

A journalist undergoing hypnotherapy for his asthma has disturbing visions of Satanic rituals and child sacrifice as he investigates the bizarre deaths of three opera divas who had affairs with the opera world's greatest male sex-symbol.

And My Soul Will Be Healed

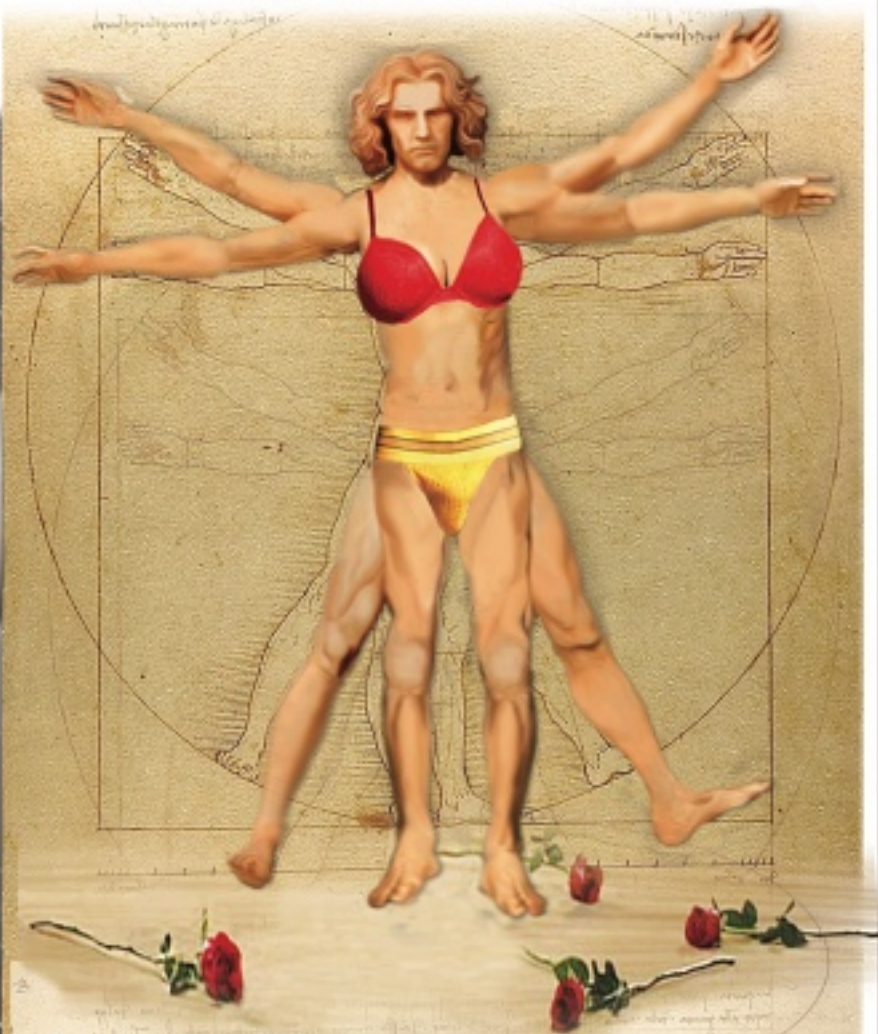
By John Joseph Schauer

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by

John Joseph Schauer

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First Edition

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 complemented 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 dying 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.”

Chapter Two

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Sandra Dixon, Director of Public Relations

CHRISTINA OLSEN MAKES UNEXPECTED DEBUT IN “DUTCHMAN”

American soprano Christina Olsen made her company debut last evening as Senta in Wagner’s *Der fliegende Holländer* after the unexpected withdrawal of previously announced Darla Wenske. Miss Wenske, who was to be making her company debut, withdrew from the production due to ill health. The remaining performances will all be taken by Miss Olsen, who has previously sung the role of Senta with the opera companies of Topeka (Kansas), Oakland (California) and Minocqua (Wisconsin), and won an honorable mention in the regional semifinals of the Metropolitan Opera Auditions in her home town of St. Paul.

Miss Olsen joins an illustrious cast headed by internationally celebrated bass-baritone Ramzi Matthews in the title role, one he has only recently sung for the first time at the Bayreuth Festival.

All remaining performances of *Der fliegende Holländer* have been sold out, but standing-room tickets at \$5 go on sale two hours before the curtain for each performance. For further information, call Sandra Dixon in the Public Relations office at...

* * * *

Of course they could afford to put a happy face on it, Jeremy fumed as he read the press release. They still had a major attraction in Ramzi Matthews; no one would ask for a refund; they were losing nothing. It was Jeremy who had been cheated out of the chance to review the debut of a significant new diva, an opportunity that didn’t come around that often, at least not to Jeremy.

He threw the press release down onto the crummy wood surface of his desk. At one time it might have been a nice piece of furniture, but by now it had become so nicked and battered that it was pressed

back into service only because budget cutbacks at the paper made it impossible to order one of the new desks to match everyone else's.

Jeremy wouldn't have minded so much if it weren't so indicative of his general standing at the office. He had made the unforgivable mistake of working his way up within the ranks, having toiled at the paper for over ten years. He was never sure whether he should be proud or ashamed of the fact. The fact was, he was one of that vast majority of people who tend to stay in the same situation even after it becomes unpleasant simply because the combined forces of inertia and fear of change seem so insurmountable.

Jeremy had begun at the paper as an editor in the classified ad department. It sounded classy to be able to bill himself as an editor at the major daily in town, but in reality his job consisted mainly of substituting a vast vocabulary of abbreviations for personal ad content that was too sexually explicit. He got the job not because he was a journalist, but because he was college educated and therefore presumably understood the basic rules of punctuation. He could also type extremely fast. That he held a master's degree in musicology from an Ivy League institution meant nothing to his immediate supervisor, who was more impressed with the speed and accuracy with which Jeremy could process and type those money-making personal ads.

He credited his skill to his "keyboard karma," because it seemed that manipulating keyboards of one sort or another had dominated his life. As a child, he had taken piano lessons. In college, he switched to harpsichord. At the paper, instead of executing the intricate hand-crossings of a Scarlatti sonata, he found himself deftly typing away and substituting "Gr act" for "up your poop shoot" without missing a stroke.

So great was his efficiency and accuracy that his supervisor promoted him to the typesetting department. The work was just as tedious, but at least it was a bit more dignified.

Jerry—as his friends and wife called him—had never intended to stay any longer than it would take him to finish his doctoral dissertation. The job stank, but what the hell, it would pay the bills while he finished his dissertation. Over the years, the job seemed—on good days, at least—to stink a bit less.

The dissertation, meanwhile, was still unfinished a few years later when he was promoted to become one of the paper's many copy editors. His choice of topic had been roundly rejected by the faculty

committee, but by then Jeremy realized that he didn't really want to spend the rest of his life in academia anyway, and the value of a Ph.D. in the real-world workplace would be minimal. Yet with or without official sanction, he knew he would someday complete his magnum opus.

The magnum opus was quite an adventure. Being naturally fascinated by the extravagant Baroque music of the 17th and 18th centuries, Jeremy had begun his dissertation on the subject of the castrati, those sensational opera singers who had been neutered as boys to preserve their soprano voices. With the power and stamina of a man, their voices were said to resemble trumpets more than a woman's natural soprano, and they achieved a degree of fame such as no opera singer since has dreamed.

The successful ones, that is. The problem was with the timing. The operation achieved its desired results only if it was performed before the boy's voice had changed, and at that stage he was invariably too young to assess his career potential accurately. By the time he was old enough to exhibit a mature dedication to his art, his voice had already changed, and once that happened, and the vocal cords had thickened, there was no going back. The quaint notion that a man's voice gets high if he sustains a groin injury is merely a device for slapstick comedy, with no basis in fact.

As a result, the majority of the would-be castrati were mutilated for nothing, and lived out the rest of their lives as pathetic freaks at worst or obscure singers in a church choir at best; but the triumphant few who achieved a sort of musical sainthood not only won extravagant wealth beyond most people's imaginations but also left legends and reputations that have managed to dazzle across the centuries—this despite the fact that no one any longer has any idea what they sounded like at all.

Unknown to most people, even within the rarefied world of classical musicians, to Jeremy they were names to conjure with: Farinelli, Nicolino, Caffarelli and, perhaps most fascinating of all to Jeremy, Senesino. He was the phenomenal alto for whom George Frideric Handel composed the lead roles of his finest operas. Yet the same singer eventually betrayed the great composer, joining a competing opera company that put his former boss out of business. When Senesino eventually left London, Handel suffered a breakdown.

Jeremy was obsessed with the questions of how so glorious a performer, at the top of his field, could abandon the creative genius who had composed his greatest roles; how someone could be so beguiling and artistically seductive on stage and so thoroughly unpleasant, by most accounts, offstage; and through what means did this unique character exercise such a powerful hold on the creative inspiration of so hearty a genius as the man who would go on to compose *Messiah*?

As the questions grew more complex and multiplied, Jeremy increasingly immersed himself in the 18th century, its history, its art and, above all, its music. He felt a direct contact with it somehow, and he was convinced he could excite the rest of the world about Baroque opera if he could just make them hear it the way he did.

Few people, however, listen to music of any kind the way Jeremy did, which was to imagine himself the performer. Since opera parts were custom-made to accentuate the strengths and conceal the weaknesses of specific singers, Jeremy fathomed that he could get a uniquely direct line into Senesino's psyche by singing the music that was composed for him. As a child, Jeremy had possessed a clear, sweet, bright soprano voice that broke most ungracefully to a depressingly unresonant baritone. The only popular songs Jeremy had paid attention to in his childhood were the exotic falsetto recordings of Frankie Valli or Lou Christie, and through nearly superhuman effort he had developed a rather remarkable if not entirely pleasant falsetto voice himself, which he used to employ—like the imaginary orchestra he used to conduct—only when completely alone.

The fascination with performing had haunted Jeremy all his life, but although he felt deeply that he possessed the soul of a performer, he knew just as conclusively that he did not possess the temperament needed to be one. It wasn't any juvenile fantasy of power or fame or wealth anymore that attracted him; it was the sheer exhilaration not of performing expertly upon an instrument, but to actually be that instrument itself. Singers and dancers, he was convinced, were disproportionately blessed by the gods.

And so, sitting at the piano in the practice room at school with a treasured opera score, Jeremy would enter a fantasy world in which he reigned as one of the great performing artists of all time. It was an intoxicating pastime, a visceral rush to merge as one with the music.

The cumulative effect of this exercise over a sustained period of months was more potent than Jeremy had bargained for. He became overwhelmed by a sense of having a spiritual connection to the dead composer and his star singer, a conviction that resulted in him taking the fateful step that ultimately led to a decisive breaking away from his alma mater. He postulated that a personal relationship between Handel and Senesino answered a great many questions concerning some of the more obscure aspects of the famed composer's life and the development of his career. His faculty advisers were aghast.

Unfortunately, Jeremy had repeatedly come to dead ends in his pursuit of primary sources for his research, including a tantalizing cache of private correspondence that remained suppressed by its owners despite Jeremy's desperate pleas. In the absence of compelling concrete evidence, inner convictions were meaningless. The projected topic was doomed.

He took the rejection extremely personally. He was earnest in his beliefs; he was honestly trying to understand something that had not been understood, to cast light on areas that had languished in darkness, to help people in the present understand the past. But with the rejection came the compensating gift of self-knowledge, and Jeremy now knew he could no longer tolerate the politics of academia, where finding the flaws in someone else's research seemed to be a more important goal than to further the collective knowledge of the human race. The cynicism and negativity that flourished under such circumstances were offensive enough, but what Jeremy found even more difficult to swallow was the way so many academicians seemed to take a great amount of pleasure in the process.

Jeremy possessed all manner of skills and talents; he was moderately good looking, charming, and witty to the point that it occasionally surprised even him. But playing institutionalized games was not one of his fortes, and he felt no regret at the inevitable realization that he would never have a career in academia as he had once intended. Very little in his life, it seemed to Jeremy, ended up as he had intended.

His marriage to Laura was as good an example as any. He met her in grad school, a French major who also, to Jeremy's total delight, played the cello quite well. It didn't hurt that she was the most attractive woman in the graduate school—not that that would

be much of an achievement, but Laura would have shone in almost any crowd. Her flawless, pale skin and naturally blond hair reminded Jeremy of a Van Eyck portrait, and he fantasized himself with her in scenes worthy of medieval tapestries, idyllic musical duets in sylvan grottos, he at the keyboard, she playing the cello (or, to Jeremy's eye for musicological accuracy, a *viola da gamba*). If he entertained any thought of children entering into his fantasy future, it was only to fill out a musical ensemble, like an instrumental remake of the Trapp Family saga.

What actually brought the two together, however, was a shared sense of humor and the absurd, which both had cultivated as defense mechanisms—mechanisms that came in handy in the neurotic environment of a high-powered graduate school. Most of the students got there by being unhealthily lopsided in their interests, so that there seemed to be a plethora of socially inept people in the mix. “My God,” Jeremy had said to Laura one evening while they ate in the graduate dorm dining hall, “I’ve just had a horrid thought. What if we aren’t in graduate school at all? What if we’ve all been institutionalized, and they just let us pretend to be grad students so we won’t get violent?”

Laura said nothing at first, but just stared at him deadpan. She then cast her eyes around the dining hall, taking in the array of humanity around her, and suddenly threw her head back and shrieked with an echoing laugh that caromed off the school's ersatz medieval architecture, “It’s true!” After that dinner, Jeremy knew the way to Laura's heart. His sharp wit and febrile imagination kept her in stitches during most of their time together, and it provided a welcome release from the tensions of their respective studies.

Having private dorm rooms, the couple found it easy to have sex. In point of fact, it was Laura who initiated it. Jeremy had little experience before Laura, but had always blamed his poor showing on the fact that so many women simply didn't turn him on. It wasn't that he was gay. Jeremy was well aware of what many of the other students thought or imagined about his sex life, but he knew in his own heart that he was not attracted sexually to men. He could certainly appreciate when another man was exceptionally good looking, but that was a matter of aesthetics, of objective observation. Testing himself occasionally by trying to imagine himself having sex with a man, Jeremy always found the resulting rush of nausea almost pleasant and downright reassuring.

Laura had turned him on. Her face was attractive, and if her facial features were not up to the standards of her striking alabaster complexion, nature more than compensated her with a body that was marvelously toned, curvaceous, ample without being zaftig, and delightfully firm. Her breasts in particular got him going; when he held them, he could feel something substantial in his hands. In his limited previous experiences, he had been turned off when he fondled breasts that seemed to evaporate like cotton candy or flaccid water balloons when he squeezed them. Laura was two real handfuls.

Their sex was more playful than passionate. Neither one of them seemed to place it at the top of their personal priorities, however, and their married life together eventually settled into the mutual pursuit of fulfilling careers. Children, it had been agreed upon before their marriage, were not part of the plan. Neither one of them felt a particularly driving need to reproduce themselves. It was one of the primary agreements upon which their entire relationship was built.

Now Laura was breaking that agreement. The ticking of her biological clock was apparently getting louder, and suddenly breeding became one of her preoccupations. Jeremy was overcome with a brooding sense of dread, like a man who has been drafted into some dreadful war with little hope of returning, and who waits in daily terror to learn when he will be shipped out. At least that's what he told Joshua Fleckman when he first started seeing him for hypnotherapy to treat the nightly bouts of asthma he began breaking into in the middle of the night. During an otherwise sound sleep, his vivid dreams would take a turn for the worse, in which he was bound or otherwise constrained in such a way that he could not breathe, and he would wake up with the same dreadful feeling.

Since this problem only occurred while he slept, it seemed logical to Jeremy that it must be a psychological or psychosomatic condition, and he felt hypnotherapy would be the quickest way to deal with it. He had little interest in endless Freudian analysis, and Joshua Fleckman seemed just the man to give Jeremy the treatment he wanted.

There was perhaps an additional incentive for Jeremy to turn his subconscious over to this man, and that was information he gained through his connections with some of the most devoted and fanatic fans at the opera house—the “standees,” the worshipful buffs who stood in line for hours every night for an inexpensive standing-room ticket. It seemed that Joshua Fleckman, who wrote an advice column

for one of the free tabloid biweeklies one could pick up from stands on the street, had treated some of the most splashy prima donnas in the world of opera. It was all Jeremy needed to hear. Filling in now at the paper as a secondary critic when he wasn't at the copy editor's desk, he sensed this might be just the sort of connection that could give him a leg up on his loathed colleague, the vitriolic Roland Wickman.

"Why in God's name did you pick him out of all the possible choices?" Laura demanded when he first broached the subject. She supported Jerry in his quest to banish the asthma attacks, but couldn't understand why he would go for therapy with a therapist who was openly gay, as Joshua made clear in his column. "I have nothing against gays, but is he apt to be able to understand the dynamics of a marriage where the main problem is the extremely heterosexual issue of reproduction? Or are you trying to stack the deck against me?" Laura fumed one morning as she and Jeremy shared the chores of making breakfast and packing their lunches.

Jeremy didn't want to admit his real motive—to get the backstage dirt—to Laura, but had another explanation ready. "Look, you and I have both been interested in Native Americans and Native American spirituality for years," he said as he stirred the oatmeal, and she couldn't disagree with the large number of dead animal parts that adorned their walls as part of various Indian artifacts. Originally mere decoration to him, they started to generate a genuine interest in their significance, partly because he was aware that somewhere, from numerous generations back, he had a tiny bit of Indian blood himself. A lecture series he attended led to his participation in several sweat lodges, and he even took part in a "plant medicine" ritual involving ayahuasca. These Native excursions marked Jeremy's first awareness of a growing longing within himself for nature, something he had previously abhorred due to his childhood allergies, and challenged his entrenched conviction that he was purely a city boy. "Well, according to a book I've read, many Native tribes had a special appreciation of gays and assigned them a special role. They were viewed as a third sex, something between men and women, and that made them ideal intermediaries in disputes between the sexes. They were also held to be sacred and were greatly respected. Look, if I went to a straight man, you'd say he was going to side with me, too, and I'm not about to go to a woman therapist for the same reason. This seems like a good compromise to me."

Laura sensed that Jeremy had made up his mind and decided not to bother arguing further. Any counseling would be better than nothing. Maybe someone like that could see things from a new viewpoint; certainly hers and Jeremy's were not going to coincide in the foreseeable future. She finished the two ham sandwiches she was making, wrapping them in plastic wrap and inserting one into each of the two brown paper bags that were being used for the third time, and then turned to her husband and pressed her lips into a concerned smile as sort of a gesture of reconciliation. "I hope he does cure your asthma," she said in all sincerity. "Because then you'll see there's no reason why we shouldn't have a baby."

"Let's deal with one subject at a time. After Dr. Fleckman cures me of my asthma, maybe he can cure you of your obsession with my penis," he answered, ducking as the sack lunch came flying at his head. He caught it deftly and tucked it into his briefcase right next to the paper on which he had copied down Dr. Fleckman's phone number.

At his first session with Joshua, Jeremy agreed to go through seven additional sessions, after which his condition would be re-evaluated and further treatment, if any, decided upon. There was minimal talking, little if any probing of childhood memories, mainly some straightforward talk about relaxation exercises followed by a session of hypnosis. Jeremy seemed to take naturally to the hypnosis, and in subsequent sessions Joshua's voice would start to put him into a hazy state even before the actual hypnosis began. By the third session, the asthma attacks were gone.

Yet long after the eighth session, Jeremy continued to see Dr. Fleckman on a regular basis. "What does he tell you while you're under?" Laura had asked one morning as she split the package of twin snack cakes to wrap one for each of them. It seemed with all of their irregular working hours, making breakfast and packing lunch was virtually the only activity they performed together on a daily basis. It was a fact Jeremy would point out in their arguments over their preparedness for parenthood.

"I don't know," he admitted as he lit a burner to cook the eggs he was scrambling. "I'm completely out once we get past the preliminaries."

"I thought only a rare few actually lose memory of what they experience under hypnosis." Laura countered. She tried to keep up

with the subject of alternative healing, at least on a superficial level, through popular magazines.

“I guess I’m special,” he responded with obvious pride in the distinction. “Josh says I’m probably the best hypnosis subject he has ever worked with.”

“Is that good?” she asked with that skeptic’s tone. “Who knows what the hell he’s telling you without your knowledge. That would spook me out.”

“My asthma’s gone, isn’t it?” He knew she didn’t have an answer for that one.

“Then why are you still going? You fulfilled your obligation to take eight sessions months ago.”

“I’m learning a lot. After all, ‘Mr. Babcock! Knowledge is power!’” he intoned in his best impersonation of Rosalind Russell in *Auntie Mame*, reducing Laura to helpless laughter as he always did when he quoted old movies as if they were scripture.

He was telling the truth. Jeremy was learning a lot, but it wasn’t self-knowledge. It was about the life at the opera house that so deeply intrigued him. Their primary goal already accomplished, Joshua and Jeremy found they shared a passion for opera, and most of their “sessions” became excuses to discuss who was singing what where with whom under which conductor, which critics had savaged which divas, and which singers from the past—whether retired or dead—would have done a better job. Now, however, there was one specific topic Jeremy wanted to ask about, and since he wanted to be sure not to sound too inquisitive, he felt particularly relieved when Joshua brought it up.

“So tell me about your first big review assignment. How was the *Dutchman*? I haven’t had a chance to read today’s paper yet.”

“Well, let’s just say that even though I thought the sets looked flimsy and that nude ballet was just too tacky for words, and even though the Senta had a voice about the size of a pea, I’d still recommend it—for one reason only.”

“Ramzi’s *Dutchman*?”

“It was incredible. I’m normally not all that interested in bass voices, I mean so many of them sound like unpitched rumbling. But Matthews! What an instrument! And when you combine that with an extraordinary stage charisma ...”

“You’ve never seen him on stage before?”

“No. I’ve known his singing only through records. But they didn’t prepare me for how huge his voice is, even in that barn-like auditorium. And even when he isn’t singing, you can’t take your eyes off of him. Somehow he made you feel everything his character was supposed to feel. When he did the big duet with Senta, his lust for her seemed so all-consuming that I’d be willing to bet he had a hard-on under that costume. He made you feel that arousal so vividly that you found yourself lusting after that second-rate soprano. It was an odd sensation; you felt his great desire for her even as you remained painfully aware that the poor woman had no power to attract anyone, let alone a stud like Ramzi Matthews.”

“Well, we all know she wasn’t the first choice for the part. You should cut her some slack.”

“I tried to be kind—or at least not as vicious as that mincy Roland Wickman—in my review. Say, what was the real story with Darla Wenske?” Jeremy asked while trying to sound casual. “I heard the dress rehearsal had been dynamite. What happened?”

“Oh, that one,” Josh said, rolling his eyes. “I guess the stress got to her. There’s a certain durability you have to have to survive in that hothouse world, and you either have it or you don’t. Darla didn’t have it.”

“So what drove her to join a convent?”

The question caught Joshua a bit off guard. “You know about that?”

“I’ve heard rumors from the standees,” Jeremy said, taking some pride in his “inside” knowledge.

“Of course, those girls. They have too many friends who work backstage, and they couldn’t keep their mouths shut about anything, could they? Well, there’s some truth to that. She did go to a convent, but I sincerely doubt that she’ll stay long.”

“You’ve worked with her, haven’t you?” Jeremy asked.

“Not really as a therapist, no. I mean, I’ve taught her some relaxation techniques, which I’ve actually taught to quite a few singers with the opera company. It’s very similar to what I’ve taught you to control your asthma. But we never really got into therapy.”

“What about the Ram? How did he take it? I’ve heard they were sleeping together.”

“Darling, there are damn few sopranos Mr. Matthews hasn’t slept with. He’s not only a great Don Giovanni on stage, he’s a real Don Juan off, too. But if you want his opinion, why don’t you ask him?”

Call the opera and arrange an interview. Exploit your resources. You're a critic, for godsake. Take advantage of your situation."

"Only part-time. And right now, Mr. Matthews isn't granting interviews. At least that's what that bitch in the public relations office told me. And it's not just me," he added defensively. "Even Roland Wickman can't get an interview with Matthews. She tells us they don't need the publicity since they're over 99 percent sold out. It's something she likes to point out frequently, as if she were taking personal credit for it."

"Oh puh-leeze! Any theatrical venture with that much tits and ass on stage is going to sell tickets. Tell you what. Let's make this a self-esteem project," Josh said with a conspiratorial tone. "I think it would be very good for you to score a little coup right now. I have a few connections. Let me make the arrangements. Meanwhile, how is the situation going with Laura?"

"It's getting worse, if you ask me. I sometimes think getting pregnant is all she thinks about. It has totally destroyed our sex life. Now every time she acts at all interested in playing, I get the impression she just wants to get knocked up. I feel like I'm nothing more to her than some sperm machine sometimes."

"Have you told her that?"

"Oh yeah, right, like I'm supposed to tell her she makes me feel like a turkey baster."

"So if she's turning you off and you can't talk about it, how are you two relating?"

"These days we're not relating much at all. I don't even know if she's noticed. Our jobs both take a lot of time, so it's easy for us to avoid each other."

"Our time's almost up, Jerry, and I still want to put you under hypnosis. This week, try to pay close attention to your feelings whenever you have an exchange with Laura. I want us to start working on a more constructive outlet for your frustrations. Meanwhile, I'll do what I can about that interview."

"Right now I want you to get comfortable so you can relax completely. Take a few deep breaths. Let all the tension flow out with your breath. Now roll your eyes up as you lower your eyelids." His tone was becoming lower, more even, with a slight sing-song lilt that Jeremy responded to almost instantly. "Imagine that you have many sets of eyelids, and you begin closing them, one pair at a time, over and over, each time taking you deeper into a relaxing and refreshing

trance. And while you're in that relaxing and refreshing trance, your subconscious mind is going to be able to do nice things for you. It can take you anywhere you want to go. It can even take you to the opera house, backstage, where all the magic happens, where reality becomes illusion and great art comes to life ”

By this time, Jeremy was long gone, drifting in a realm of half thought and half dreams, no longer aware of his physical surroundings. How long this condition persisted he had no way of knowing, but eventually he became aware of the sensation of rising, as if from the bottom of a swimming pool to the surface, bursting through to the light and air just as his eyes opened and he found himself again in Joshua's studio.

“Any recollections?” Josh asked.

“Not really recollections, I don't think,” Jeremy answered, barely moving and still awash in the most delightful relaxation imaginable. “But for some reason, I find myself thinking about an incident in my childhood.”

“What's that?”

“I was at an amusement park with my family. I always loved going on the rides when I was a kid, but there were some I was still a bit afraid to go on, namely the adult-sized roller coaster and Ferris wheel. And yet they intrigued me, sort of like when you're afraid of heights but get a thrill from standing on the observation deck of a skyscraper. Anyway, I was standing and watching the huge Ferris wheel from its base, when I turned around and found my family had walked on without me. I was scared, but I had always been taught that if I ever got separated from them, I should just stay where I was until they came back for me. I still remember how thrilled I was to see my mother come back for me, laughing in her relief. But for some reason, when I thought about that incident this time, she didn't come back. I could see her walking away, into the crowd. I don't know why, but it makes me want to cry ”

To his complete surprise, Jeremy suddenly broke into quiet sobs, pulling himself together as he reminded himself that it was only an aberrant thought, that it wasn't reality at all. “My God, what's happened to me? Obviously she did come back for me, or I wouldn't be here now. So why is my subconscious so upset over something that didn't happen?”

“Don't be too literal. Images we receive in dreams or trances can be interpreted on any number of levels, but rarely literally. I think

you're dealing with feelings of abandonment right now. Somehow you feel Laura has abandoned you by changing the rules of your marriage, and you feel you have lost something. And of course in a way, you have. You've lost an arrangement you found comfortable. It's only natural you should feel sadness."

"It may be natural, but it's depressing anyway."

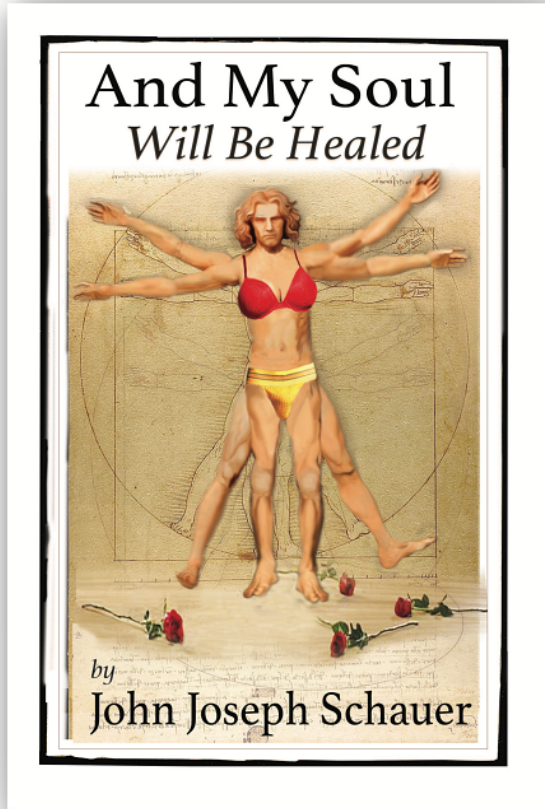
"Life isn't all losses, remember. Try to concentrate on the new things in your life, the things you have gained through hard work."

"Such as?"

"Such as an exclusive interview with Ramzi Matthews. That ought to knock your nemesis, Mr. Wickman, on his fat butt!"

Jeremy took his cue when Joshua stood up and walked over for the hug that concluded all of Dr. Fleckman's sessions. Jeremy wasn't a touchy-feely kind of person, and he found most physical contact to be embarrassing, but he had come to be comfortable with this parting gesture, and he left with a deep sense of gratitude.

As soon as Jeremy left and the door was closed, Josh reached for his phone. He recognized the famous voice at the other end the instant he answered. "Hello, Ramzi? I think it's time you gave an interview."



A journalist undergoing hypnotherapy for his asthma has disturbing visions of Satanic rituals and child sacrifice as he investigates the bizarre deaths of three opera divas who had affairs with the opera world's greatest male sex-symbol.

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