

Song of Death
by Kaye George

Prologue

Stinguendo: Dying away. (Ital.)

She didn't usually swim alone, she knew she shouldn't, but she loved the lake at night. Most nights Grace came with her, but Grace had relatives to take to the Quad-City airport tonight.

Ida was a strong swimmer, had grown up with this little body of water. She knew every inch of Crescent Lake, and every noise. But a sound that didn't belong raised the hair on her arms.

She raised her head from the water and cocked an ear toward the trees ahead, toward the sound. It didn't repeat. Must have been a night creature in the woods.

Ida cupped her hands and pulled herself through the caressing water, creating tiny ripples and almost no sound.

At her age she had seen quite a few moons, but tonight, what a pleasure, to be the only soul to see this one, a mere sliver laying a shining path across the silent ridges in the inky liquid.

Bullfrogs boomed from the shallows at the end of the lake, but the wind, more subtle than those raucous frogs, merely sifted through the oak leaves on the far shore, adding a rattle to the soft wind's breath.

She approached the bank and, her toes welcoming the soft mud, turned and stood waist deep for a moment before her return trip. The woods gave off their verdant odor. It blended with the comfortable fishy smell of the dark lake.

There was that sound again--a snap, then a footfall. She tried to whirl around as a dark form--Dear Lord--sprang with a splash from the darkness--grabbed her from behind, shoved her under the water.

Ida clawed and scratched. Strong fingers pressed her down. Into the muck. Ground her face into the bottom. Her nose and mouth clogged with silt. No air.

She twisted. She kicked and met strong legs. Unmoving legs. She scratched, tried to pry the iron grip from her shoulders. It only tightened.

Her arms went limp. Her legs stopped flailing. Those hands, always those strong hands, forced her down, into the mud. No air. No breath. Mud. Only mud.

She knew this shadow, these hands. She stopped struggling. She was dying. Regret mingled with the peace she felt as she gave up.

Oh Cressa, my dear, dear Cressa.

Chapter One, the next afternoon

Alla Diritta: In direct motion (Ital.)

I was lost and it was getting dark. Was it really this far to Gram's town? Lush Illinois cornfields stretched on for miles and miles, disorienting me. My mission was two-fold; escape another bad-choice boyfriend, and somehow fix my broken relationship with Gram.

I couldn't tell how far I'd come. Clumps of dark trees and small towns relieved the deadly monotony, but didn't help me know where I was. I distracted myself slightly with my composition.

After I finished humming the phrase I thought would sound good as a clarinet solo in the second passage, I switched off my tape recorder and dropped it onto the passenger seat. Strains of Moussorgsky's tone poem, Night on Bald Mountain, wild foreboding music, took the place of my own composition in my head. My distraction wasn't working.

Maybe because a car had been on my tail for miles, but the jerk wouldn't pass me. It couldn't be Len. Could it? I would not think about him right now.

Even though I had ridden out to Alpha visiting my grandmother dozens of times as a child, even though I was sure I would remember the way, I was lost. Nothing was familiar. I hated being lost after dark, and it soon would be. A sick feeling welled in my gut, but I told myself it was not time to panic. It was time to get help.

I reached over to fish the cell phone out of my purse and punched in the familiar numbers. The phone trilled twice. To my relief, Neek answered on the third ring.

"Hi Cressa. Wait a minute." She panted a couple of times. "I gotta catch my breath. Doing extreme yoga."

"Extreme yoga?" What a contradiction. And how typical of her. "That sounds like something that would appeal to you, Neek."

“You should try it, Cress. What’s up? Where are you now? I have good news.”

“I don’t know where I am, that’s why I called you. Why can’t I ever win the lottery and get a GPS for my car?”

“Don’t whine, Cressa.” She chuckled. “And be patient.” She told me that a lot. “When the omens are right you’ll win.”

It felt better talking to her. Neek was my best friend at the apartment building, or anywhere, and the person I’d asked to handle my mail and plants when I’d fled Chicago earlier today.

“I don’t think that latest if-I-can’t-have-you note from Len was a good omen.” Those notes, slipped under my door in the night, were getting more frequent. And more frightening.

“He’ll never find you in Alpha, don’t worry. And, speaking of omens, this one’s divine,” she squeaked. “Listen, Cress, I’m excited about this. I found a quarter outside your apartment door right after you left. You know what that means.”

“No, I don’t really. This is your good news?” Neek was a sweet person and a true friend, but she tended to find omens in things. Last week she’d been foretelling the future by the clouds. Not the weather, mind you, but the actual future.

“Yep. A quarter. That’s big stuff. Big changes for you. Oh, Cressa, this fits right in with you finally going to visit your grandmother. I’m so glad you’re doing this. Have you called her yet to let her know you’re coming?”

“I decided to surprise her.” I eased my foot off the gas. The car behind me slowed, too. “I can’t wait to see her face when she realizes I’m actually at her cabin.” Unless she didn’t want to see me.

“Promise me you won’t mention the piano.”

“Okay. Not at first, anyway.”

“Hey, I’m just glad you’re going to see her.”

I swallowed at her soft sympathy. “So am I. So am I.”

“That’s what this quarter must mean, a good surprise. And, by the way, that ficus of yours is dying of thirst.”

“Are you near your computer?” I asked her. “I need you to tell me if I should be going through Ophiem or past it on the way to Alpha.” Nothing had looked familiar since the Quad-Cities.

I had driven across the floor of a wide valley, then climbed a gentle hill. The name of the town, Ophiem, was so familiar I thought I should drive through it. So I turned onto the

smaller road toward the town. But that felt wrong. My sudden u-turn should shake my tail and get me headed back toward Highway 150. That had to be the right direction.

The Illinois farmland would have been a restful sight--I hadn't been out of Chicago i--I hadn't been out of Chicago in months--if I didn't have that damn tailgater. It couldn't possibly be Len. No, it couldn't be.

A glance in the rearview mirror told me no one was following now. I let out a relieved breath.

It would also be more restful if I knew what kind of reception Gram would give me. She would be glad to see me, wouldn't she? My burst of self-congratulations, at being the first to capitulate and end our feud, was giving way to nerves and doubt.

I wanted to kill two birds; get away from Len's harassment and surprise Gram. Well, maybe three birds. A quiet lake should be a good place to finish this damn piece of music. I'd been stalled on it for weeks and my teaching job this fall depended on it. I hoped Gram would serve as my muse. She always had in the past.

"Did you go through Orion?" She pronounced it like the constellation.

"It's ORE-ion," I remembered from years ago, "and yes, that was awhile—"

"Yep, the highway goes right past a town called Ophiem. You're almost there."

"Past, not through, right?"

"Right. A straight shot down Highway 150. Unless you're on the Interstate?"

"No, I'm not. Thank God, I'm back on track. And thank you, Neek. I'll call you tonight."

"Tell me all about her new cabin when you get there."

"Her 'cute' little cabin?" My lip curled in spite of my good intentions.

"Yes. And give your Gram a big hug from me."

A glint caught my rearview mirror and I flinched. Then I saw headlights close behind me.

The hair on the nape of my neck raised. Was it was the same car? I slowed again to try and shake it.

"I'll give her hugs from both of us. You know, Neek, I think a car is following me. It's been behind me ever since I passed the Quad-City Airport."

"Do you think it's Len?"

"I don't know. The car kinda looks like his, but how could it be? He has no idea I'm here."

“Well, then, it’s——”

“Neek, are you there? Neek?” The connection was dropped.

Damn cell phones. I threw the thing in the direction of my purse.

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