

RED RETURNING

The
Sound
A NOVEL
Red
Returning

SUE DUFFY

 Kregel
Publications

The Sound of Red Returning: A Novel

© 2012 by Sue Duffy

Published by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel, Inc.,
P.O. Box 2607, Grand Rapids, MI 49501.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotations in printed reviews.

The persons and events portrayed in this work are the creations of the author, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™
Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

ISBN: 978-0-8254-2574-5

Printed in the United States of America

12 13 14 15 16 / 5 4 3 2 1

Prologue

*I*t was just three small paragraphs in the *Boston Globe* that morning in October 2011:

Slain Professor's Widow Dies

Eugenia C. Devoe, wife of the late Schell M. Devoe—a prominent Harvard music professor who was murdered in his Boston home in 1996—died of natural causes Friday in Canada. She was 78.

An accomplished musician, Eugenia Devoe had been a popular band director at Boston Central High School for many years. Shortly before her husband's death, Devoe resigned her position and left the couple's home near the Harvard campus. Until now, her whereabouts had been unknown.

From Boston, Devoe had moved to the small farming community of Curien, west of Montreal, where she assumed her mother's maiden name, Holbrook. Neighbors say she

rarely ventured from her small rural home, where she taught piano lessons. The couple had no children. Mrs. Devoe had no surviving family.

By dawn the next day, the isolated cottage that had been Eugenia Devoe's hiding place lay in ruins. Even the boards had been stripped from the ceilings and floors. Yet when the intruders left, they took only one thing from the house—a letter Schell Devoe mailed to his wife just hours before he died.

Chapter 1

ONE WEEK LATER

When the lights dimmed, a tall, trembling silhouette stood in a doorway to the East Room. The audience gathered there waited expectantly.

“Miss Bower, are you all right?” whispered the president’s valet as he straightened a beaded clasp on the back of her gown.

Liesl nodded absently, but all was not right. From a time and place long buried, an alarm had just sounded, causing her gifted hands to tense and her mind to flash the unbidden image of a dark alley in Moscow.

A voice inside the historic room spoke, momentarily dispelling the fearful image, and the valet stepped aside. “The President and First Lady wish to continue this evening’s festivities with a performance by one of the world’s most acclaimed pianists. Please welcome the recent winner of the coveted Messenhoff Award for the Performing Arts, fresh from her victory recital at Carnegie Hall—Miss Liesl Bower.”

A chilling inertia threatened to abort her entrance, but the stimulus of applause propelled her slowly forward. Her head held high, she passed beneath chandelier prisms that now, to her wary eye, cast a distorted light.

She had performed in royal courts around the world and in this very

room before two sitting presidents. It was not the dignitaries and other guests of the president assembled before her, not the white-knuckle jitters that still plagued her no matter how often she performed, not the powerful scherzo she would soon unleash onto the keyboard. What had stricken her just moments earlier was a face in the second row, the same face she'd seen burn with rage that night in the alley. What was he doing in *this* place?

As she crossed the room, the clapping hands ringing in her ears, she risked the briefest glance at the man in the second row. But even in that instant, she felt his eyes breach the barricade she'd constructed around herself so long ago, that bulwark about her soul that isolated her from the hurtful world outside.

Though her mind was in turmoil, her slender body, now slick with perspiration inside her black velvet gown, moved with practiced poise toward the piano. When she reached the imposing Steinway concert grand with its three gilded-eagle supports, she placed a steadying hand on its fine, aged wood and turned to face her audience, knowing where she must *not* look again. She nodded to President Travis Noland before bowing grandly, then seated herself at the keyboard, the only thing in the room she was sure of.

As she always did, Liesl closed her eyes to summon the music, to place herself in the hands of the composer. Sometimes she would hope for the faintest breath of God. This was one of those times.

To settle the after-dinner audience, Liesl began a warm and rippling etude by Moszkowski. Later, like the times she had driven for miles in deep thought and couldn't remember anything about the route she'd taken, she realized she'd finished the etude without inhabiting it—a transgression for any concert pianist. *No more of this!* she scolded herself.

She rose from the piano to accept the applause. Careful to avoid the troubling face, she looked around the room and noticed one or two guests beginning to nod off. Even at this unsettling moment, the drooped faces amused her because she knew what was coming.

Moments later, her silken hands lifted like graceful swans from the even-tempered opening measure of Chopin's *Scherzo No. 2 in B-Flat*

Minor only to strike with a fury that caught her audience off guard and swept them into the stormy yet lyrical piece. It was President Noland's favorite and his special request for the evening.

Now, Liesl escaped her audience and plunged so deeply into the music, she no longer sensed if anyone else was there. Except once. After the pounding clash of the first passage, she was midway into a peaceful interlude when she surfaced long enough to dare look into the second row. *Gone! He's gone! But where?* No time to wonder; the music wouldn't wait. The storm was gathering again. It demanded she channel it down the length of the instrument and release it to the room. But in the finale, in the resolution of the strife, the victory of peace prevailed.

It was then she suspected why the president had selected this particular composition. She knew who else was in the room. The Russian ambassador and others from his diplomatic corps were seated so close to her, she could hear them breathe. She knew the strife of recent negotiations between the United States and Russia, knew that the delicate balance of power between them sizzled ominously. Of course, Ambassador Olnakoff would know the scherzo she'd just performed. A music scholar himself, a devotee of Chopin, he would surely translate the conflict-to-peace narrative of the music into the political message of reconciliation that Noland must have intended.

When it was over, Liesl rose from the piano to exuberant applause, her eyes falling on the empty second-row chair. Though she usually allowed the applause to roll over her in tingling, uplifting currents, at that moment, she was numb to it, feeling only the need to warn someone about the man she'd just seen.

She scanned the crowd for Ben Hafner, assistant to the president for domestic policy, perhaps her closest friend since their Harvard days together. *I've got to reach him!*

But the audience wouldn't let her go. They begged for an encore and Liesl knew she must oblige. But as she lowered herself to the tufted bench, she looked out once more and caught Ben's mop of brown hair and toothy smile beaming her way from a side door to the room. *Read my face, Ben,* she silently implored, then raised a summoning brow.

Once again, Liesl lapsed into the spell of the music, having chosen something she hoped would reinforce President Noland's mood for the evening: the disarming *Clair de Lune* by Debussy.

The piece had been a recital offering when she was just twelve. Under her grandmother's tutelage, she had refined her performance of it in the centuries-old house beneath the live oaks. Now, as she gently stroked the keys, she could almost smell the briny wind off Charleston Harbor; hear the creak of the kitchen floor as her mother and grandmother prepared the evening meal; and hear the bells of St. Philip's.

Was this selection for Noland? Or for her need in this hour?

As Liesl took her final bow, she was set upon by admirers, her path to Ben still blocked. The reluctant celebrity with the amber hair and eyes to match always drew more attention than she welcomed. She'd been photographed around the world, not just at the piano in one of her regal gowns but in baggy sweats leaving a produce market in Paris, even swimming in a remote grotto in Greece.

The White House photographer approached and asked her to pose next to the piano, between President Noland and Ambassador Olnakoff. When the president swooped in with the ambassador in tow, more than a few observers raised an eyebrow over the unnatural chumminess the two men displayed toward each other. Liesl overheard one tuxedoed gentleman comment to another, "A beautiful woman can bridge many a gap, eh?"

After the photos were taken, other admirers moved toward Liesl. Between the heads of those gathered about her, she finally made eye contact with Ben. She excused herself from some wanting to discuss the finer nuances of the scherzo, and quickly left the East Room.

"What's up?" Ben asked when Liesl reached him. "I still read you pretty well, don't I?"

"Right now, that's a good thing." She took his arm and pulled him down the hall.

"Whoa, take it easy. People will start talking again."

She stopped abruptly and turned into him. "Ben, you've got to listen to me!"

He stared down at her, then put both hands on her shoulders. “You’re shaking. What’s the matter with you?”

Before she could answer, he steered her across the hall and opened the door to a small, tidy office, then closed the door behind him. “Sit down and talk to me.” He remained standing.

“Did you see the man in the second row wearing a red ascot? Black hair slicked straight back, hollow cheeks?”

Ben thought a moment, then nodded hesitantly. “Probably Evgeny Kozlov.”

“Do you have a picture of him?”

“No, I don’t have a . . . what’s this about, Liesl?” he asked impatiently, his forehead bunching in creases.

“Who is this Kozlov?” she asked, her tone urgent. “Why was he here tonight?”

Ben took a seat opposite Liesl and looked intently at her, but didn’t answer.

She knew there were many things Ben could never talk about with her. Perhaps this was one. She drew a hurried breath. “Ben, do you remember that last trip I took to Moscow with Dr. Devoe?”

He nodded solemnly.

“It was January 1996.”

“I remember,” he said softly.

“The last night we were there, Dr. Devoe came to my hotel room. He pulled me out into the hallway and asked me to take a walk with him. I was tired. I’d just played a concert that night at the conservatory. But he insisted. He said he had something to tell me. I asked why we couldn’t talk in my room, and he said, ‘Because they’re listening.’”

Ben reached for one of her hands and held it.

She squeezed the hand of this burly, compassionate man she loved as a brother. The media had tried hard to make something more of their relationship, daring to suggest that Ben might stray from the wife he adored.

Liesl continued. “I had no idea what Dr. Devoe was talking about, and he refused to elaborate.” She steadied herself. “When we walked out of the hotel that night, the snow was blowing hard, but we kept going. He was

taking me to a small coffeehouse in the next block, he said. Before we got there, though, the flimsy hat I was wearing blew off and I ran after it. Just a silly thing. I had to chase it down the sidewalk.

“But when I turned back, Dr. Devoe was gone. I ran to where I’d left him and heard voices from an alley nearby. Angry voices. Dr. Devoe and another man were arguing in Russian.”

There was a knock at the office door. Ben put up a hand to silence Liesl as he moved to answer it.

“Mr. Hafner,” said Ben’s chief aide, Ted Shadlaw, “sorry, but I happened to see you come in here.”

“It’s all right, Ted,” Ben said calmly. “What is it?”

“Miss Bower’s car is here.”

“Tell the driver to wait, please.” Ben closed the door. “Keep going,” he told Liesl, returning to his seat.

She didn’t know how exhausting this would be. She wanted to curl into a ball and draw the barricade closer. “I didn’t know what to do,” she said. “I was afraid to approach the alley until I heard a scuffle and went charging in. Dr. Devoe was on the ground. His mouth was bleeding, and a man stood over him. By the street lamp, I could see him clearly. Then the man came at me. He pointed his finger in my face and yelled, ‘Don’t ever come back to Russia!’”

Ben flinched.

“He ran off and I helped Dr. Devoe to his feet. I tried to press a tissue to his mouth, but he wouldn’t let me. He held my wrist and looked hard at me. He told me to forget what I’d just seen, that it was just a common street thug trying to rob him. But I knew better. They knew each other, I was sure of it. And why would a random mugger tell me never to return to Russia?”

Liesl looked sharply at Ben. “I never saw that man again,” she said. “Until tonight. In the second row.”

Ben breathed a heavy sigh and stared at the floor. When he looked up, Liesl saw his frustration.

“Liesl, what happened to Dr. Devoe later, that ghastly thing you witnessed in Boston, is history. Fifteen years ago. It’s over.”

“But, it’s—”

“It’s like it happened yesterday for you, I know,” he interrupted. “And now, after what you just told me, I understand even more why you disappeared after the murder. But why didn’t you tell this to someone during the investigation?”

Her eyes clouded and she looked away. “You know the way they treated me. Like I’d done something to betray my country.”

“The police?”

“No, the others.”

Ben nodded. “Liesl, lots of people were questioned. Dr. Devoe had many associates, many students. None as close to him as you were, granted. And none of them had to watch him die. I’d do anything to erase that trauma from your life, but I can’t. And you can’t.” He paused. “But you can break its grip on you. You have to let it go.”

Liesl straightened her back as if a steel rod in it had just snapped into place. “Tell me who Kozlov is?” she persisted.

Ben stood up and raised both hands in surrender. “Someone Olnakoff recently brought over for counsel. He’s a lawyer in Moscow.”

“He’s a punk!”

“Liesl, keep your voice down. And try to understand what’s going on. Russia is back on a collision course with the United States, and President Noland is dealing every diplomatic card he can to keep our countries from a showdown. We can’t go accusing one of their diplomats of brutish behavior nearly fifteen years ago. From your account, that’s all it was. Scared the wits out of you. Probably had everything to do with Devoe’s treason, though maybe not his murder. But that chapter’s closed. What do you want from this man? An apology?”

Ben moved toward the door. “I know you think I’m insensitive. But you’ve suffered long enough. Make it stop. The man isn’t here to terrorize ‘one of America’s classical darlings,’ as that *Post* reporter called you.” He smiled brightly as if trying to coax the same from her, but she fixed a stony eye on him.

“Liesl, come with me,” he finally said with a hint of begging in his voice. “Your coach awaits.”

Liesl let him pull her up from her chair and hug her gently, though she barely returned the gesture. When he let her go, she said, "Mrs. Devoe just died. Did you know that?"

Ben went still. "Yes, I know," he said, then tried again to lead her to the door, but she stood her ground.

"That warm, vivacious woman was living alone in the backwoods of Canada under a false name, Ben. Why did she have to do that?"

He looked down at the floor then back at her as though he'd had to compose the impassive face he now showed her.

She noticed this effort and understood. "You know something more about that, don't you?"

Ben straightened stiffly. "Liesl, please let this go. It doesn't concern you anymore." He waved an arm toward a draped window. "There's a whole world of beautiful music and adoring fans out there for you. You've worked hard for it. Now put this behind you once and for all and go live your life."



The limousine that had transported Liesl to the White House on that Tuesday evening pulled back onto Pennsylvania Avenue and headed toward her small, rented bungalow in Georgetown, where she'd lived for many years. She wrapped her velvet cape tightly about her and sank deep into the plush leather of the seat, resting her head against its high back. *Ben's right. It's over. Time to put it away.*

Soon, she gazed out the window at one of Georgetown's stately old houses, and her mind raced back to her childhood home in South Carolina. She wished she could climb the worn stairs to her room, to wander the neighborhood where she'd been just another kid on the block, not the prodigy others had labeled her. She wanted to go back in time and skip rope with her friends, canoe into the marsh, and catch fiddler crabs. It had all come too quickly to an end.

A few blocks from her house, the driver turned toward her and asked, "Miss Bower, are you expecting anyone at your home tonight?"

Liesl looked at him curiously, her mind still swirling in Charleston currents. “Why do you ask?”

The man hesitated before answering. “I just thought you might have arranged for someone to follow you there.”

The impact of what he was saying suddenly hit, and Liesl turned quickly in her seat to look out the back window. A few car lengths behind was a set of headlights, nothing unusual. “I’m not sure I understand,” she said, though something quickened inside her.

“So, you’re not expecting anyone?”

“No, I’m not.”

“In that case, ma’am, I’d like to call Mr. Hafner and tell him I’m returning you to the White House.”