

Chapter One

The man in second row center stared at her. Fleecy hair swept back and angular jaw set, he was a clean-shaven version of Michelangelo's God. And beneath craggy white brows, his dark eyes glinted at Livvy Fischer.

Livvy clenched her fists, digging the nails of her ring fingers into her palms. Of course he stared. Giordano Landucci, music director and principal conductor for Opera San Jose, generally stared at auditioning sopranos.

But, seated in the front left row of the auditorium, Livvy wasn't singing.

Tamping down panic, she attempted a neutral, pleasant expression as she watched the mezzo-soprano on the stage of the historic California Theatre. But Livvy couldn't concentrate on the *Carmen* aria. "Love is a rebellious bird"? *Psht*—Bizet made the heartless sound so beautiful. "When will I love you? Good Lord, I don't know. Maybe never, maybe tomorrow. But not today, that's for sure." Opera wasn't short on mind games. At least *Carmen* gave a guy a heads-up: you didn't get that in the real world.

Livvy could feel Landucci's gaze burn the side of her face as he continued to focus his attention on her instead of on the mezzo. He must have known who she was. Any casting assistant worth their salt would have checked out Livvy's credentials. And a quick web search would have yielded the articles: *Oh, that soprano ...*

Did they invite her to audition out of curiosity? Because of the hair-raising story that still circulated the opera world?

Of course not. They were professionals, their time precious. They invited her because she was qualified.

Livvy caught herself breathing short. That wouldn't do. She'd never been this nervous at an audition before—nervous for days before, sure. Anxious for days after, yes. But invariably, once inside the hallowed halls—be it practice room or center stage—the adrenaline would kick in: *Get me up there. Let me open my mouth and let it out.*

But what if it wouldn't come out? What if her ability to become the character—to mine her emotions and offer them up to the audience—was gone? Vaporized like smoke, her opera career vanishing along with it.

Dear God, what was I thinking, coming here? I'm not ready. It's too soon. She itched to sprint from the auditorium in her three-inch Christian Louboutin knockoffs. But no way could she tell her sister she'd wimped out.

Stop it. Be present.

I am being present. I am presently going to dissolve in sweat. Going to seep into the burnished gold carpeting. Soak down the sloped floor to the orchestra wall and drip, drip through cracks and seams to the pit below, where I'll leave a stain. The stain known formerly as up-and-coming soprano Livvy Fischer.

"Livvy Fischer?" The casting assistant read from her clipboard.

Livvy started. Rose. Gave the assistant what she hoped passed for a smile. She strode—nay, *glided*—to the stairs and ascended the stage, Landucci's eyes following her all the way.

When taking the stage in an audition, Livvy typically felt certain the directors and conductors focused on one thing—her size. Certainly not all sopranos were as amply proportioned as the stereotype, but Livvy's tiny frame raised at least eyebrows and often questions. Did she have the lung capacity to project unamplified over a chorus and a full orchestra to the farthest reaches of an opera house?

At this point in an audition, she typically anticipated blowing their socks off.

Not today.

Today she didn't anticipate getting the weight of the past off her chest long enough to draw breath, much less blow off any socks. She hadn't been on stage since that dreadful night.

The archetypal conductor, Landucci exhibited focus and intensity. At his right presided Lisette Garofoli, Opera San Jose director, founder, champion, and patron saint. All class and elegance, the world-renowned former soprano proffered a genteel smile. "What will you be singing for us today?"

"I'll be singing 'Sempre libera,' from *La Traviata*."

"Verdi it is." Landucci nodded at the pianist, then waved Livvy on. "When you're ready."

Livvy drew herself up and smiled at the accompanist. The familiar music cued, and somewhere within Livvy, Violetta reawakened.

"Sempre libera degg'io folleggiare di gioia in gioia ..." The theatre lay at Livvy's feet, resplendent in gold and ornamented with cast-plaster details and stenciled ceilings. Would she earn the chance to sing here for a full house?

She imagined the musculature of her torso—abdominal wall, back, diaphragm, and intercostals—all working in harmony, empowering her lungs to marry sound to breath, to infuse the air of the auditorium with her voice. "Free and aimless, I frolic from joy to joy, flowing along the surface of life's path as I please."

Yeah, right. "Free and aimless" just meant naive.

Focus, Livvy!

The Italian tasted exotically familiar to her mouth. Like the memory of a tropical fruit. "*Nasca il giorno, o il giorno muoia ...*"

Move, Livvy! Don't just park and bark. If they wanted a potted plant, they wouldn't have hired an accompanist.

Livvy's body kept going, moving, singing. But her brain jumped the tracks. She couldn't keep herself present.

When the aria ended, the theatre seemed to hold itself in check until the last strains faded. Livvy held her ground, poised, while her all-important audience of two remained impassive.

"You won your district in the National Council Auditions, two years ago," Landucci said.

And here we go ... Livvy nodded.

“Yet you didn’t go on to compete in the region finals. Why is that?” he asked.

So many responses prepared, practiced. All partial truths. She had decided to go with “family emergency.”

“I had ... I injured my vocal cords. Smoke inhalation.”

Neither Landucci nor Garofoli looked as surprised at this information as Livvy felt upon disclosing it.

Please keep it at that. That’s all I can speak to right now.

Ms. Garofoli’s gracious smile was a lifeline. “I can hear the work you did in Milan. Your pronunciation is impeccable.”

“Thank you.” Movement caught Livvy’s eye. The curtain of the Juliet balcony, stage left, fluttered.

“Well then, let’s hear from a different language. What’s next?” Landucci asked.

Livvy glanced from the conductor back to the Juliet balcony. Was someone up there? Watching her?

Landucci made a slow, exaggerated turn to follow Livvy’s gaze.

Livvy’s face flushed hot. ““Silver Moon,”” she blurted. “*Rusalka*.”

“Very nice.” Ms. Garofoli leafed through pages of what must have been Livvy’s resume, bio, and repertoire list. “Who coached you on the Czech?”

“No one,” Livvy answered. Garofoli lifted an eyebrow. Impressed? Doubtful? “I learned it by ear when I was a kid, listening to my parents’ bootleg cassette of Renée Fleming.” A wistful smile snuck out at the memory. “I wore out the tape, rewinding and fast-forwarding, imitating her.”

Livvy smoothed her already sleek sheath dress. *Okay then.* She nodded at the pianist. And plunged into panic.

Bad, bad choice. Of all arias, why had she chosen this one?

Scenes played themselves across her mind. Not of the opera world where her mind was supposed to be focused but the real world. Long hours perfecting the aria. Recording a demo with the help of her Number One Fan. The world of possibilities opened by that demo. The world of torment created by that fan.

Livvy willed herself to focus, to stop the wild thoughts. An audition for Opera San Jose’s Resident Artist Program was not the time to sing on autopilot. And definitely not on an autopilot gone haywire.

But anyone could be watching her right now—not just from the Juliet balcony but from literally all around her: the projection booth in front, wings behind, catwalks above, traps below the floor ...

Livvy’s heart began to race—that anomalous rhythm that had become terrifyingly familiar. And once the racing heart started, there was no stopping or controlling a full-blown attack. Oh not now, please! *Jesus, you created my heart to beat at its own perfect pace!* Not this.

Livvy’s back dampened. Was the front of her dress soaked with sweat too? Then her throat began to close, the precious airway constricted. Tears sprang to her eyes. *Where are you? You designed me to sing!*

Landucci frowned. Garofoli’s eyes widened in alarm.

Livvy closed her eyes, put her hand to her throat. Gasping, she turned upstage, her back to her judges. The accompanist stopped playing, Dvořák obscenely extinguished.

Trembling, Livvy teetered on her heels. The pianist shot to his feet, bench screeching across the stage floor. Livvy waved him off. Then ran off. Ran stage right, into the wings. Ran blind and breathless, down stairs, through hallways, and out the door marked *Emergency Exit Only: Alarm Will Sound*.