Chapter 73

Reminder of a Promise Long Forgotten
A Maker of Wigs Lifts Moon Pearl's Spirits

Vincenzo Bellini himself having left the building one hundred and fifty-five years previously, the propulsion of Margaret into the next, most glorious phase of her destiny was delegated to his emissary on Earth, Mr Colman O'Toole.

"It's the *Norma,*" Colman explained, visiting at the Fifth Avenue apartment one Sunday afternoon in November. "Leo Fischel needs a commitment."

"*Norma?* What *Norma?* Bellini's *Norma?*"

"I had not heard there was another. Do you not remember, dear girl? Two years ago your old pal William Leung agreed to finance a *Norma* for the Met, on condition they let you sing the lead. Gave them a million dollars to make a start."

Margaret did remember. She had not heard William's name spoken for some weeks, though she had seen it in the *New York Post* once or twice. There had been huge judgments against him; further indictments had been brought; his funds had been sequestered (*kouya* in Chinese—she had had to look it up in her English-Chinese dictionary); most recently, that he had been admitted to hospital, then discharged. Hearing his name now, from Colman, disturbed and disoriented her. She got up and walked to the window looking over Fifth and the park, to avoid Colman's pale steady eyes.

"I thought that guy had lost all his money."

"So he has, so he has. But they had spent the million, d'you see, and by the time that was done they felt like the chap in that Scottish play: 'To return were as tedious as go o'er.' They just pushed the production back a couple of years to spread out the remaining costs. Now it's set for the '91 season. Just a year from now." Colman laughed. "A mere blink of the eye in the world of operatic bookings, as you yourself well know, my dear. Indeed, for such a high-profile production, a new production and so notoriously difficult to cast, I am surprised they have left the matter unsettled so long. Perhaps Leo has not been aware of your, ah, temporary retirement. Bearing the full brunt of your voices down there in the orchestra pit, you know, conductors tend to think of singers as indestructible. He has just been supposing you would turn up for voice rehearsals at the appropriate time. Your man Vinnie is already engaged for Pollione. That's the tenor lead, you know."

"Vinnie called on us in Southampton. I'm surprised he didn't mention it."

"Well now there is Vinnie for you. He does not think much of his schedules more than a few months ahead."

"How is it Leo didn't cancel that engagement when he canceled all the others?"

"Dear girl, that was two seasons ago. It is all forgotten. And it was not Leo's doing, anyway, but Alex and the house management. Leo was opposed, as a musician should be—it was the fellows with the adding machines that canceled you."

"Have *they* forgotten?"

"Oh, probably. They live from one season's budget to the next, you know. The source of those claques is pretty generally known, in any case. I myself made sure of that. With Mr Leung's current difficulties, there is nothing to fear from that quarter. I shall be after pointing that out, should anyone raise the matter."

"A year," murmured Margaret. "A year."

"Plenty of time to get yourself back on form. Leo wants to begin rehearsals in August, I understand. A new production, you know. An unfamiliar work, and a very challenging one for all concerned."

The park was brown and bare, drifts of leaves spilling onto the footpaths. Little Chunxiao nine months old now. Would be walking before he was one year old, Margaret thought. Before Spring Festival. No word from Half Brother, though it must have been he that had originated that blessed slip of paper in the summer. Two very careful, very bland letters from Mother sent indirectly, through the business office of some relative in Chongqing. From Old Soldier, nothing since the summer. Spring Festival . . . summer . . . now fall . . . soon winter. The endless turning of the seasons. Leaves across the footpaths. A hillside in Tibet all flushed yellow. A dancer at the barre, seen through frozen darkness on a winter's morning. Many voices shouting on the basketball court: *denounce! denounce!* Butterflies dancing in the bamboo grove. How time flees from us! Waiting for no-one, sparing no-one! A dust devil swirled the leaves.

"You must tell me, Margaret, my dear."

Colman's voice was very soft—soft as waterlogged peat, soft as the mist in an Irish glen. In the softness, everything was understood. *If you break this engagement, you are finished. Your retirement will be official. Nobody will be calling for you. Everybody will forget you. I myself have other fish to fry, I cannot wait forever.*

"I want to sing *Norma,*" said Margaret at last. "I want to very much. If only it wasn't *his* opera!"

"Bellini?" asked Colman, uncharacteristically slow off the mark.

"William."

"Ah."

"You know . . ." Margaret turned to face him. "I used to consider that Bellini was my *guiren,* my personal angel. And William my *xiaoren,* my demon. Now here, in this *Norma,* is . . . Oh, I can't express it in English! Don't you see? It's under their both, both of them—how do you say it?—both of their influences. Bellini wrote it, William paid for it. Bellini may lift me up, but William may pull me down. You see?"

Colman was shaking his head slowly. He made a brief, uncertain laugh. "And they say we Paddies are superstitious!"

"Aren't all performers superstitious? What about Vinnie and his bent nails? What about 'break a leg'? Didn't you yourself just talk about 'the Scottish play'? Who can say why this show is a success, that one a

failure? Sometimes it seems just random. Is it any wonder we are superstitious?"

Colman nodded. "Performers and sailors, to be sure. The helpless playthings of random forces. But you know, the philosopher who tells you all is illusion will still take care to eat his breakfast in the morning. And the singer who says success or failure is all random will still train weeks for her part. We do our best, dearest Margaret, we all do our best. Are you familiar with the name of Van Eyck?"

Margaret was not.

"A Dutch painter. He signed all his paintings with a motto. If I were more of a scholar I should be able to tell you in the original Latin, but the gist of it was: 'As I was able, not really as I wished.' He did his best. That is all God asks of us."

"God? If there's a God, why does he allow so much cruelty and pain?"

"If there is a God, my dear, he created the whole shebang, and it follows that he must be much smarter than us, and so there is no use our second-guessing him."

Colman got up out of the armchair and came over to her at the window. In one of his rare awkward intimacies, he took her left hand in one of his, and patted it clumsily with the other.

"Do not bandy theology with me, young lady. I was taught by the Brothers and have an answer for anything in that line. Now, shall you be singing Norma for us a year from now?"

"Yes, Colman."

"And I never doubted it." Colman let go her hand and stepped back, beaming. "Never mind the cancellations, nobody will think of them. I shall tell Leo you are in fine voice and training hard. I hope I shall not be misleading him."

"No, Colman. As a matter of fact, I started up my exercises again in August. I've been training since then, trying to get my voice back."

"Good, good, my dear. It will come, never fear. We must set up some engagements for you, for the spring and summer. No big roles, it is too late in the season for that. But a recital or two . . . I shall investigate. Leave everything to me."

* * *

Margaret dawdled for a few days, then called on Old Shi. He was delighted.

"Norma!" he chortled, clapping his hands. "Norma! Such a role! A great giant of a role! You have missed a whole season, and are missing another one, and they give you Norma! Who ever heard of such a break? Bellini is really your *guiren!*"

"The production was Liang Weilin's idea. He financed it. He wanted me to sing the role. He probably had his lawyers write that in as a condition of the financing."

Old Shi waved this away. "Never mind that, never mind that! He is finished. In and out of clinics, his money all grabbed by the government. He has AIDS, you know."

"I don't care what he has. He tried to wreck my career. Not once, twice. He is an evil man."

"Yet you were ready to marry him once."

"That was before I knew his true nature."

Margaret said this without thinking, and saw Old Shi make the beginnings of a frown. "Oh, I don't mean his being a same-sexer," she added hastily. "All right, Old Shi, I'll admit that I am not comfortable about that. But I wouldn't hate him on that account. It was that I didn't know, that he never said anything to me about it, until . . . until after I'd already agreed to marry him."

She wished they had not got this far into the topic, and feared Old Shi might now ask: Did he tell you about his AIDS? Did you know? Margaret felt sure she could not deceive Old Shi, could not maintain a lie against his steady narrow eyes, and would have to confess that she knew William's condition and had fled from it. Her flight had been entirely instinctive, yet—it had seemed to her, *still* seemed to her—reasonable. But she could not expect Old Shi to see things in that light. However, he did not pursue the subject. The prospect of coaching a Norma had seized his imagination.

"Complete preparation!" he crowed. "We shall examine every measure! Every *note!*"

* * *

She took Chunxiao to see the store windows on Fifth Avenue, where little tableaux had been arranged telling Christmas stories; but Chunxiao was too young, and only stared dumbly from his cocoon of winter padding. Alone, Margaret skated on the ice at Rockefeller Center, under the great Christmas tree. In the dim evenings she walked the streets, in and out of the stores—Saks, Lord and Taylor—or rode a cab to Chinatown for a Chinese movie. For New Year's Eve—the western one, not Spring Festival—the Mos wanted to organize a party for her, but she scotched the plan and they sat in the apartment watching the ball drop on TV, Mr Mo offering a diffident toast in Maotai white liquor.

She did a recital in Trenton, an engagement Colman had got for her at short notice, sharing the evening with two other sopranos. She chose easy stuff, songs she knew by memory, that she had sung a hundred times: Rossini, Puccini, Mozart. Still it did not go well, she scooped and sharped, and the audience was merely polite, saving most of their applause for one of the other women, a rising young black singer, subject of a gushing profile by an up-market TV news magazine program. Margaret went back to her exercises and the Iron Bride.

Vinnie came to town for a *Tosca* at the Met. He was to be in New York again in June, he said, for another open-air concert in Central Park. Would she sing with him there? He would make all the arrangements.

"I don't know, Vinnie. My voice . . . I'm really not back on form yet, not by a long way. I'm getting very nervous about our *Norma.*"

"Nonsense, ma bella. You will be a fine Norma. But do not concentrate too much on that one role. Do not *hover*-prepare, yes? Broaden your view. Eh, I shall not allow you to sing anything from *Norma* when we are in the Park, you agree? Bellini you may sing, but no *Norma*."

"In open air, in the park? With no acoustics? What will my voice sound like?"

"Like the voice of a *hangel,* Perlinetta. Don't be afraid. I shall be there with you, to 'ide your mistakes, if you make them. We shall sing duetti—yes! we shall sing 'A te, O cara'" [a famous duet from Bellini's *I*

puritani, with sensational high notes]. "If you make a mistake I shall *hastound* them with Cs and Ds!"

"Oh, Vinnie! Did anybody ever refuse you anything?" laughed Margaret.

"You better discuss with Nella. So, we 'ave a date for June?"

"Yes. I'll call Colman. Now, what shall we sing? Let's fix it now so I can rehearse them. I'm getting tired of Norma already."

* * *

Norma had, indeed, taken over Margaret's life that winter. With Old Shi urging her on, she was doing the most complete preparation of her career.

Bellini's opera tells the story of a high priestess of the ancient Celts at the beginning of their occupation by the armies of Rome, when they were struggling against their new oppressors. Norma, the priestess, falls in love with a Roman and bears his children. Then the Roman leaves her for another woman, one of her own acolytes; and the double betrayal—he of her, she of her own people—plays out in a fine dramatic tragedy. It was an intriguing role, with many possibilities for interpretation, and after six week's study Margaret thought she had hardly scratched the surface of it. She tried to encompass the subject, browsing big colored books of Celtic art she found at the Doubleday store on Fifth, history and archeology, Caesar's *Gallic Wars* in a Chinese translation Johnny Liu found for her somehow.

At Spring Festival there was a joyous surprise: a long letter from Half Brother, of remarkable frankness, passed out through Old Soldier in Hong Kong. Half Brother's unit had been under strict discipline since the Incident. She should write only through Old Soldier. He rejoiced in his nephew, but she should not try to send photographs. Her lover—that was the word he used, Chinese *airen*—had been transferred to a new camp, also light regime, in Heilongjiang Province in the far northeast. This camp was in the military region belonging to the Twenty-Seventh Army Group, in which Half Brother himself served. He could probably get a commutation arranged, but this was not yet the time. She should be patient. The *airen* was in good health. He would try to arrange for some direct communication with the *airen,* but the time was not yet right. She must be patient. . . . She must be patient.

Margaret showed this letter to Mrs Mo, and they wept together.

"Everything will come right for you," said Mrs Mo. "Don't be afraid."

The Met called her in to consult on costumes and wigs. Margaret had not been in the building since that last awful *Lucia* two years before and was self-conscious the whole time, feeling herself under the eyes of the porters, the stage hands, the carpenters and dressers. The wigmaker tried to set her at ease.

"Still got your *Sonnambula* wig," she said admiringly. "You remember? You wanted to do Amina in your own hair, but Frank wouldn't let you." [Wigmaking is a tiresome and labor-intensive business, and the big houses keep all those they make for as long as storage space permits.] "Oh, that was a lovely performance! I watched one from the house and stayed for two more backstage. It's so good to see you back."

Feeling a little better after this, Margaret went to watch Vinnie, who happened to be rehearsing his *Tosca* that afternoon. Afterwards they found a rehearsal room of their own, got a pianist (a very simple process: "SIGNOR CINELLI NEEDS AN ACCOMPANIST," and hold open the door) and went through some of the songs they had agreed on for Central Park in June.

"Your voice is just fine," encouraged Vinnie. "Coming on fine."

"Coming, Vinnie? Not yet come?"

"Not yet. But still several months. Do not worry, bambina, all will be well."

* * *

For her birthday, her thirty-third birthday in April, Johnny Liu and Maisie took her out to a restaurant in Queens. To give Mr Mo the night off, Margaret took a radio car. They feasted on sea cucumber and mussels, abalone fried up with seaweed and bean curd, crisp snow peas in oyster sauce.

"Ready to go to your summer house?" asked Johnny. "It's warm already this year."

"I don't know," said Margaret. "For a week or two, perhaps. But I need to be near Old Shi. And the Met. I can't be out of town for long."

"So dedicated!" marveled Maisie. "I guess this new opera's really important to you."

"It will restart my career," explained Margaret. "Or sink it for good.

I'm trying to make a comeback, you see. It's over two years since I sang anywhere important."

"I hope you don't get those hecklers breaking up your performance," said Johnny.

"No. No, that's not going to happen."

She told them about the June concert in Central Park.

"With Mr Cinelli. But my appearance is supposed to be a surprise. He's going to pull me out of the audience. Try to make a stir with me."

"Won't the people know you rehearsed the songs, though?" asked Maisie. "They'll know you're not really going up there cold and singing, won't they?"

"They won't mind. It's just a bit of showmanship. Makes it more interesting."

"At least if you're in your apartment on Fifth, it won't be far for you to go," observed Johnny.

They toasted her birthday, the student movement, martyrs in their glory. After this Johnny and Maisie exchanged a glance. Johnny cleared his throat and announced their engagement.

"End of the year, probably," he said. "Maisie wants a western-style wedding—dress, veil, flowers." Johnny shrugged and laughed. "I don't mind, but first we must save some money."

Margaret was full of joy for them. She raised a toast, and watched over her cup Maisie's eyes smiling at Johnny. They would be happy, there was no reason they should not be. She thought of the time she had lived with Johnny, during those early days when she was scrambling for auditions. She thought of his kindness and consideration, his urgent embraces, and wondered if he had been in love with her, and thought he probably had. Then she wondered if she would soon be scrambling for auditions again, back to square one. *Norma,* everything depended on *Norma.* It was a gamble, everything in life a gamble—love, marriage, performance, revolution. Some worked, some didn't. You could only trust to Heaven that enough worked to make life bearable, or death honorable.