

Melody

By Alessandra Azzaroni

PROLOGUE

I came with Nana. We sat in her Volkswagen beetle and drove to Dr. Martin's house. I tried to forget why I was going there. But that wasn't going to happen easily.

One look at my hands reminded me of the events that had led me to visiting Dr. Martin and today.

Today would be different from our other visits. Dr. Martin said it's easier to refer to them as `visits' rather than `sessions'. You see, Dr. Martin is my therapist.

She said that group therapy would help everyone. She said that sharing our stories and listening to others would be beneficial for everyone.

Dr. Martin scheduled four visits. Each visit would have a different story told.

Dr. Martin says that being selfish is okay, sometimes. But there are other people in the world with other problems. We couldn't be in competition to see who had the worst life.

But I seriously wondered if any of the other girls had been through what I'd been through.

I scratched the back of one hand. Nana immediately saw and chastised me. "Melody, you know you shouldn't do that." I stopped my scratching and tried to ignore the itch.

Nana drove up the long driveway until finally the house came into view. It was all one level, but it covered a lot of ground. Pretty large - especially for a house with only two people living there.

A bicycle was parked at the side fence. A panel van drove off along the driveway, followed by a Mercedes-Benz. It led me to wonder if people's cars reflect their lives. Would the vehicles be significant in the other girls' stories? Was Nana's Volkswagen significant?

Nana stopped the car, but left the engine running. "I'll be here at four," she said. "Call me if there's any changes."

I thanked her for the ride, then kissed her cheek. I swallowed what pride I had - next to nothing - and knocked on the front door. Lucy Martin answered it. She's Dr. Martin's sister. She's a quiet, part-time nurse. "Hello, Melody," she greeted. "They're all in the study. You know the way?"

"Hi, Lucy. I know the way. Thank you." I walked along the beautiful hallway rugs until I got to the study. I knocked softly on the door.

"Come in," Dr. Martin invited.

I was the last one to arrive. Dr. Martin was sitting in the desk chair. A beautiful black-haired, olive-skinned girl sat in an armchair. A redhead lazed about on one of the couches. And a small, tense blonde took up as less space as possible on the other couch. I sat down on the blonde's couch.

"Good, you're all here," Dr. Martin began. A thirty-ish woman with red-brown hair and reading spectacles was our therapist. In turn, Dr. Martin pointed to each of us as she said our names. "Melody Granger, Tara Ross, Raven Sanders and Star Breakley.

“Now,” she continued. “Who wants to begin?”

I hid my hands in my lap. There was silence. “Melody, I was kind of thinking that you could.”

All eyes turned to me. I sighed under my breath, hoping that no one would hear me. “All right,” I agreed. “But be warned.”

CHAPTER ONE

I held out my hands, palms down. Everyone looked at my very pink hands, deep in contrast to my pale-ish complexion. “I wasn't born like this,” I begun. “It was the result of an accident.”

I put my hands back in my lap. “But I'll start from the start. I wasn't exactly... planned to be born when I was. Nevertheless, I came into the world and my parents had to take responsibility. Which, of course, they weren't too happy about it.”

“What do you mean by, ‘of course’?” the redhead, Star, asked.

“Well, if you aren't planned, then ‘of course’ no one wants to face up to what they have to do,” the black-haired girl, Raven, replied. A scowl graced her face for a fleeting moment before going back to a normal, blank look. “Continue.”

“At the time my parents were both musicians. Both pianists. My father was a piano teacher, as well. It was only natural, I suppose, that I would be a pianist, too.

“As far as I can remember, I've always been taken to recitals and orchestra performances. I've seen both of my parents play professionally.

“When I was one, they'd let me sit on their laps at the baby grand piano they owned. They'd encourage me to press the keys and listen to the sounds. I did like the sound and I began to love the piano when I was very young. I was two when they bought me my own electronic keyboard for Christmas. It was my favourite toy, bar none. But to my parents, it was more than a toy for me.

“I was three when they signed me up for private piano lessons. Even though it was so long ago, I can still remember my first instructor. His name was Hans Schleitl. He came from Vienna. I remember him because I thought he looked like Santa Claus with his trimmed white beard and hair and roly-poly belly. He was very nice and before long I could compose my own little songs as well as excelling the ones he's taught me.

“And no,” I told the others, “I'm not arrogant, but it's just how it was.” They all exchanged glances, but then looked toward me to continue.

And so I did. “While I was happy with Hans Schleitl, my parents were not. They thought he wasn't teaching me the right things, and I wasn't learning fast enough. When I was seven, they fired him.

“How come you always call your parents ‘they’?” Star asked.

“Because they probably weren't real parents,” Raven answered, as if it were obvious.

“Yes,” I seconded. “Anyway, after they fired him, they vowed to be more selective with their choices. He suggested that she teach me. She said that *he* should teach me. Because he was already a teacher and all.

“After much discussion, they decided that I would practice by myself until they'd found me another instructor.

“In the meantime, I was nearly eight when they told me that they'd entered me in a competition.

“And that, my friends,” I said ominously as I looked around the room at everyone, “is where it kicked in.”

CHAPTER TWO

As if on cue, there was a knock on the study door. “Come in, Lucy,” Dr. Martin called out.

Lucy entered with a large tray. On it were five glasses and a pitcher of homemade lemonade. Ah, what visit wouldn't be complete without Lucy's lemonade.

She unstacked the glasses and poured lemonade into each. She didn't say a word. I knew Lucy hated to interrupt our visits. I respected her for that, if nothing else. She scampered out of the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

“Continue any time you're ready, Melody,” Dr. Martin invited.

“All right.” I took a breath, deeply, and picked up where I left off.

“They came to see me together. I was reading on a sofa in the living room. They sat down either side of me.

“`We've got big news for you, Melody,' he said. I sat expectantly.

“`You've been practicing every day, haven't you?' she asked. I nodded.

“`You're going to be in a competition!' he announced jovially.

“Me, myself, I didn't have the same enthusiasm as they did, but I was excited, nonetheless.

“They were sure I could win. But to win, I needed a vigorous training schedule. At least, according to them. My main concern was who would be my piano teacher.

“They found Frédéric Chavain from France. He was famed, they'd told me. And they told me how special I was to have him for a teacher, as he usually took on much older students.

“I met with Frédéric at his home four times a week. But to my parents, that was not enough. I needed more than an hour's practice a day, they said.

“As the day the competition was on came closer, my schedule upped. I still had my four hours a week with Frédéric, but I also had one hour before school; three hours after school; and two hours after dinner.

“Now, I thought a parent's priorities for their children should be getting enough sleep, having a healthy diet and doing their homework. Not so in my parents' case.

“No. Their priority was for me to concentrate solely on my composition. After a few weeks of `training' as they called it, my fingers were getting blistered and tired. I had trouble writing properly in school.

“In school, I suffered. Since I couldn't go out on the weekends because I had training and I couldn't go after school, people stopped inviting me to things. I think I lost my friends even more when I stopped playing at lunch because I had to do my homework then. I certainly couldn't have done it after school.

“After a while, the effect on my fingers worsened. At lunchtime one day, when I usually did my homework, I had to stay back to rewrite some work because my writing was atrocious. I struggled, taking my time to ensure a half-decent job. I only just got away. I only had ten minutes to eat my lunch.

“Straight after dinner, a quarter-hour before my evening training was to start, I came to my mother and showed her my fingers. She asked me what had happened. I told her it was all my practicing. All she did was put on some lotion and told me to be ready for the evening.

“A week until the competition. I was scared. My composition was pretty good, I thought. Excellent in their opinion. I knew that I was scared of *them*. I had a letter home from school during the week to let them know that the school was concerned with my handwriting and concentration.

“I was exhausted from all the playing that I couldn't fully pay attention in class. But, of course, they didn't care. As long as I fulfilled the schedule, nothing else mattered.

“The competition was on a Saturday - my eighth birthday. They thought it would be best to keep me home on Friday. I spent just about the whole day reviewing my piece and perfecting it. I was applying the lotion several times a day. Frédéric came by and we had our session, but he reported to them that I wasn't doing as well as I used to.

“They were furious. I skipped dinner that evening, as they did. They kept at me for missing notes, slipping my fingers on the keys and not putting my heart into it. It was after midnight when I went to bed. It was, indeed, a very long day.

“I was woken at four the next morning. Five hours to go. Five hours that included getting there and having breakfast and practice, practice and more practice. I wasn't drained physically from all the practice, but my fingers felt weak. Yet, they stood behind me through my training, forcing me to keep playing and playing.

“When we got to the auditorium, they were told that parents and instructors were not allowed backstage. I was extremely thankful for that. Frédéric would be there, for they had to prove to him that I was his 'best' student.

“The order of the contestants was alphabetical. I was nervous when C came along, and downright shaky when E was on. So I did the only thing I could.

“I ran away.

“When my name was called, I was already a good distance away from the auditorium. I ran at first, not knowing where I was going, but I ran and ran until I couldn't go on. I slowed, then gave up. I was in the park. I curled up under a tree and cried myself to sleep.”

CHAPTER THREE

I didn't realise that my eyes were closed, but I opened them to see all four of them - Dr. Martin, Raven, Star and Tara - all staring.

I looked at myself. I closed my eyes again. There I was, curled under the tree, safe and sound. When I raised my eyelids, I was curled up in the same position, but on a couch.

“How about a break, everyone?” Dr. Martin asked, standing up. “Go stretch your legs, then we'll have lunch and continue later.”

Before I knew it, we were back in Dr. Martin's study in the same seating arrangement.

Star surprised me with an interesting question. "Were your parents successful?" I didn't quite understand, so she elaborated. "I mean, some people try to live through their children's lives because they didn't succeed in their own.

"Well, before I was born, they were," I answered. "Of course, her career ended before his did. The pregnancy made her swell and it affected her fingers.

"And him...he broke his wrist not long after I was born. He never competed again, but resorted to helping others instead."

"Resorted?" Raven repeated. "Sounds like an absolute tragedy," she declared dramatically, tossing her head back with her eyes closed and placed the back of her hand across her forehead.

I rolled my eyes. "Well, it *was* a tragedy for him. Other people, not as much."

It suddenly occurred to me that I'd never heard Tara speak yet. "You all right there?" I asked. She nodded fast and I could hear the swoosh that her hair made. "Sure?" Same motion.

"Are you ready to continue, Melody?" Dr. Martin asked.

I took a long, deep breath and exhaled slowly. "All right.

"I was found at the park by my grandparents, my mother's parents. I didn't see them all that much. My parents never let me invite Nana and Papa to the competition.

"They were walking their dog, Benny. They found me under the tree and sat down with me, tying Benny to the trunk. They asked me what was wrong and I told them everything. Since I only saw them once or twice a year, we weren't all that close. Somehow that made it easier for me to explain all that I'd been through." I twisted a lock of light brown hair around my finger, thinking of what to say next.

"But my parents soon found us, not long after I'd finished my story. I was scared of them, I really was. Scared and raging mad. But not as mad as they were. But I think Nana and Papa were the angriest.

"Nana started first, raving on how to and not to raise children. They should be doing well at school, getting plenty of sleep, a good diet and *time* to themselves. Something I was never given. Something I needed desperately, though. And even if it wasn't by myself, I just wanted something other than the piano.

"Then Papa went on about how sick I looked. My eyes were sunken and heavily ringed. My skin was pale, far paler than I'd been born with. My stomach was grumbling because of lack of food, for sometimes I had to skip meals. I was never, *never* allowed snacks; they took up my time. And when I did eat, there wasn't much, for I couldn't waste time eating.

"And my fingers, he was *really* unhappy about my fingers. The sores on my joints, the blisters on my fingertips and my cramped fingers that were beginning to curl naturally. Papa's hands were important to him. He used to play the fiddle until he began painting, sculpturing and all that. His hands were a major part of his life, and he loved his work. But he always knew when to stop and rest. If he wanted to keep working until his death, he had to take care of himself. And he thought I needed to be taken care of.

"Nana and Papa would've gone through the roof if the park had had one. Their main point was that what my parents were doing was a form of child abuse. They threatened to tell child welfare, unless my parents stopped what they were doing and let me grow up.

“I may have been just eight, but I can still remember it all, even the times before that with Hans Schleitl and Frédéric Chavain. I know it's uncommon to remember things from before three years of age, but I wonder why I can.” I turned towards Dr. Martin for an answer.

“If something traumatic has happened when you're very young, you can remember it for many years to come,” she explained. “Or sometimes, when it's extremely bad, you can forget it and never remember it unless you get flashbacks when you're reminded of it.”

I picked up the story again. “I went home with my parents that day. I'd been too afraid to tell them what things had been like for me, but it was a relief to have them know. Maybe they'd finally lay off and let me be. And so they did.

“Their way of laying off was to ease my piano use. Like drugs and cigarettes. You don't go cold turkey; you just reduce it bit by bit until you're off.

“I suppose it was only fair. One hour a day was too little for them. It wasn't what I wanted - I wanted to be off completely - but it was a start. On Fridays I'd have an extra hour with Frédéric, but I could handle that. He'd softened since the last time I'd seen him. So much that he told me about a competition that he didn't tell them about. He wanted me to enter, but he knew what would happen if they knew about it. I had him on my side.

“Frédéric wasn't quite a friend, and never would be, but he understood. Perhaps it was something that a lot of musicians went through - the pressure and the pain. But also the need to succeed. And I wanted to succeed *so* much. I once thought that I hated the piano, but then my interest got re-ignited.

“I knew I could do it. I knew I could do it and succeed. But my real worry was to keep them from finding out.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“I figured things out, though I didn't practice the piece I'd written at home. I told them I was having extra lessons with Frédéric, and they didn't doubt me, for they were too pleased with the fact that I was enjoying the piano again.

“But Frédéric never gave me extra lessons. While he was out teaching other students, he'd given me a key to get into his house and use his piano.

“My composition explained with music what had happened to me. The start had melodious tinkling notes until it got lower and louder - fierce. Then it went back to the tinkling and ended there. But I supposed most people would translate it as a thunderstorm.

“They never, *never* suspected a thing. They even paid for the extra lessons, when they were actually paying for me solely using the piano. I did have to give myself credit. They never even saw the score I'd been writing.

“Finally, the day came. My hands were in perfect condition, a real turnaround from what they were like before. In the morning I told them that I was visiting Nana and Papa. That wasn't a lie. I was going over there and then they would take me to the competition. In the off chance that I actually won something, they promised to keep it hidden away in their home.

“I was ready. I waited backstage while they sat in the audience. A, B, C, D, E and F all went. Then there were the early Gs. Then me - Melody Granger.

“It was my best performance of all. The best I'd ever done, even better than my practicing. It was perfect. I knew it and I could feel the crowd, that they knew it too. And I hoped that the judges did, also.

“The remaining competitors performed and we all waited backstage. Third was announced. Then second place. Then first prize - me. I had actually done something I liked doing and I had succeeded. That meant something.

“I met up with Nana and Papa at their car. But they were not alone. *They* were there. How could they have been there? I never told them about the competition. I hid all evidence. But it wasn't enough. Where had I gone wrong?

“As it turned out, they were quite surprised to see me there. They'd come to the competition for the music, no ulterior motive. I was shocked, of course.

“I thought they would've been over the moon with joy. I mean, I'd done something they wanted me to do without forcing me to, and I'd done well. But that didn't matter when they were raving on about I betrayed them and lied to them.

“I just didn't understand. How did I betray them? How did I lie to them? I didn't tell them what I was doing, that's all. But then I remembered about how I said I was having extra lessons with Frédéric.

“We stood by the car, them yelling and yelling, me trying not to avert my eyes for fear of what might happen if I did. I looked them in the eye, fighting resistance to yell back. I wouldn't stoop to that level. Yelling never gets you anywhere. It may be a form of intimidation, but that's it. Yelling never wins you any arguments, and although they were a higher status than I was - they *were* my parents - I would be the victor.

“I calmly got into Nana and Papa's Volkswagen. They got in after me and we drove away, the trophy in my hand.

“I had a long discussion with them - Nana and Papa - and we decided that what I needed was time away from my parents. It was kind of how it was for children of divorced parents - two weeks with one, then two weeks with the other. It wasn't running away from the problem, but it wasn't facing it. I'd still have to stay with them for part of the time, but part was better than *all* the time.

“They drove me home to my parents, and the suggestion was discussed. To my surprise, it was quickly agreed to.

“As much as I wanted to, I didn't give up the piano. I needed a creative outlet. I couldn't do art, like Papa could. I was terrible at sports. I couldn't write, because even when I tried to and planned something, I struggled for words. Dancing was out of the question and drama wasn't my thing. But I needed to do something creative, so I stuck with piano. But I knew somewhere that I had to give it up soon.

“So I heard about another competition when I was thirteen, and so I'd sit at a piano at whoever's house I was at and I'd wait for the notes to come.

“My lessons with Frédéric were over and I wasn't going to get any more from him. He'd come in too deep and had to get out. I didn't blame him. More often than not, I felt the need myself, to get away back to when it had never started. I never should have touched a piano as a child. I never should have enjoyed listening to the music. But time can't be erased and you can't redo things. But there are a lot of things in life that you can't do.

“The notes finally came. They were mainly in bass clef, and the whole piece sounded as if it could have come out of a horror movie, or at least a thriller.

“There was the sarcastically cheerful sounds until the climax came with the loud, low notes being rapidly played and faded until there was an almost silence. The sarcastically cheerful music came back and faded. It was as if to prove a moral. You could read a story to it and it would fit in perfectly.

“All my music was like that. Hauntingly sweet at first, but would never be the same again.

“It was when I realised that, that I knew I had a problem.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“Break time, girls?” Dr. Martin asked. We all nodded and off we went for a walk.

“You're building up, aren't you?” Star asked. My puzzled look invited her to explain. “I can tell that you're going to tell something major. You're building up to it. The conflict - the big one, that is.”

I nodded. Star *did* know. Was I really obvious?

“I mean,” Star continued, “you still haven't told us what happened to your hands.”

“And they can't have turned out like that simply because of playing the piano too much,” Raven put in.

“Correct,” I confirmed. “All will be revealed shortly.”

Back in the study, I spoke again. “It was after I wrote that piece that things started to happen. I started to hear voices.

“‘Break it. Smash it. Hurl it away. Hurt them. Destroy them. Kill them,’ they said. I couldn't decipher what had entered my mind, but I knew I never thought those things myself. They were told to me. Voices in my head. The opposite of a guardian angel. This thing wasn't looking after me. It wanted to hurt me and it wanted me to hurt everyone and everything.

“Perhaps I really was losing my marbles then. The voices scared me. Instead of thinking things, the voices would tell me things while I did my best to ignore them. Perhaps I had schizophrenia, but I didn't know what was happening to me. If I told someone, they'd probably say I had a guilty conscience. So I kept the voices quiet. Or at least, I tried whatever I could to shut them up.

“I practiced my piece at both homes. My original piece started to change. Subconsciously, the hauntingly sweet music disappeared. All the way through was anger and frustration. I didn't think it was me who changed the song. I thought *they* did it - the voices in my head.

“Everyone went to the competition. I performed my piece and even to my ears it sounded awful. It was like I was just thudding away at the keys.

“So it's no wonder I didn't get a placing. My parents were furious, but they never said a word. I was making a decision in my head and it was time to tell it.

“After the competition, he had come straight home, got his bags and got a taxi to the airport. He'd been invited to conduct in Venice, so off he went. It was just her and me.

“When I went into the kitchen, she was there, boiling water on the stove. She heard me come in and looked at me. ‘Yes?’ she prompted.

“‘I’m dropping piano,’ I announced.

She screamed and instinctively I held my hands in front of me, as if to ward off something evil. Instead, or maybe it was evil, the pot of boiling water was thrown at me. I jumped back, but it had already covered my hands.

“I started shaking, all wide-eyed. I tried to scream, but I couldn’t. I could feel the voices of people in my head. They shouted things at me and I shouted out loud at them.

“Then she came towards me with the kettle and threw it at me, the water getting me. She was shouting at me, they were shouting at me, *I* was shouting at me. But then I stopped shouting and just screamed and screamed.

“I could feel the boiling water on my hands still, so I started clawing at them, as if to peel my skin off - which I did. I kept screaming. They kept repeating ‘Crush, kill, destroy’ and it was breaking me. I wanted to break *them*.

“Somewhere in the distance I heard a door bang and pounding footsteps. I saw people grab her and then some others came after *me*. I shrieked and panicked and babbled at them, then I got angry at those *things* playing with my mind.

“*GET AWAY! GET AWAY FROM ME! HELP! SOMEBODY HELP ME!*”

CHAPTER SIX

When I opened my eyes, Dr. Martin was hovering over me and telling me that it was all over. It wasn’t happening now. Get control.

Raven, Star and Tara weren’t in the study, but I could feel their presence. They were close by. Probably outside the door.

I sat up slowly and willed myself to stop shaking. Slow deep breaths. Then calm.

“Are you back now, Melody? How do you feel?” Dr. Martin asked.

More breathing. “I’m here. Ten, nine, eight, seven...” I counted on. After one, I said, “I can go on now?”

“Sure?”

I nodded.

“All right. I’ll bring them in.”

Back in our positions, I began again. “When I came to, I was at a hospital, in the psychiatric ward. With me were a psychiatrist, a social worker and my grandparents. I asked the psychiatrist, Dr. Laizenfaire, where my mother was. I was told she was being dealt with.

“I was told that from now on, I’d be living with Nana and Papa. Never would I be living with my parents again.

“My hands were bandaged, but I could still feel them burning. That’s when I was told that I couldn’t use my hands as much as I used to. Schoolwork and work around the house was fine, but I had to choose a hobby that didn’t involve my hands so much. They would be red and fragile forever, but they didn’t go into medical details why.

“Papa died a few weeks after that. It really hit me, because even though he and Nana were my grandparents, they were more like parents - the way real parents should be.

“I was given the job to sort through Papa's art. Decide what to keep and what to sell. And it was disturbing to see things that brought up memories.

“Like the oil scene of a bullfight. With the matador wearing a colourful vest and holding out a red cape, with the bull coming closer. The stands were full with people. It reminded me of my father. He'd once told me how he'd had a piano student while in Spain. But the student quit piano to become a matador, like his father and uncles were.

“Then there was a painting of a piano. The keys were yellowed and damaged in some sort of way. Some had been stabbed with a sharp object, so the ends were jagged with the wood clearly visible beneath the plastic coating. Most disturbing of all, it was called ‘Melody's Piano’.

“Soon Nana signed me up for therapy with Dr. Martin. I think I'm getting better. I think I'm surviving. I'll get through it.

“The voices have just about stopped. When I'm feeling angry or sad, they come back. But that's it. I don't think they'll cause me too much trouble from now on.

“And that's my story,” I concluded.

EPILOGUE

As we waited to be picked up, I asked Dr. Martin who would speak tomorrow.

“Raven, are you up for it?” Dr. Martin asked.

Raven sighed heavily. “Yeah, I'll do it.”

Star was picked up first. Then Tara. “Good-bye, Tara,” I said, hoping she'd say something. “See you tomorrow.”

But all she did was nod and wave briefly before getting into the panel van.

As Nana's Volkswagen came into view, I turned to Raven. “Good luck, tomorrow,” I told her.

“I'll need it,” I heard her mutter before I got into the car and we drove away.

THE END.

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