

MADAM STRANGE

The Opera

By R. A. Conti

Bianca felt out of place in the luxurious hotel lobby. She could not recall ever being in a hotel. Not a glitzy one such as the Bellevue-Stratford in downtown Philadelphia, anyway. The word ornate didn't begin to describe the fancy lobby. There were columns, sculptures, marble floors, and rich, dark wood. It could have looked like a garish movie set, but it didn't. Because the hotel was old, it looked stately, dignified, and timeless. Bianca had no idea what the rooms were like but would soon find out.

The hotel was renowned for its opulence and for the famous people that had stayed there in its heyday. Among the former guests were presidents, diplomats, heads of state, and actors. Bram Stoker stayed at the hotel's predecessor when he was working on the manuscript for *Dracula*. Bianca hoped she wouldn't run into any of the imaginary horrors Stoker created but felt ready if she did.

Bianca didn't know who or what had summoned her there. She had been with a carnival in the Midwest. A powerful urge to travel east woke her one night. She saw a vision of the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel and wondered why *that*, of all places, would beckon her. The call was unmistakable.

She left the carnival the next day and drove east for several days. After arriving in Philadelphia, she found the hotel and parked her RV in the garage. Then she changed into the only fancy dress and pair of high heels she owned. She approached the doors dressed like a wealthy businesswoman or socialite. The doorman smiled at the attractive, slender woman of indeterminate age as he opened the glass door. People in the lobby turned to gaze at Bianca as she passed. She looked confident but didn't feel that way. She also looked special, and that was all that mattered there where appearances meant more than anything else.

Bianca saw an empty settee and settled into it. *Is there someone I'm supposed to meet?* she thought. No feeling of recognition or attraction arose in her as she looked around the lobby. The people she saw could easily have been at the carnival she just left, albeit dressed more casually. *Nobody stands out*, she thought. *Why am I here?* She cautioned herself to wait patiently and observe calmly. Eventually, her purpose would be revealed.

The settee felt unusually comfortable. It was more like a bed than a couch. Fatigue from her long drive and little sleep caught up with her. She closed her eyes to rest them but heightened her other senses. Maybe an overheard conversation would give her a clue about why she was there. But, she sensed nothing. Bianca almost fell asleep.

"Oh, good! You're here," a voice said. It sounded like it belonged to a young girl. Bianca opened her eyes and saw a round-faced girl with a trusting smile, dark hair, and deep blue eyes. She was dressed in a white blouse and dark skirt. Bianca had seen similar clothes worn by schoolgirls at private academies.

"Excuse me?" Bianca said.

"You're Bianca Estranho, right?" the girl asked.

"Yes, I am."

"Thanks for coming on such short notice," the girl said. *What notice?* Bianca thought. She looked at the girl and wondered who she was.

"I'm Molly Williams. Do you remember me?"

"Should I?" Bianca asked.

"My mother is Iris Williams. You knew her- helped her, actually- when I was a baby. You gave her this-." Molly pulled a silver necklace out of her blouse. Bianca recognized the spiral design with a tiny bird at the center. Years ago, she had bought several identical necklaces from a jewelry maker in a town she visited. She didn't know why she bought them and had just put them away. Later, when she met someone she wanted to remain connected to, she gave the person a necklace and told them to send for her if they ever needed help. It had been just a friendly gesture and Bianca wasn't certain it would really work. Clearly, it had.

"I'm Iris's daughter Molly."

"I remember now. How's your mother?"

Molly grimaced. "I don't know. She's disappeared. That's why I sent for you. She always told me if something really bad happened that no one else could help me with to call *you*, so I did. And here you are. Thanks for coming."

"And here I am," Bianca replied. "But what do you think I can do? I'm not a private detective. I'm just a fortuneteller."

Molly shook her head. "Not according to my mom. You're so much more."

"Maybe your mother confused me with someone else," Bianca protested, although she knew Molly's mother had been right about her. That was why she had given Iris the strange necklace.

Molly shook her head. "She didn't. I summoned you and here you are. Come up to my room where we can talk in private. You can never tell who's listening down here. Plus, there are cameras."

"Uh, okay... I guess," Bianca said.

Molly smirked. "Are you afraid of a *girl*?" she asked.

"Afraid, no. Cautious. Yes. For both of us, Molly. *Both* of us."

"Okay. Thanks. Sorry if I seem nervous. My mom's disappearance has really rattled me."

They rode up to Molly's floor and went to her room. "No cameras or bugs," Molly said. "I've checked the place as best I can." Bianca had no idea why or how Molly would have done that and didn't ask.

"Okay, I guess," Bianca said. "So, I've had no contact with your mother since you were a little girl. What's she been doing?"

"She became an opera singer," Molly replied, proudly.

"Really? I never heard of her."

"Oh, she's not famous or anything. She performs in small productions around the country. Sometimes she has major parts, but not always. She loves it though. And she has the freedom to do it with the money my grandmother left us."

"She's lucky," Bianca said.

"So am I," Molly replied. "That's how I can afford to pay for a room here." Bianca looked around. The room wasn't as opulent as the lobby but it had a subdued elegance.

"I see. Tell me more about what happened, Molly."

"There's not much to tell. I came home from school and she had disappeared. No note, no voicemail or text, nothing."

"And that wasn't like her?" Bianca asked.

"Mom was always there when I came home or left messages to tell me where she was going."

"What happened when you called her phone?"

"I heard it ring," Molly replied. "*Inside* her coat pocket in the closet."

Bianca grimaced. "Shit," she said.

"She'd never go out without it. It was her lifeline to her work and me. That's when I suspected she had been abducted."

"Abducted?" Bianca asked. "Have you told the police this?"

"No. What's to tell? I'm twelve years old. They've got more serious stuff to deal with."

"How long ago did she vanish?"

"A week," Molly replied.

"And you've been *alone* all this time?" Bianca asked. Molly nodded. "Why did you come *here*?"

"To be safe. It's what she always told me to do if she ever disappeared."

"I didn't know opera singers led such dangerous lives," Bianca said.

Molly frowned. "That's not funny."

"I didn't mean it to be, Molly. What else can you tell me about her, besides that she's an opera singer?"

"Well, recently she got several calls. I could see they upset her but she never told me why."

"Did she ever meet anyone?" Bianca asked. "Did strange people come to visit her?"

"Not that I know of."

"Well, we don't have much to go on, do we?" Bianca said.

Just then, they heard a knock at the door. Molly and Bianca froze and looked at each other. "Let me answer it," Bianca whispered. She walked quietly to the door and listened. There was another knock. "Who's there?" Bianca asked.

"Bianca?" a woman's voice said.

"It's my mother!" Molly shrieked.

"Thank God you're here! Let me in."

Bianca opened the door. She recognized Iris as soon as she saw her. Iris was stocky. She had a long face with a strong nose and a wide mouth. Her eyes weren't blue like her daughter's, but grey. So was her short hair. Iris hugged Bianca quickly and then ran to embrace Molly. The hug told Bianca much about Iris's state of mind. She was worried, maybe even frightened, and feeling overwhelmed. *Whatever trouble she's in*, Bianca thought, *it's more than she can handle. I'm glad I came.* Molly started to cry as soon as Iris embraced her. Bianca looked into the hall before she closed the door but didn't see anyone else.

"Mom, what's going on?"

Iris shrugged. "Molly, I don't really know."

“Were you abducted?” Bianca asked. Iris shook her head. “But you must have disappeared for a reason.”

“I had to keep Molly safe and get her to do what she did,” Iris replied. Bianca expected her to say more but she remained silent.

“Then what’s this *about*, Iris?” Bianca asked. “Please tell me why I’m here.”

“Okay,” Iris said. She paused, sighed, and then began her story. “The weirdness started when I went to a yard sale...”

Iris had gone to the yard sale because she heard rumors about the old mansion. The deceased owner had been an eccentric who kept to himself. Neighbors suspected he did weird things but nobody could specify what they were. People believed the rumors anyway.

Iris didn’t believe or care. She liked eccentric people because they were often more interesting than normal people. When she saw the announcement that the mansion had been sold and everything inside was for sale she went just to see what was there. Iris wasn’t certain what she would find but felt drawn there.

Most of what was left was junk. The antiques, valuable books, plates, silverware, rugs, and art had already been sold off. Only the dregs remained. Most people left the sale without exploring the items. A woman was sitting in a lawn chair. Iris assumed she was there to collect money. The woman didn’t look up when Iris said hello.

Iris noticed an old trunk. It opened easily. She looked inside. It was filled with sheet music. *This is my kind of trunk*, she thought. Much of the music was from old popular songs. She didn’t recognize the titles and didn’t open any of the sheet music to read the lyrics.

Iris plowed deeper. She spotted a notebook and pulled it out. There was no title on the leather cover. She hoped it might be an unknown manuscript by a famous composer. *Wouldn’t that be something?* she thought, excitedly.

Iris opened it and read the title: *Demeter and Persephone, An Opera in Three Acts*. Iris had never heard of it. *Now I know why I came today*, she thought excitedly. *It might not be famous, but it’s an opera!*

She turned the page. There was a brief overture. Iris read the musical notes. The simplicity of the melodies impressed her. She had no idea who wrote it but it seemed worth exploring. She went on to *Act One - Descent*. Iris skipped over Zeus and Hade's duet and found Demeter’s aria *She of the Grain* a few pages later. Iris read it, enthralled.

The music soared and the lyrics rang with ancient poetry. ‘She of the golden double-ax, she who glories in the harvest.’ Persephone appeared a few pages later, painting flowers. Her aria that described the allure of the narcissus flower almost broke Iris’s heart. *I don’t know who wrote this but I have to share it and see that it gets sung*, she thought.

Iris took the manuscript to the bored-looking woman and asked the price.

“Is that from the old trunk?” the woman asked. Iris nodded. “You can have the whole thing for ten dollars.”

“But I just want this one. I don’t like the others. This is kind of beautiful. It’s an opera, you see, and I’m an opera singer.”

The proprietor didn't care what Iris was. "Okay, just take it then. Cost you five bucks." Iris whipped out her money, paid the woman, and walked to her car excitedly. *Wait 'til the opera company sees this, she thought. What a find!*

A black SUV drove up just as Iris pulled away in her little blue Toyota. A tall woman got out. She was dressed in black and wore a black veil. The yard sale proprietor assumed the woman was coming from a funeral. *Musta been a shitty funeral, the woman thought. Maybe she needs a diversion.*

The mysterious woman examined a few items and eased herself toward the old trunk. She looked around before she approached it. *No one cares about this old thing, she thought. It's mine!*

She tried to lift the trunk but it was too heavy. Her arm went up. The driver's door opened and a short chauffeur stepped out. He was young and muscular and the yard sale proprietor eyed him appreciatively. He walked toward the mysterious woman. She pointed to the trunk. He hefted it with a grunt and followed her toward the proprietor.

"How much is this?" the woman in black asked.

"The whole thing's ten," the proprietor replied, still eyeing the chauffeur.

"Is everything in it?"

"Depends what you mean by everything."

"Did anybody buy anything from it?" the woman pressed.

"Oh, yeah. That lady who just left. You passed her as she was driving away."

"What did she buy?"

"Some book," the proprietor said. "I didn't look at it."

"Did it have a cover?" the stranger asked.

"Plain brown. Bigger than a regular book. Looked like something somebody would draw or write in."

"Did you get her name?"

"I didn't *need* her name, lady," the annoyed woman replied. "Just her money."

"Okay. That's it, then. Come on, Carl."

"The trunk, ma'am?" Carl asked. He hadn't looked at the proprietor even once.

"Drop it. We don't want it." Carl dropped the trunk where he stood.

"Hey! You pick that up."

"*You* pick it up," the strange woman said. She and Carl hurried back to their car.

Carl started the SUV. "Did you see that other car?" the woman asked.

"I noticed it, ma'am."

"Do you think you can find it again?"

"I can try," Carl replied. The black SUV peeled out of the driveway and drove away at top speed.

Carl spotted Iris's car two minutes later. "Just get close enough to read the license plate," the woman told him. "We don't need to tip her off that we're following her." Carl read the license plate aloud. The mysterious woman sent a text. "Okay. Turn here. Let's go back and wait at the house. We've made some progress today although it was not what I hoped for."

In the hotel room, Iris continued her tale. “I took the opera home and read most of it in one sitting. It just kept getting better and I knew others would like it as much as I did. I called Jack and told him about it. He seemed interested, although he wasn’t as enthusiastic as I thought he should be. He told me to bring it to him in a few days so he could play some of it and see if it was worth pursuing. I got the feeling he suspected I wrote it and was trying to foist it off on him!”

“So far this all seems harmless,” Bianca commented. “But exciting for you as an opera diva.”

Iris smiled. “I’m hardly a diva, Bianca. But I love opera.”

“Don’t believe her,” Molly disagreed. “She has a wonderful voice and audiences love her.”

“But I’ll never perform at the Met or La Scala. Or in London.”

“Is that what you truly want?” Bianca asked.

Iris looked at her. She knew Bianca had asked because of Molly. “I want to continue doing what I love and being with the daughter I love. Opera and Molly are my two loves. They’re equal but Molly comes first.”

“Well said,” Bianca replied.

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Thank you for trusting me, Molly. I’m sorry I put you through this week. But you did what I always told you to do. You contacted Bianca. And now she’s here.”

“But I don’t know *why* I’m here,” Bianca said. “I don’t know anything about opera.”

“I don’t think this is about opera,” Iris explained. “It’s about something much bigger.”

“I still don’t understand,” Bianca replied.

“Maybe you will when I tell you what happened next,” Iris said.

Two days after Iris bought the manuscript, she received a phone call from a man who told her he was an opera impresario and wanted to buy it. He offered to pay whatever she asked. Iris turned him down, politely. He hung up. Two hours later, she received another call from a different man. She listened to his plea and hung up, again. That night there was a third call. Molly heard her mother talking loudly. Iris didn’t mention the call when they were getting ready for bed.

The next morning, Iris’s doorbell rang. She asked through the intercom what the visitor wanted. “I will pay you whatever you want for *Demeter and Persephone*,” a woman said.

“I’m sorry, but it’s not for sale.”

“Everything’s for sale. Name your price.”

“I found it,” Iris replied. “I’m studying it. I plan to show it to others and maybe have a concert performance.”

“But it doesn’t belong to you,” the woman protested.

“It does now.”

“But *you* didn’t write it.”

“It’s unsigned,” Iris replied. “No one knows *who* wrote it. I won’t claim I did. But I found it and I’m keeping it.”

"I know who the composer was," the woman said.

"You do?" Iris asked, excitedly. "Who was it?"

"Let me in and I'll tell you all about him."

Iris's story surprised Molly and Bianca.

"Of course, I had to let her in but I hid the manuscript before I did, just in case. I hadn't made any copies of it yet."

"So what else did you learn?" Bianca asked.

"She was evasive. I didn't even get to see her face. She was dressed in black and wore a black veil as if she was in mourning. She wouldn't give me the composer's name but that it was somebody in her family. She told me I wouldn't recognize it because he never composed anything else."

"Did you believe her?" Bianca asked.

"I didn't care. I wasn't going to fall for the family argument. It was mine. It was beautiful and it deserved to be heard. That was all I knew."

"So what happened?" Bianca asked.

The mysterious visitor took out her checkbook. "Name your price," she commanded. Iris didn't say anything. "Surely, as a poor, underappreciated opera singer, you need money. I can give you whatever you want."

"I don't sing for the money. I do it for love of the art."

The woman smirked. "Oh, an *artist*! Well, then, you ought to respect the art created by others. It doesn't belong to you. It belongs to my family. Please sell it to me."

"It's not for sale," Iris said. "Please leave."

"You'll regret this," the woman replied, angrily. "My next offer won't be so generous." She turned and hurried out. Iris hoped she had seen the last of the woman.

"But you hadn't?" Bianca asked.

"Well, yes. I didn't see *her* again. But other stuff started happening."

"What kind of stuff?"

"I thought I was being followed. I noticed people on the street looking up at our apartment. I worried we weren't safe."

"Well, were you?"

"I don't know, Bianca, but I didn't take any chances. I hid the manuscript."

"Where is it now?" Bianca asked.

"It's still in the apartment. But no one could find it no matter how hard they searched. That's why you're here. I can't go back for it and I wouldn't send Molly back. We're safe here. But no one knows you. If anyone saw you entering the building they would think nothing of it. You could rescue it and bring it back here. That is... if you'll help."

Bianca smiled. "Of course I'll help," she said. "Just don't ask me to sing."

An hour later, Bianca drove her RV to Iris's apartment building. She spotted a black SUV parked across from the entrance the moment she arrived. Bianca sensed a menace coming from the vehicle but saw no one inside. *Maybe they're prowling around*, she thought. *I'd better be extra careful.*

She unlocked the front door, took the elevator to the fourth floor, and walked down the hall toward the apartment. Everything seemed quiet. Bianca listened outside the apartment door, then unlocked it and went in.

The scene that greeted her shocked her. The apartment was a shambles. Someone had turned over all the furniture. The intruders had cut open the chairs and sofa. There was stuffing strewn around the room. Books were all over the floor. Ceiling light fixtures hung on their wires. *Someone's been very thorough*, Bianca thought. *I wonder if they found what they came for?*

She went into the bathroom. It had also been ransacked. The linen closet was empty. There were towels strewn about the room. The plants behind the toilet hadn't been disturbed and Bianca hoped the manuscript was still where Iris hid it. She moved the plants and took the lid off the toilet tank. The sealed plastic bag was there. Bianca took out the bag, dried it, and looked at the brown manuscript book inside. She didn't know why this opera caused such chaos but wanted to find out.

Bianca had to leave the building without anyone seeing her carrying the book. She tucked the manuscript under her roomy jacket. It didn't show. No one would know it was there unless they bumped into her. She locked the apartment door and went to the elevator. After she pushed the button, she waited.

The elevator opened and a man almost bumped into her as he rushed out. He didn't apologize. She did and hurried to hit the 'close door' button before he could turn around. Bianca didn't breathe again until she was back inside her RV. The manuscript was safe. She hoped she didn't leave any hint that she had visited the apartment so no one would follow her.

She called Iris as she drove back to the hotel. "It's safe. So am I, I think. But your place is a wreck. I'm sorry."

"We might never be able to go back there," Iris replied. "It's not a problem for right now, anyway. The manuscript is all that's important."

"Yeah, about this manuscript," Bianca said. "You've photographed it, right?"

"A few pages," Iris replied.

"We gotta do the whole thing right away and then upload everything where it will be safe. Then maybe we can figure out why it's causing all this trouble."

"Good idea, Bianca. See you when you get back."

On the way back to the hotel, Bianca spotted the black SUV in the rearview mirror. She couldn't lead it to Iris and Molly. *But they're not the ones in danger anymore*, she realized. *I am. I'm the one with the manuscript now.*

Bianca couldn't escape the SUV. Her RV was too visible. The SUV stayed far enough behind to follow but not menace her. *Sooner or later they'll make a move*, she thought. *I need to be ready when they do.*

She wished she had her crystal ball to tell her what was coming next. Even though it was just a gimmick for her customers, it helped her focus her thoughts and glimpse into the

future. Normally, the crystal ball wouldn't show her future. But, this was Iris's and Molly's future and Bianca wished she could consult the ball.

She called Iris again. "I'm being followed. I can't lead them to you. I don't know what else to do. Any ideas?"

"Only one. Molly said she saw this in a movie. Let's fake a handoff of the manuscript to me in my car. They'll see us and start following me. I'll try to lose them. I'm less conspicuous than your RV."

"Faster, too," Bianca said.

"Right. You'll go back to the hotel and pick up Molly. I'll call you and we'll arrange a place to meet."

"That'll work, except for one thing," Bianca said.

"What's that?"

"What're they gonna do when they catch you and find out you don't have the opera?"

"I won't let them catch me," Iris replied.

She told Molly to stay put and hurried down to the garage. Iris went to her older blue Toyota. She called Bianca and told her where to meet her. They did the handoff at a traffic light not far from the hotel. The black SUV was several cars behind in the line of vehicles. After the light changed, Iris took a sharp right turn and Bianca went straight. As she hoped, the SUV followed the Toyota. Fortunately, there were similar blue Toyotas on the streets and Iris was able to escape from the black SUV. She headed for the expressway ramp assuming she'd lost her pursuers.

Bianca, Molly, and Iris met several hours later in a remote parking lot of a suburban shopping mall far away from the security cameras. "Let's do the photography right now while we have some time," Bianca said. She turned on a small light over her kitchen table. Then she got out her phone, opened the manuscript, and framed the first page.

"This is a pretty high-resolution camera," Bianca said. "We should get lots of detail." They took turns photographing the pages and had everything done in an hour. Bianca uploaded the files and copied them to her laptop. Iris did the same. Then she looked through the pages.

"I just noticed something," Iris said.

"What, Mom?"

"The page numbers. Some are missing."

"Yeah," Bianca replied. She flipped through the images on her laptop. "But look- here they are, later in the book."

"He must have moved the parts around but not renumbered the pages. Which is weird, because the plot isn't out of order."

"Maybe the original numbering was the order he wrote the pieces in," Molly said.

"Must be. Unless..."

"Unless what?" Bianca asked.

"See this tiny writing at the bottom of each page?" Iris zoomed in.

"Yeah, but it's Greek to me," Molly joked.

"I think that *is* Greek," Bianca said.

"What does it say?"

“Let’s see if we can get Google to translate it,” Bianca said. “I’ll copy and paste this text and upload it.” It only took a moment.

“Okay- here’s what Google says: ‘To elevate man above the human sphere into the divine and to assure his redemption by making him a god and so conferring immortality upon him.’”

“They sound like research notes for the opera,” Iris said.

“Yeah. Let’s see what’s on the next page.”

“It’s garbled,” Bianca said. “Something about the third mystery, whatever that means.”

“Let’s look it up. Here it is. ‘There were two Eleusinian Mysteries, the Greater and the Lesser.’” Bianca skimmed the article. “There’s no mention of any third mystery.”

All the talk of myth and mystery confused Molly. “Forget about ancient mysteries,” she said. “We have our own. Somebody wants this opera really badly. There must be a reason. What’s it about? What does it mean? It’s a work of art, not history. Maybe we’re looking at this the wrong way.”

“Well, its deepest meaning- taken from the powerful Greek myth- is a mother’s love and devotion for her daughter,” Iris explained. “So I guess that’s what it’s about.”

“Motherly love is a lie,” a voice said. Bianca, Iris, and Molly turned. A woman dressed in black, wearing a black veil, had silently entered the RV. Iris recognized her and gasped. She moved to shield Molly. Bianca moved to protect them both.

“What do you want?” Iris asked.

The woman pointed at the opera manuscript. “*That* belongs to me,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Molly asked. Bianca already knew.

“It’s my grandfather’s opera.”

“Are you a musician?” Iris asked. She hoped to distract the strange woman.

“What I am isn’t important. That manuscript belongs to my family. I came to take it back.”

“Like I told you before, it’s not for sale,” Iris said. “It’s very beautiful. Your grandfather was a musical genius. His work should be shared with the world.”

“He didn’t write it for the world.”

“That makes no sense. Why else would he write it?” Iris asked.

“That’s not important,” the woman responded.

“Okay, then what *is* important?” Bianca asked.

“I will leave here with that opera manuscript. Either you sell it to me, or you die and I take it.” The woman pulled a small gun from her pocket. “*That’s* what’s important.”

“Mom?” Molly said. Her voice trembled.

“Stay calm, Molly.”

“Name your price,” the woman said.

“Why would you kill for this?” Bianca asked.

“That’s not your concern.”

“If we’re going to die, it would be nice to know why,” Iris said.

“*Mom?*” Molly whimpered.

“No one’s gonna die here today,” Bianca stated. Molly’s fear didn’t ease.

“Mrs. McIntyre?” a voice said from outside.

“Help!” Bianca, Iris, and Molly shouted.

A man opened the door and rushed in. “Mrs. McIntyre. What are you doing?”

“Carl, I told you to stay in the car.”

“I couldn’t do that, ma’am. Boss’s orders.”

“But *I’m* your boss.”

“No, Mr. McIntyre is. He told me to keep an eye on you. He doesn’t want anything happening to you.”

“Carl, if you don’t go back to the car this minute, I’m gonna use this on you first.”

Carl smiled, calmly. “I don’t think so, ma’am. It’s not loaded.” Bianca leaped at Mrs. McIntyre and took the gun from her hand. “I think you should leave now,” she said. “Carl’s gonna take you home. Aren’t you Carl?”

He nodded. “I think that’s for the best. Come along, Mrs. McIntyre. We’re leaving now.”

“Thank you, Carl. Nice meeting you, Zelda,” Bianca said, cheerfully. She had read Carl’s mind and learned her name. He took Mrs. McIntyre’s hand and led her to the RV.

Their ordeal was over for now. And, they still had the manuscript.

As Carl drove away from Bianca’s RV, Zelda McIntyre sat stiffly in the backseat. She was seething. “You had *no* right...,” she said.

“I followed my boss’s orders, ma’am. You know what he told you.”

“But he doesn’t get it, and neither, apparently, do *you*.”

“My job’s not to *get it*, ma’am; it’s to drive you around and protect you,” Carl explained calmly.

“Protect me from what?”

“Getting hurt, or doing something stupid and hurting other people.”

“If I could I’d fire you right now...”

“And how would you get home?” Carl asked. “You can’t drive.”

“I *can* drive! Simon won’t let me.”

“You know why, ma’am. All those cars you wrecked...”

“Those crashes weren’t my fault!”

“Well, even if you *did* fire me, I’d still stay in the driver’s seat.”

“Your problem, Carl, is you’re too damn loyal.”

“It’s my job. I take it seriously.” Carl wanted to add ‘and you’ll thank me one day’, but knew she would scoff. He didn’t need another hysterical incident. He just wanted to get his boss’s wife home safely.

Zelda ignored Carl’s comments. She thought about the opera. Zelda wasn’t finished with her quest to get it back. She was the only person alive who knew what the opera meant.

Back in the RV, the women were still shaking from the unexpected encounter with Zelda McIntyre.

“Is everybody okay?” Bianca asked.

“No,” Molly replied. She was still trembling. Iris hugged her. “What’s wrong with that woman?” Molly asked.

"I don't know," Bianca said. *I don't think we've seen the last of her*, she thought but kept quiet. "What now?" she asked Iris.

"I don't think this is over," Iris commented. Molly groaned.

"Mom, I hate to ask this, but is an opera *really* worth all this shit?"

"This one is," Iris said. Molly frowned at her mother's reply.

"I think there's a hidden meaning that we haven't found yet," Bianca suggested. "I don't know if it's in the lyrics, or the music, or the Greek notes at the bottom of the pages. It would probably take a Greek scholar to figure it out."

"Do you know any?" Iris asked.

"Not a one. But I suspect Mrs. McIntyre knows the truth."

"Surely you don't think *she* would tell us?" Iris said. "She threatened to kill us."

That gave Bianca an idea. She searched online. An hour later, she drove alone to the McIntyre house and pulled her RV into the driveway. Then she got out and walked toward the front door. Zelda saw the RV from inside. She waved away the maid and opened the door. "How did you find me?" Zelda demanded.

Bianca smiled. "There aren't many Zelda McIntyres on Google."

"I never mentioned my name."

"You didn't have to. I knew what it was."

Zelda didn't want to ponder how Bianca knew her name but realized she might be dealing with someone unusual. "What do you want?" she asked.

Bianca smiled. "I'm here to give you a reading. Why don't you step into my RV so I can look into my crystal ball?"

Zelda wasn't amused. "Are you serious?"

"Or you could ask me in for tea," Bianca said. Zelda thought about it for a moment and then stepped aside. Bianca strolled into the house. "Lovely place," she commented.

"Um, thanks."

"Where's the kitchen?" Bianca asked.

"Why do you ask?"

"So I can make us some tea," Bianca said.

"The cook will do it."

Bianca took her hand from her jacket. She held a plastic bag. Zelda saw dark leaves in the bag. "Oh, my tea is *very* special, Zelda. Only *I* know how to make it right. I'll do it."

Zelda sighed. "Very well."

The myth of Demeter and Persephone had fascinated Zelda McIntyre for much of her life. She loved the story of Persephone's abduction and Demeter's revenge that almost ended humanity. Zelda could not imagine that any mother had ever loved her daughter as much as Demeter loved Persephone. Zelda's mother Carol had never loved her the same way, or at all.

Zelda remembered when she first heard Demeter's lament from the opera. She was a little girl who scarcely knew what music was. She didn't fully understand the lyrics but recalled the feelings of love and devotion she felt in the lilting music. *I wish I had a mommy who loved me like that*, she had thought. But, she didn't. She only had a grandfather who loved her and poured his love into his opera. He had written it for Zelda, and only for her. *He*

understood my tragedy, Zelda knew. He understood me. And he loved me more than my mother, father, husband, or anyone else in my life. And now all that love belongs to a stranger who doesn't appreciate it.

"So now that we have our tea, why did you come here?" Zelda asked.

"You saw the lettering on my RV, right?" Bianca said. Zelda nodded. "It's not just the future I see. It's also the present. Sometimes the past, too. Something in your past is hurting you. I'd like to find out what it is."

"That doesn't answer my question. Why did you come here?"

"To understand, Zelda. I felt you were deeply troubled when you came to us."

"You've no right to probe."

"You had no right to threaten to kill us. Isn't probing more civilized than threatening?" Bianca asked. Zelda nodded, reluctantly. "What I want is to understand why you did that. I'm hoping there's a way out of this impasse."

"There isn't."

"There always is, Zelda. May I call you Zelda? We just have to find it."

Bianca closed her eyes and reached out. She took Zelda's hand and held it gently. Zelda had no idea what Bianca was doing. Thoughts began forming in Bianca's mind. They were not her thoughts. They were Zelda's.

I came so close. I almost had it. My grandfather's opera would have been mine. Demeter and Persephone would have belonged only to me and no one else. But that selfish woman wants to give it to the world! The world doesn't deserve it. I do! He wrote that opera for me.

"So, are you one of the women in the opera?" Bianca asked. Zelda didn't understand the question. "Who are you, Demeter or Persephone? I'm guessing Persephone. Am I right?" Zelda nodded reluctantly. "And who was Demeter?"

"There was no Demeter in my life," Zelda replied, coldly. Bianca understood but didn't know how to explore Zelda's revelation.

"So... your grandfather..."

"He was the only one that loved me. He wrote it for me. It's all I have left of him! Is it wrong for me to want to possess the only love I ever had?"

Bianca shook her head. "No, Zelda, it's not wrong. But love isn't love if it's not shared. You said there wasn't a way out of this impasse but I think I see one."

"You do?" Zelda replied. Bianca heard a little girl's pleading in Zelda's voice and knew she was on the right track.

"It's simple. The manuscript belongs to you and you should have it because your grandfather wrote it," Bianca said. Zelda brightened. Bianca recognized that little girl in her eyes.

"Do you mean it?" Zelda asked.

"I do. But the *opera* belongs to the world. No one will ever know what the music means to you but the world will come to love it as much as you do. Not as the sublime expression of your grandfather's love but as a great work of art."

"I don't understand, Bianca. What are you saying?"

“There’s no reason you can’t have what you want and Iris can’t have what she wants. Your secret can stay with me and *only* with me.”

“Do you *really* mean it?” Zelda asked. The full weight of her emotional tragedy struck Bianca. *That poor, lonesome child*, she thought. *All she ever wanted was her mother’s love; such a simple, natural need; so easily thwarted. Now, maybe she can become whole.*

Iris’s opera company performed a sold-out concert version of *Demeter and Persephone*. Videos of the performance were popular online. Opera companies wanted to stage full productions. Iris received credit for discovering the unknown opera. Its composer remained a mystery.

Bianca could have easily researched Zelda’s grandfather and found out his name. So could Iris and Molly. But, they hadn’t. Bianca told them not to. She let Zelda keep the manuscript, her secret, and her grandfather’s love.