

THE PERFORMERS

Chapter 9

The morning of the district competition, Juli poured Rice Krispie's into a bowl but did not reach for milk. She heated a mug of water in the microwave and flavored it with a lemon slice.

"Why do you eat weird like that?" Alex asked.

"You have to do it to be the best," Juli told him.

This was part of the routine she'd created based on what Mrs. Deffenbog told her and what she read about being a singer. There were rules—no chocolate or caffeine because it dried out the vocal folds. ("Folds, not chords," Mrs. Deffenbog always said, her hands caressing one another to imitate their movement.) No dairy because it created dreaded phlegm. Technically, if Juli was to follow the article in the issue of *Opera News* she'd found at the library, no wheat, because it created inflammation.

"Your father doesn't eat when he plays, remember?" Sheila said. She opened the waffle maker in the counter, which hissed and filled the kitchen with the smell of browning butter. The arm of her flowered robe nearly dangled into the waffle batter she scooped.

"Yeah, but that's his job," Alex said.

"Maybe it will be hers, too," Sheila said.

Juli was glad for any connection to her dad, evidence that greatness came at a cost. Her mind conjured the image of him onstage, the one she'd carried since she was little. His eyes watched the music, his trumpet gleamed like a sword. She recognized his movements as he waited to play, how he shifted from foot to foot, how his finger found the spit valve and emptied

it with a puff of air into the mouthpiece. Then he lifted the trumpet and the smooth brilliance of the notes danced in the air.

Juli slurped more water, trying to replace the butter aroma with the lemon's sharpness. She moved in her chair so that her black dress wouldn't wrinkle. She'd never say this aloud, but Juli appreciated these rules, enjoyed the power that came with depriving herself. It was saintly, similar to the martyrs she read about in elementary school who lived alone on mountaintops, whipped themselves, wore hairshirts, and were rewarded with visions of ecstasy. She would think of that when the birds that inhabited her stomach began their endless fluttering.

Her dad appeared on the landing, holding Oxford shoes. He sniffed, blew his nose, and rolled his shoulders. He wore a tan suit coat and gel creased the folds of his thick, graying hair.

He sat on one of the kitchen chairs and put on his shoes, buttons of his shirt straining against his belly. When he was done, he looked at Juli and asked, "Are you ready?"

Juli took a last look in the hallway mirror. She retied the strands at the shoulders and waist of the dress she had borrowed from Chrissy. She'd never be pretty like Chrissy, but the dress moved her two notches closer, as if Chrissy had left magic dust inside. Juli wore her hair as straight as she could get it by blowing drying it and setting it with hairspray. She gathered her water bottle, music books, and the little black purse she took to dances. "Ready," she said, and waved goodbye to Alex and Sheila.

They took her dad's Honda. Her dad said, "Why don't you sit in front." That had been her mom's spot. She and Alex always sat in the back seat—Juli behind her dad, Alex behind their mom. Her mom's presence always filled the car, even after she died.

Her dad smelled of the cedar closet where he kept his work clothes. She was close enough to see the mole next to his eye, the bumps of his razor burn. How the skin pulled in below his cheek bones like hers.

Juli yanked down the visor and the mirror blinked at her. She'd bought a special lipstick, bright but not too showy. She learned from choir that you turned into a pale blob under the stage lights if you didn't apply blush and lipstick. She dabbed on the first layer, mouth cracked open, the color like spurts of spray paint.

"What are you singing," her dad asked, his eyes on the road.

Juli held up the book of Italian songs. "*Caro Mio Ben*," she said.

"Oh yes. Everyone sings that." He shrugged. Even when he was sitting, Joe Costa was moving. "You know, I used to sing," he said.

"Uh huh," Juli said. He'd told her this plenty of times.

"With jazz bands when I met your mom, but when I was younger, too. Your age. Back in Boston." He leaned forward and gripped the steering wheel. "When I was in youth symphony, I had to take singing lessons. My trumpet teacher said it made us better musicians."

He started to hum, and Juli recognized the beginning notes of the song she would sing that day. He began to sing the Italian words softly, rolling the "r," holding out the "o" at the end of "caro." His voice was sweet, low and full. Juli hummed along, her voice an octave higher, sounding thin compared to his richness. "Your grandma loved that song," he said.

"My Portuguese one? Your mom?"

He nodded. "She was a singer, too."

"I didn't know that." Juli's knowledge of her grandmother came from shadowy pictures of a woman with a crucifix around her neck. She died before Juli was born, her death the reason

Juli's dad never returned to Massachusetts and never talked about the time before Juli's mom. "She loved music," Juli's dad said, "but she got," he cleared his throat and swallowed, "nodules. These growths on her vocal cords. They botched the surgery." He looked over at Juli and a warmth came into his eyes that Juli hadn't seen in so long. It touched a spot deep in her chest. "*Your* mom loved that song, too. She'd be so proud of you."

Juli remembered her parents singing together, her mom at the grand piano, her dad behind her mom's shoulder. She smiled, thinking that if her mom were here now, she would accompany her, that Juli would be the one to stand over her mom's shoulder.

They pulled into the parking lot of one of the city public high schools, a building that resembled a cruise ship. Juli's stomach quivered.

The day was bright, and Juli shaded her eyes from the sun's reflection on the asphalt. As they walked, her dad's hands thrummed the air, the skin red from his continual habit of washing them in scalding hot water. Juli wanted to reach out and grab one like she had when she was a kid. Holding her mom's hand belonged to tasks like crossing the street. Her dad was different. Sometimes, Juli could run up to him and slip her hand into his. She winced remembering the sting of one of the last times she'd tried this, when he shook out of her grasp. "Julietta," he said, "you're too old to hold hands."

Music kids flooded the building, carrying black cases of all shapes and sizes and in various states of formal dress. The girls wore black skirts and flared pants. The boys, black pants and white shirts, ties akimbo. The expanse was so different from Juli's all-girls high school. Even if they were Juli's age, these kids had probably driven themselves to the competition, while Juli had two months before her sixteenth birthday and driver's test. They also didn't fit into the

traditional groups. At Bishop Healy, the girls were either jocks, theater or music kids, popular, or smart. Here, there were sub-groups to the groups—mohawked punks, goths with dyed black hair and armfuls of black rubber-band bracelets, girls in old-timey dresses with crinoline slips and boys in bowties and suspenders.

Her dad pointed to the “Check-In” sign. He stopped and sighed, rubbed his eyes. “You all right, Dad?” Juli asked. He squeezed her shoulder and nudged her in front of him so she was exposed, nothing between her and the doors of the high school.

The booming hallway smelled of sweaty armpits and Wrigley’s Doublemint. The trembling, operatic voices, squeaky clarinet arpeggios, and tuba blats covered the sizzling energy of ambition. Juli pretended not to appreciate this flurry of activity. After choir rehearsals when some of the more enthusiastic girls continued their singing on the way to their lockers, she rolled her eyes and commented to whoever was nearby that they “needed to get it together.” It was a lie. She loved the anticipation. The idea that soon, someone could step on a stage, a crowd would hush, and music, the sweetest, most transformative force, could change their life.

Juli was comfortable in this space. In this sea of churning emotion, she stayed calm. She wouldn’t give into the pressure, because when she went onstage, it would release, and she’d soar above the audience. Next to her, her dad’s mouth tightened into a line. He shoved his hands into his pockets as they made their way to the check-in table. Under the fluorescent lights, the black hairs budded on his chin like crawling ants.

Juli gave her name to the woman at the folding table in the hallway. The woman smiled and scanned a stapled list. When she looked up, she cocked her head to stare around Juli to her dad. “Joe!” she said. “How great to see you!”

Her dad nodded, but his face didn't change. "Barb, a pleasure."

"I haven't seen you at meetings." Her voice trailed off and she rubbed her palms together.

"Well, schedules get in the way." He rocked back and forth on his heels.

"Is this your daughter?" She smiled at Juli. "I used to see you running around rehearsals when you were little."

Juli's cheeks grew hot. Several other performers had lined up behind her and the hard nose of a music case bumped the back of her knee.

Her dad and the woman trudged through musician small talk. Around the hall, other parents spit-smoothed cowlicks and ran lint rollers over black suit jackets. Black, always black—the musicians' unofficial dress code, which allowed them to slink into the background, let the music speak for itself. A trombone player blew his nose into the cloth he used to empty his spit valve. Juli knew what the future held for some of these musicians. Album covers with sculpted bodies draped in tuxes and evening dresses, presented like musical royalty while holding their instruments. Right now, bodies didn't give breaks. Constellations of zits covered chins, Adam's apples that jutted like tree stumps. Polyester highlighted misshapen mountains of flesh.

When Juli's dad and the check-in woman's conversation dulled, Juli patted the table with her fingertips, as she'd seen her mom do for attention. "Ma'am," she said, "has Mrs. Deffenbog checked in yet? She's with Bishop Healy High School."

The woman sprang back to her role. "Oh hon, teachers don't check in," she said. "But here," she said, springing back into her role, "hand this paper to the judges. You'll get your rating and ranking in the mail." The sheet had Juli's name, high school, and soprano written at the top,

followed by various rating categories—Musicality, Breath Control. “And your room assignment is over there.” The woman pointed to the sheet rock wall where taped papers lilted.

The students were divided by instrument—voice was one—and distributed between the auditorium, two choir rooms, and a band room. Two choir rooms, Juli thought. This meant the school had four pianos, which were required for accompaniment, and endless musical opportunities. At Bishop Healy, they had one, which the maintenance guy wheeled back and forth from the choir room to the gym stage for concerts.

Juli’s name was next to Choir Room A. More papers with arrows beckoned.

“That lady at the table—she’s a fellow musician,” her dad said. “A flute player.” Juli was used to categorizing people by their instruments. Flute players were generally animated and enthusiastic. “Didn’t Sheila play the flute?” she asked.

“She did,” he said. “There are lots of women flute players.”

“Why is that?”

He shrugged. “Men are attracted to certain instruments, women to others. I’d say women are often more attracted to delicate ones. Strings and woodwinds.”

His statement brought a sharpness to Juli’s stomach, like she’d eaten too many forbidden Doritos. “But mom wasn’t,” she said.

Her dad shook his head. “The piano is a whole different beast.”

She started to ask what he meant but stopped. The piano was untamable and wild, like her mom. When Juli’s mom and dad fought, their raised voices were accompanied by stomping feet and waving arms. When she was little, Juli had flung herself between parents, aligning with one before flitting to the other. “He’s stupid, isn’t he,” she’d say, then, five minutes later when

the fight hadn't resolved, "She's stupid, right?" Sometimes, this would end the arguments, laughter bubbling from clenched mouths. One of them usually said, "Julietta, you can't say that," but no punishment came.

Worst were the times late at night when they fought, when they wanted no one to hear. When they brought up money and her mom mentioned the words "poor house" and her dad cried big, shaking seal barks. There were other noises, too, scraping chairs, her mom's shouts. Once, Juli crept to the edge of the dining room and saw her dad standing over her mom like a vulture, pinning her arms to the chair. Her mom repeated, "Let me go, Joe." They didn't notice Juli and she crept away. *Stop, stop, stop*, Juli told herself, shaking the thoughts from her head.

At the end of the hall by Juli's performance room was a water fountain where Juli bent to refill her water bottle. A hand rested on her back and a warm voice said, "Julietta."

Juli turned and without hesitation, wrapped her arms around her choir teacher. Her head landed on the soft spot between Mrs. Deffenbog's shoulder and chin. The impulse shocked Juli and her body stiffened until Mrs. Deffenbog squeezed her back.

Mrs. Deffenbog held Juli at arm's length. Since it was nearly Easter, Mrs. Deffenbog's matching sweater and skirt had pastel flowers and bunnies. She asked Juli, "Who brought you?"

Juli pointed to her dad, sitting on a folding chair, which he stood from when Mrs. Deffenbog walked over, her hand extended.

"Mr. Costa," Mrs. Deffenbog said, "it's an immense pleasure to teach your daughter. She's one of the most talented students I've ever had. You have a treasure."

"Wonderful to hear," he said.

Her dad watched her. He scratched his chin. "Her stepmother and I are proud," he said.

Mrs. Deffenbog's words were clouds floating by, nebulous, just air. Juli couldn't hold on to them, not in front of her dad, because she didn't want him to think they mattered. She sipped from her water bottle and pointed to the clock. "Ten minutes," she said.

Mrs. Deffenbog squeezed her hand. "I've got to check on the others," she said.

In the line of singers outside Choir Room A, girls outnumbered the boys two to one, and their high voices spun through the halls. Mrs. Deffenbog had warned Juli that more than half of professional singers were sopranos, and that Juli would need to stand out to make it. "Your voice has richness and clarity," she told Juli at her last lesson before the competition. "It doesn't wobble like other girls' voices your age. It's sure of itself." Juli wondered how this was possible. She'd never been sure of anything in her life.

In his seat, Juli's dad uncrossed his arms and cleared his throat. He tapped his fingers on the chair and Juli remembered how her mom used to clasp her dad's hands tightly to keep them from moving. If they were at home, she'd even turn off the stereo because the music distracted him. Mid-conversation, whether in public or not, he'd remark, "Dizzy Gillespie. Did you know he triple-tongued that ending three times?" At home, he'd find the CD case or the record sleeve to read about the recording while he hummed along.

He started to jiggle his leg, and Juli remembered when she'd seen his tight, pained expression—before orchestra auditions. In the weeks leading up to those anticipated events, he barely talked or ate, and Juli, her mom, and Alex crept around, terrified to make noise. When the dreaded news came that the symphonies in New York or Boston or Philadelphia wouldn't be hiring him, her dad spent days in bed. He typically slept late, but Juli knew these times were different from the way her mom closed the bedroom door slowly without the usual thump.

“Why doesn’t he audition well?” Juli asked the last time, when she was 9 and a coveted spot had come open in their very own St. Louis Symphony

She’d meant her question innocently, but her mom’s eyes spit fire. “You have no idea how much pressure he’s under,” she hissed. Juli didn’t ask those questions again.

“Dad,” she asked, “did you do these competitions when you were a kid?”

He nodded slowly. “Your grandma took me to them.”

“Was it similar to this?”

He shrugged. “The kids were more serious then.”

“Did it make you nervous?” she asked.

“I love to play,” he said. “I hate to perform.” His fingers drummed faster.

In the hallway, other singers hummed through opening arpeggios and mouthed lyrics. One girl with a blonde bob pressed her ear to the choir room door, which didn’t matter because the intense voice of the girl performing inside flowed right through the wood.

Her dad leaned towards her. “I have to tell you something,” he said.

Juli leaned in, too. He wanted to share something with *her*, a musician’s secret.

“I don’t think you’re good enough to place in this competition,” he said softly, as if not wanting to crush an egg. “Best if you know that now.” He leaned back and didn’t look at her.

Juli stayed frozen, body facing her dad, until the eyes of the other performers landed on her like stage lights. She stood and mumbled, “Bathroom.”

Standing in front of the sink, Juli started to translate his words. A high-pitched whine buzzed in her ears—*failure, failure*. She brought her fist down hard on the ceramic sink and bit her lip at the pain. How dare he. He didn’t know her. Maybe he never had.

Her eyes locked on their reflection. She didn't look any different, but she was so light that if she didn't clutch the sink she might start to bob against the ceiling. She didn't know how long she stood there. She didn't notice the bubbling until it was strong. It coated her insides, starting in her stomach, pouring through her lungs into her throat. She knew what her mother must have felt when Juli asked those questions about her dad's auditions, the anger that comes from being stuck. Juli needed to move, but she couldn't leave the bathroom yet. She walked into a stall and stood facing the toilet. She imagined the force of retching. The lava inside Juli was dying, leaving an empty pit. She turned and held to the sides of the stall and dropped onto the toilet seat. She was alone. When she stepped into Choir Room A, she would have no one. Not Chrissy, not Mrs. Deffenbog. Not her dad. Just herself.

She remembered the week before, standing in Bishop Healy's choir room in the morning sun. She'd smelled the sharp chemicals fixer from the photo darkroom next door and the notes pouring from the piano made her ache in all the right places. When Juli had finished singing "Caro Mio Ben," Mrs. Deffenbog had closed her eyes and put a hand to her chest. When she opened them, they were rimmed with wetness. "Julietta," she said, "you sing like a sparrow." The bathroom door whooshed open. Underneath the stall, black ballet flats crossed the tile. The sound from the hallway sprung Juli into action. She flushed, opened the stall door, and gave a quick glance in the mirror, dabbing at the slight bleed of her eyeliner. She gulped water at the sink before pushing open the outside door. The clock on the wall said 10:15—five minutes.

Her eyes barely registered anyone in the hallway. Her dad was still in his chair, but she didn't look at him. She held her arms protectively around her torso. Her fingers tingled and her breath became shallow. Heat built in her cheeks and armpits, and she longed to quell the ocean of

nerves inside her, landing on the holiest of trios she heard her mom call on in the hardest of times: *Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.*

When she heard her name, she walked into the room with her jaw clenched and reminded her knees that they couldn't buckle, not for the next five minutes. Everything changed when she stood on the makeshift stage by the piano. Her shoulders broadened and her head lifted. She handed her music to the piano player and when he placed his hands on the keys, he became her mother wearing a long black dress with glittering earrings, her long fingers rooted to the keys. Juli nodded her head to begin. Music trickled from the piano and Juli looked out at the three judges and imagined reaching through their chests into their hearts. Then she began to sing.

They were quiet in the car. Juli's dad hadn't talked since she left the performance hall. They moved out of the city and onto the highway, passed the Budweiser neon eagle that flapped its wings and flew, dwarfing the highway. The carpet of green that was Forest Park, the green tile ball of the Cathedral's dome. The landscape had been gleaming and new to her before, her city laid out open and wide, hers for the taking. Now, all she saw was the emptiness between buildings. The Budweiser eagle's wings were just orange lines.

They turned off the highway. Traffic slowed. They sat at a stoplight, the ticking of the blinker the only sound.

"Why," she said.

"Why what?" he asked.

"Why do you perform if you hate it so much."

"You have to," he said slowly. "Nothing matters if you don't get up on stage and show what you've got."

“Yes, but if it makes you miserable—”

“It doesn’t make me miserable,” he snapped. “It’s the most incredible thing you can ever do. Music is the hardest and most exhilarating expression of what it means to be human.” He shot her a look across the front seat console. “You can’t understand if you aren’t at that level.”

He was mad now. He thought she was trying to show him up. She waited for the fire of rage to return, but her blood was cool. She stayed on a cloud until they pulled into the driveway.

Two weeks later, the letter came. Sheila handed it to Juli when she walked in from school.

Juli tore it open. Inside were two folded pages, one of which was the competition scoresheet. After nearly all the rating categories was a 5, the highest possible number. The only one that wasn’t was Originality, which had a 4 next to it. The judge’s handwritten comments included, “Nearly flawless rendering of classic Italian song.” The other paper congratulated her on placing second in the district competition.

Sheila read over her shoulder. “Julietta!” she gushed, grabbing Juli’s shoulders. “Joe, come quick!” she called. When he didn’t arrive, she walked into the kitchen calling, “Joe?”

Juli headed for the stairs to her room. She didn’t want to be there when he found out. There would be no apology—instead, she’d have to sit through discussions of what he’d done at her age. She refused to let what he’d said vanish, poof, like a puff of air.

On her way up the stairs, she snatched the cordless phone and dialed Chrissy’s number. There was another party that night and Juli wanted to celebrate.

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