking in reality. He even provided himself with a different, more glamorous name. Robin Durby was what he had chosen. It sounded vaguely British to his youthful imagination, and that, for him, carried connotations of class and intelligence.

In his own world, Jeremy—or rather Robin—wielded absolute authority as an omnipotent maestro. His flea fantasy became progressively more complex and all-consuming, until for a majority of the hours of the day, young Jeremy would live in a world in which his magnificently trained orchestra was merely the flagship organization in a flea empire that practically ruled the western world.

Tonight, for the first time in his adult life, Jeremy had that feeling of power again. He may not be ruling the western world, but one tiny parcel of it was under his dominion; the review of a highly anticipated debut would be written by him this time, instead of that idiot Roland Wickman.

The real fleas in the opera house certainly weren't news to Nigel Bramwhistle, the company's general director. Say what you would about him—and in international opera circles, there wasn't much that wasn't being said about him—he had certain old-fashioned, if also inappropriate, ideas about dignity. When a local exterminator offered to fumigate the entire opera house free of charge, asking only

permission to list the opera company as one of their clients in advertisements, Nigel had declined the offer. Better to scratch like a mangy ape than admit that this temple of the muses was subject to the woes plaguing the rest of mankind. Opera, like a soprano's waistline, was primarily illusion.

Bramwhistle, of course, was not unaware of the realities of life—particularly economic ones. His most brilliant strategy, and the one for which he was most famous, perhaps, was not what had put his company on the operatic map in the first place. His company had been well run by his predecessor, himself a respected stage director whose standards were high. Many—if by no means all—of the productions mounted under his strict supervision boasted surprisingly opulent sets and costumes, the highest musical standards in the orchestra pit, and appearances by some of the most stellar names on the international roster of singers. But it was none of these things that defined the company's profile after the arrival of Nigel Bramwhistle. And his company had a prominent profile, indeed.

Nigel carried on his predecessor's habit of interfering in other director's productions, and if he didn't always do it as successfully, his intentions were no less lofty. Yet as gifted an impresario as he was, Nigel most clearly demonstrated his genius in marketing, utterly transforming the field of opera while ensuring capacity audiences for more performances each year than any comparably sized city could support.

His brilliant marketing secret was contained in only three words: full frontal nudity.

When first introduced, it had created a furor of national proportions. An opera company, rarely discussed outside the rarefied arena of a local arts review in this not very cultured city, was being spoken of on national news telecasts, making headlines on arts pages of major newspapers across the country, and being featured in lengthy—but always tastefully edited—photo spreads in countless magazines. Redneck Congressmen from some of the more backward states railed against this affront to decency and culture while demanding that the company's federal funding be stopped immediately. Needless to say, the same Congressmen were dismayed to learn that Nigel's plucky troupe received no government funding at all, but was secured entirely through private donations—along with consistently sold-out houses.

Although a few divas of international stature actually participated in the onstage exposure—the images of Sally Daniels stripping down to nothing when she did her own “Dance of the Seven Veils” in *Salome*, and June Miller sashaying around the stage in the altogether for the

orgy scene from *Thaïs* lived vividly in the memories of many young men who flocked to those performances—the vast majority of them demurred, ostensibly out of modesty but in actuality because so few of them had bodies the audience would pay to see.

The nudity element was therefore provided occasionally by chorus members, but far more frequently by the company's numerous "supers," the supernumeraries who sang not a note but merely dressed the stage as guards, soldiers, maids or peasants when the scene called for it. Even when the scene didn't call for it, however—and most of the time it didn't—naked, nubile bodies would adorn the *mise-en-scène* in surprising profusion.

The diva who was to make her company debut on this particular evening was one who had demurred. A large, but not fat, woman who would be described as "statuesque" or "big-boned" depending upon the observer's cultural refinement, Darla Wenske looked rather striking in the heavily constructed costume in which she would soon appear on stage as Senta in *Der Fliegende Holländer*—"The Flying Dutchman." Her career was in a swift ascendance as attested by her recent remarkable debut in the same role at the famed Bayreuth Festival in Germany. Raised in the Midwest, Darla had left the United States immediately upon graduation from a reputable music conservatory to begin the grueling route that awaits those who hope to work their way up through the countless regional opera houses of Germany.

Darla, however, had not toiled as long as others often did in the German vineyards before the intervention of a colleague led to her debut at Bayreuth, where she was first seen by Nigel Bramwhistle on one of his many European opera house junkets. He wasted no time in contracting to bring nearly the entire production, including Darla, the conductor, stage director and the bass-baritone who sang the title role, as a package deal. This "package" he then gift-wrapped with his signature full frontal nudity, the gimmick this time being that the impressionable young girl Senta, obsessed with the darkly threatening and yet irresistibly smoldering Dutchman, indulges in elaborate erotic fantasies that were to be duly acted out on stage by supers during her rendition of the famous Ballad.

The bass-baritone in the title role was not making his debut this evening. Already a local favorite, having appeared as Scarpia in *Tosca*, Escamillo in *Carmen* and the Count di Luna in *Il Trovatore*, Ramzi Matthews by now was one of the most sought-after opera singers in a world that was normally obsessed with tenors and sopranos. He could sing in any opera house in any city he wanted to; his loyalty to Nigel's

company was based less upon the company's status than his close friendship with Nigel.

Ramzi's parents were Coptic Christians from Egypt who had Americanized their last name, Mati, to Matthews when they moved to California. Not having access to a Coptic church, they had given their American-born son a Catholic upbringing. Like so many men of Middle Eastern origin, Ramzi was blessed with disturbingly sensuous looks. Never handsome in a pretty way, he exuded a sexuality that aroused as many men as women among his legions of fans. He was tall and lithe, of appealing proportions with roughly chiseled features that naturally projected the demonic demeanor of the many villainous roles it was his destiny as a bass-baritone to play. He never seemed to preen, and his obvious self-confidence on stage never suggested self-absorption. If he was at all vain about his appearance, it was perhaps in connection with his hair, a full head of glistening, jet-black curls that he never allowed to be covered by a wig. The visual effect might not always have been appropriate to the period and setting of the opera in which he was performing, but it gave him such a strikingly sinister and Dionysian appearance and so perfectly complimented the velvety blackness of his ravishing voice that designers and directors never objected to this stylistic anomaly.

Ramzi—or “the Ram,” as he was called by his adoring fans—had quickly become a favorite with audiences here. This was of course true virtually everywhere, but he seemed in a peculiar way to fit in with the nudity that surrounded him here. He exuded an intense animal sexuality that convinced you he was about to jump the bones of whichever woman he was closest to. Part of his appeal was a subtle but unmistakable streak of sleaze, somehow imbued with class—like the best and most elegant gigolos whose musk-like auras seem to proclaim, “I’ve got what you want, and you can have it—for a price.” The difference was that a gigolo was usually paid in money or merchandise, while the Ram’s powerfully primitive allure left the objects of his attention with a haunting fear that the cost is actually much higher; that you will relinquish some part of you that you can never get back, just as indigenous tribes fear that being photographed somehow steals part of your soul.

No one understood that fatal infatuation better than Darla Wenske. She knew she would not be sitting in the star soprano’s dressing room right now had it not been for Ramzi Matthews. It was he who, after performing with her only once, had used his considerable artistic clout to bring about her debut at Bayreuth, and that happened only because he finally succumbed to the often repeated requests of the

artistic management of that august festival to undertake a Wagnerian role for the first time in his career. With that major coup to his credit, the Bayreuth intendant was less concerned that his new Senta was a relatively unknown commodity.

The faith placed in her had proved well-founded, and once the international critics got finished with their ecstatic litanies of extravagant praise for the Ram's first Dutchman, they found room in their reviews to discuss with wonder the stunning young soprano who was performing in a major international house for the first time.

Those reviews circulated widely throughout opera circles, and part of the audience in the auditorium of Nigel Bramwhistle's company, along with the patrons who usually came only to ogle, were connoisseurs of the vocal arts who expected to witness an evening of revelation, Jeremy Blatz perhaps the foremost among them. When the house lights finally dimmed, an audible gasp of relief escaped from the mouths of the capacity audience, so great was their anticipation. The vigorous ovation that greeted the conductor had less to do with his international conducting credentials than the audience's collective relief that the performance was finally about to begin.

Darla was well aware of the expectations she was supposed to meet and, hopefully, exceed, and the pressure did nothing to alleviate the torment she was going through backstage. She heard the open fifths of the demonic-sounding string tremolos that marked the start of the overture, and she knew what would be expected of her. Like most performers, however seasoned and experienced, she always felt a rush of stage-fright at that perilous moment before a performance when she knew there was no turning back. It was like an intense spasm of revulsion you endure at the start of some highly unpleasant but necessary task you face, such as a job interview or driver's test, while trying to focus on the relief you will experience once it is all over.

But the hill of resistance this time was too steep for Darla to scale again, and the thought that a success this evening would only guarantee an endless succession of repeated trials for her rendered her unable even to attempt to overcome the spiritual inertia that was beginning to crush her. It was an agonizing, suffocating sensation, especially terrifying to someone whose livelihood depended upon the easy flow of breath. Darla knew now with unshakable conviction that she could no longer act in such total defiance of her own nature. It was one of those rare, defining flashes when you know that if you do not act right this very second, you never will.

She darted out of her dressing room to the astonishment of her dresser seated in the hallway. "Miss Wenske!" the dresser shouted as

she stood and watched the costumed diva frantically push her way past the men of the chorus who were preparing to take their places on stage. Darla worked her way down the hall to where Ramzi Matthews was having the final touches put on his makeup. In the brightly illuminated mirror he faced, he instantly spotted Darla as she entered and knew immediately what she was about to say.

"I can't do it," she blurted, then stopped suddenly to realize she had never said those words before. Her entire career, her entire life so far had been rather an endless succession of affirmations of the inevitability of her reaching her goal. But now her goal was nowhere near as sharply defined, as obvious as it had been when she was only a rather plain and not especially graceful girl whose one great gift was a phenomenal voice. To sacrifice her entire life for the singular privilege of being worshipped on a stage no longer seemed like a predestined fate. She could still escape; but ironically the man whose assistance she most needed at this moment was the same one from whom she needed to escape.

Ramzi dismissed the makeup artist and, once the door was shut, turned to the shaking soprano, piercing her with his intense gaze. "What the hell are you talking about?" His low, resonant growl carried only mild exasperation. "The critics loved you. Have you forgotten the ovations in Bayreuth?"

"It wasn't me they were applauding for, and you know it."

"That's nonsense! You always get this way before a performance. What about those techniques Josh taught you?"

"I've already tried those," she said, trying to focus on her resolve, but already the sepulchral tones of his speaking voice were having their usual effect upon her. "They don't help." Her tone betrayed her lack of conviction as she started to slip back into that state of helplessness she dreaded.

"You can't just stop now. You know better than that. Listen—can you hear that? The overture has begun. The chorus members have warmed up. Several hundred professional people are standing by at this very moment for the sake of showcasing your talent, and you want to walk out now? Don't you remember how it feels? Can't you hear the ecstatic applause? Of course you're feeling scared—everyone gets stage fright. But that passes. Don't forget how relieved you feel afterwards."

His mention of the ordeal that faced her brought about the usual involuntary reaction, a prickly spasm that seemed to begin between her ears, causing her neck to tense and a shudder to sweep down her spine with the intensity of an ice cube slipping down her back, but coupled with simultaneous fear, revulsion—and arousal. "That's just it. That's

exactly what I dread. Do you know how I feel after a performance? Empty. Like I've been violated, degraded somehow..." her voice trailed off as her senses began to assert their individual memories, a misty cloud through which she saw only the curl of his full lips smirking above her, like the sadistic benediction of some pagan deity gazing down from heaven. It made her think of the disturbing pictures the nuns used to show her in school of the "cruel god" that was worshipped by "heathens." It wouldn't be until later that she would learn her own god could be even crueler.

"Degraded?" His tone became infinitely more intense without becoming any louder, a device he had learned to save his voice for the stage. "You didn't consider it degrading the first time we performed together. You seemed to know what you were doing—and what I could do for your career."

Her cheeks flushed and she burned with shame at the memories he was dredging up for her. "I'll admit it was tempting at first. You know how attracted I was to you from the start," her speech slowed as she seemed to be drifting off. "I never made any attempt to hide it. I worshipped the stage you sang on, and then suddenly there I was, singing on that same stage." She paused, glimpsing again that wonderful moment and savoring the sweet sensation it brought while fighting off the realization that it could never be recreated.

"You still are singing on the same stage with me. So what's the sudden problem?"

"What about after the performance? It's always the same. What am I supposed to think, how am I supposed to feel when I'm back in my hotel room? Am I just supposed to forget what I've been through?"

"Is it really all that terrible? Or are these just your nerves talking? You know I'm always here to help you—even after the performance. Or does that all count for nothing? Do you really think you could get by without me?"

"It's no use," she said. Her emotion was beginning to audibly break through in her voice. "I just can't go through with it again. It isn't getting easier; it's getting worse."

A silent pause filled the dressing-room air. "Have you stopped to consider," he said, the concern in his tone tinged with an inflection of menace, "the consequences of throwing away your career? Where do you think you can go, what else can you do to support yourself? You've led a pretty rarefied existence for most of your life. Outside of the world of opera, where will you ever be able to fit in?"

She concentrated on her breathing to prevent the knot in her throat from starting to choke her as she struggled to pull her thoughts

together, to remain coherent in the face of the psychic assault he was mounting upon her. "You can't threaten me anymore," she nearly whispered, her voice now dull and monochromatic, so unlike the gleaming instrument she exhibited onstage. "I've thought it all through, and I'm going to enter the convent."

His crackling laugh stung her like a whip. "And I suppose you feel you'll be safe there?" he asked in way that somehow aggravated her sense of fear. "Have you chosen a convent? Do they know about you? Are they taking you in out of some pious sense of pity? Or are you playing the Prodigal Daughter? I suppose you've told them all about what sort of Catholic you've become."

"They know who I am, and they have agreed to accept me like any ordinary novice."

"No ordinary novice has your gift," he purred, his voice becoming increasingly seductive. "It isn't something you can give back or turn off like a faucet. You knew that when you began this career. You need to sing. It's that simple."

"If I sing again," she said in a slow and measured voice, "it will be only for God."

She shuddered at his obvious displeasure as his eyes narrowed to serpentine slits. His voice became softer, more monotone and somehow more disturbing. "That is no longer yours to decide." He said it as a fact, but to her it sounded like a threat. "It wasn't God who gave you that voice. I created Darla Wenske! I'm the one who transformed a pathetic creature with totally unrealistic hopes for a major singing career into an internationally successful diva with a sensational voice. Without me, you don't have the strength to use it. It's not something you can do on your own. You need me—perhaps now more than ever."

"Please," she whimpered as she felt herself involuntarily falling to her knees. She tried to beg him from the greatest depths of her soul, but hesitated as she realized she didn't know what to ask for. Permission to leave? It wasn't permission she needed. His blessing? Had she felt less drained of her life-force, she would have laughed at the idea that this man could bless anything. No, what she needed was strength, and that was something he never gave her. His own strength may have provided her with temporary support, compensated for her complete lack, but it did nothing to provide her with strength of her own. Did she ever possess the ability to walk away from him? Wasn't she in the palm of his hand from the very first, long before their relationship had evolved into this complex arrangement?

If only she had never met him! The thought struck her as it had so frequently in the recent past. It was a hopeless sentiment, but the only one that brought her any comfort, however fleeting, and she tried to cling to it for momentary stability. That is what she wanted to ask for, to change the past, as if something like that were in his power. So totally was she intimidated by him, so overwhelming was her awe of him, she almost believed he could do it—if he wanted. He could release her entirely. He could let her walk away with no residual effects of their relationship.

It was as if he read her unarticulated request. “Don’t expect me to make it any easier for you.” He turned away from her, breaking eye contact for the first time since she had entered the room. “If you intend to walk out on me, you don’t really expect my assistance, do you?”

Darla felt the horrible realization sink in that she was cutting herself off from everything he had given her, and there was no going back now. Their time together, onstage and off, was something she had no hope of experiencing again, and the thought wracked her with a sudden spasm of grief as she reflexively turned away from him. The moment her eyes fell upon the doorknob she tore the door open and ran down the hallway, stopping only long enough to frantically struggle out of the confining costume before fleeing the building past the stage door guard, who shouted after her, while passersby stared in astonishment at the incongruous sight of this large woman in her underwear and bizarre stage makeup.

Ramzi knew the path of action he must take even before the door closed behind the runaway soprano. He rushed into the hallway and snapped to his dresser seated outside the door, “Run like hell and tell the stage manager to stop the performance after the overture. There will be a front-of-curtain announcement.” He then strode briskly to the rehearsal office and barked another command to the woman on duty. “Send someone to Nigel’s box immediately and tell him Darla’s gone. He’s going to have to announce her substitute. And tell him to come to my dressing room immediately afterwards.” As he stormed back to his dressing room, Ramzi glowered at the poor wardrobe staff scurrying past, gathering the pieces of Darla’s costume now strewn down the hallway. “He should be good at it,” Ramzi mused as he returned to his dressing room to wait for the commotion to settle down. “He’s given this speech before.”

As he sat back down at his dressing table, he made a mental note to call Joshua as soon as the performance was over—and Ramzi was confident it would get started again. He could pretty well judge how

long he would have to wait, based on previous experiences when a lead singer canceled at the last minute so that it was impossible to fly in a major-name replacement. The poor apprentice understudy was at this very moment in total panic as she was being stuffed into Darla's costume, the wardrobe mistress frantically ripping seams and sewing them back up again at mind-boggling speed. Makeup was being applied to her face by no fewer than three makeup artists while the wigmaster hastily restyled a new wig meant for a different production. The stage manager, having put the backstage masses on hold as Nigel stepped in front of the curtain, rushed to the soprano's dressing room to describe last-minute cue changes and key blocking points.

Over the P.A. loudspeaker, Ramzi could hear the audience's enthusiastic applause, which gave way to a clearly audible expression of disappointment. The sight of Nigel striding onstage with his pronounced waddle was nearly always an indication that bad news was about to come. "Ladies and gentlemen, I regret to have to inform you that Miss Wenske—" and the collective groan blurred the rest of the sentence. Obviously Darla Wenske would not sing, and he was probably saying it was because of sudden illness. It always was. Nigel had a great reputation for finding new talent, but as brightly as they burned, they never lasted very long, or at least it was beginning to seem that way lately. New discoveries were often greeted with enthusiasm, accompanied by a cynical attitude of, "Let's see if she's still singing next season."

After a little more commotion in the auditorium, Ramzi heard the performance resume with the sailors bantering as their ship drops anchor. Through the door Ramzi detected the distinctive clicking of Nigel's trademark patent-leather loafers in the hallway well before the knock at the door. The singer opened the door for the administrator, who came in and, without waiting for any further invitation, sat in the one large overstuffed chair in the tiny room.

"Now what?" Ramzi demanded. "Who the hell is going to appear opposite me in the Faust Festival?"

Nigel appeared remarkably unruffled for a general director who had lost his leading lady just a few minutes before. But then, Nigel's face rarely seemed to express emotions common to most other people, his features being simultaneously unappealing and relatively immobile. That was partly due to his British reserve, and partly due to the large amount of fat that swathed his face. His round head exuded an unappetizing pallor further marred by pink blotches, although the largest of these, on the top of his balding head, were covered by a thick mat of the remaining hair that grew out of the side of his scalp and was

unconvincingly combed sideways to cover his dome. It was a ploy that has never been very successful on other men, and even less so on Nigel, who tried to hide his gray hair by dyeing it a rather hideous orange himself, although he could easily have afforded to have it done professionally.

Then again, even perfect hair wouldn't have salvaged his appearance. His thick glasses perched upon a nose so upturned that it instantly suggested a pig's snout to those meeting him for the first time, and the general puffiness of his cheeks and forehead pressed noticeably against the frames. When he sweated, which was quite frequently in his high-pressure position, the perspiration ran from his brow onto his lenses. His overall physical appearance was, in a word, unfortunate.

You might expect such a man to exert a strong revulsion on everyone with whom he came into contact, but such was not the case. Once he opened his mouth, the silky tones of his voice, coupled with his cultured British accent, made you forget his tragic resemblance to a slug. He exhibited a dazzling wit and oozed charm, having long ago mastered the art of saying whatever his auditor wanted to hear, whether he remotely meant it or not. Even those whom he most brutally savaged behind their backs were convinced of his sincerity and loyalty in his presence.

Ramzi was well aware of the slippery way in which Nigel could manipulate the truth, but he was also aware that he held the highest trump card in his dealings with Nigel: Ramzi Matthews was not only the biggest star who regularly sang for Nigel; he was also the only one whose own box office draw surpassed that of the ubiquitous naked bodies that identified every Nigel Bramwhistle production. It was a fact Nigel never lost sight of. "I'm a bit disappointed that you have so little faith in my ability to produce an appropriately dazzling replacement diva," he responded in clipped tones. "Have I ever let you down before?"

"Not until they crack up or run away. You must admit your track record is pretty poor."

"My track record? My dear boy, I only identify and nurture those singers. It seems to me that they never have any problem until they encounter the Ramzi Matthews experience."

"They'd never get beyond the coaching rooms without me, and you damn well know it," Ramzi shot back as he began to pace briskly within the tight confines of the cramped dressing room, then suddenly stopped and spun around to confront Nigel. "This upcoming festival is

very important to me, and I don't want any last-minute cancellations fucking it up. What do you propose?"

"I have a lovely young Chinese soprano who should make an exquisite Marguerite."

"Another Asian? I hope this one has better stamina than that Korean girl we lost in England."

"Kim Lee had problems, I'll admit. But this one should make everyone forget her. God knows, I'm trying to."

"And the voice?"

"She doesn't have the carrying power Darla has—or should I say had?—but she has coloratura flexibility up the yin-yang and a bright, silver tone that nearly brings tears to my eyes, it's so beautiful."

Ramzi turned to the lighted mirror to put the final touches on his makeup. "That must be some voice, if it can evoke a human reaction from a jaded sonuvabitch like you. What's her name?"

"Sarah Wang. She's from—"

Ramzi snapped his head around in obvious displeasure. "Can't we change that? The press is going to have a field day with that moniker, after they see the productions. Or have you forgotten?"

"I never forget anything, dear boy. I spoke with her about it, but she is adamant about retaining what she calls her cultural heritage. It's one of her more recent obsessions. It's kind of cute, in a way. She's as thoroughly Americanized as they come, but lately she has become overwhelmed with concerns about being true to her Chinese roots. I'm afraid the name will have to stay."

"And you're sure she's ready? What does Josh say?"

"He says he'll be damned if he lets another soprano be thrown to the lions before she's prepared, but that he'd wager his life on this one."

Ramzi slipped on the huge, ragged cloak that completed his costume and walked to the door. "That's good enough for me. The good doctor knows what he's talking about."

Nigel sat silently in the chair until the door closed behind Ramzi, then half-mouthed his unspoken response: "Let's hope no one else does."

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