

Madam Strange, Teller of the Future
By R. A. Conti

Book 2 - The Opera

Chapter 6

Bianca felt out of place in the luxurious hotel lobby. She didn't recall ever staying in a hotel for even one night. Not in a glitzy one such as the Bellevue-Stratford, anyway. The word ornate didn't begin to describe the fancy adornments in the lobby. Bianca had no idea what the rooms looked like but she would soon find out.

The hotel was renowned for its opulence and for the famous people that stayed there in its heyday. Among 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 awoke 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, drove east for several days, parked her RV in the hotel garage, changed into the only fancy dress she owned, found her only pair of high heels, and approached the doors dressed like a wealthy businesswoman or socialite. The doorman smiled at her as he pulled the glass door open. People in the lobby turned to gaze at Bianca as she passed. Bianca didn't feel special; she felt out of place. But she looked special, and that was all that mattered here 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 wondered. No feeling of recognition or attraction arose in her as she looked around. The people she saw could easily have been at the carnival she just left, albeit dressed fancier. *Nobody stands out. Why am I here?* she thought. Perhaps she needed to patiently wait and observe before her purpose would become clear.

Fatigue from her long drive and little sleep caught up with her. The settee felt unusually comfortable. It was more like a bed than a couch. Bianca wondered what the beds in the hotel were like and whether she would find out. 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.

Nothing.

Bianca almost fell asleep.

"Oh, good! You're here. And early, too. I hope I didn't keep you waiting." Bianca opened her eyes and saw an adolescent girl.

"Excuse me?"

“You’re Bianca Estranho, right?”

“Yes I am.”

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

“You don’t remember me, do you?”

“Should I?”

“You knew my mother- helped her, actually- when I was a baby. You gave her this-.” The girl pulled a necklace out of her blouse. Bianca recalled the spiral design with the bird in the center. Years ago, she bought several identical necklaces from a jewelry maker in a town she visited. She didn’t know why she bought them all, however, and 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 was just a friendly gesture. No summoning should have been possible. Clearly, it worked. Here she was.

“I’m Iris’s daughter Molly.”

“I remember you. How is your mother?”

“I don’t know and 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.”

“And here I am. But what do you think I can do? I’m not a private detective. I’m just a fortune-teller.”

“Not according to my mom. You’re so much more.”

“Maybe your mother had me confused with someone else.”

“She didn’t. 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.”

“Are you afraid of a girl?”

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

“Okay. Thanks. Sorry if I seemed nervous. My mom’s abduction really rattled me.”

“You *know* she was abducted?”

“We shouldn’t talk here.”

They rode up to Molly’s floor and went to her room. “No cameras or bugs. I’ve checked the place.”

“Okay, I guess. 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.”

“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 got the freedom to do it with the money my grandmother left us.”

“She’s lucky.”

“So am I. That’s how I can afford to pay for a room here.”

“I see. Tell me more about this abduction.”

“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?”

“She was always there when I came home or left a message to tell me where she was.”

“What happened when you called her phone?”

“I heard it ring- inside her coat pocket in the closet.”

“Shit.”

“She’d never go out without it. It was her lifeline to her work and me. That’s how I knew she was abducted.”

“Molly, have you told the police all this?”

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

“So how long ago did she vanish?”

“A week.”

“You’ve been alone all this time?” 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.”

Molly frowned at Bianca’s comment. “That’s not funny.”

“I didn’t mean it to be. What else can you tell me about her, besides that she was an opera singer?”

“Well, recently she got calls at funny times and never told me what they were about. I could see they upset her but she never told me why.”

“Did she ever meet anyone? Did strange people come to visit her?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Well, we don’t have much to go on, do we?”

Just then they heard a knock at the door. Molly and Bianca 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?”

“It’s my mother!”

“Thank God you’re here! Let me in.”

Bianca opened the door. Iris hugged her quickly and then ran to embrace her daughter. Molly started to cry. Bianca looked out in the hall before she closed the door. She didn’t see anyone else.

“Mom, what is going on?”

“I don’t really know.”

“Weren’t 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.”

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

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

Chapter 7

Iris knew of the neighborhood rumors about the old mansion. The deceased owner had been an eccentric who kept to himself. He was suspected of doing weird things nobody could specify. People believed the rumors anyway.

Iris didn't believe them, however. She liked eccentric people because they were often more interesting than normal people. When she saw the announcement about the mansion having been sold and everything inside offered for sale she went just to see what was there. Iris wasn't certain what she would find. Perhaps she could learn something about the old recluse by seeing the things that he owned.

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 yard sale without exploring the items. Iris noticed an old trunk. She wondered why no one was looking at it, had nothing better to do, and decided to look inside.

It opened easily. Iris discovered it was full of 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 an odd musical 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 never heard of it. *Now I know why I came today*, she thought excitedly. *It might not be famous, but it is an opera!*

She read the next page. *Act One - Descent*. There was a brief overture. Iris read the musical notes. The simplicity of the themes impressed her. She had no idea who wrote it, but it seemed worth exploring a bit more. She 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 describing 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 asked the price.

“Oh, is that from the old trunk?” the bored proprietor 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. What a find!*

A black SUV drove up as Iris pulled away. A woman got out dressed in black. She wore a black veil. The the yard sale proprietor noticed her and 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 casually toward the old trunk. She looked around before she approached it. No one watched her. *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. 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 whole thing's ten," the proprietor replied, 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. I didn't look at it."

"Did it have a cover?"

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

"Did you get her name?"

"I didn't *ask* her name. Just got her money," the bored woman replied.

"Okay. That's it, then. Come, 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." The black SUV peeled out of the driveway onto the blacktop and drove away at top speed.

Carl spotted Iris's car two minutes later. "Just get close enough to read the plate," the woman told him. "We don't need to tip her off we're following her." Carl read the license plate out loud. 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."

Iris continued her tale. "I took the opera home and read most of it in one sitting. It just kept getting better. 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 that I wrote it and was trying to foist it off on him!”

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

“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 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.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Thank you for trusting me. 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. I don’t know anything about opera.”

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

“I don’t understand.”

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 the manuscript. He offered to pay whatever she asked. Iris turned him down... politely. He hung up. Two hours later her doorbell rang. She looked out and saw a woman. She asked through the intercom what the visitor wanted. “I will pay you whatever you want for *Demeter and Persephone*,” she said.

“Sorry, it’s not for sale.”

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

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

“But it doesn’t belong to you.”

“It does now.”

“But *you* didn’t write it.”

“It’s unsigned. 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.”

“You do? Who was it?”

“Let me in and I’ll tell you all about him.”

Her 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?”

“She was evasive. She wouldn’t give me the composer’s name. She only told me it was her grandfather. I wouldn’t recognize his name because he never composed anything else.”

“Did you believe her?”

“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 wouldn’t leave without the manuscript. She 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.”

“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. Please leave.”

“You’ll regret this. 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, but I didn’t take any chances. I hid the manuscript.”

“Where is it now?”

“It’s in the apartment but no one could find it no matter how hard they searched. That’s why you’re here, Bianca. I can’t go back for it. 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.”

“Of course I’ll help,” Bianca replied. “Just don’t ask me to sing.”

Chapter 8

Bianca spotted the black SUV parked across from Iris and Molly’s apartment building the moment she arrived. She felt 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 almost made her break down in tears. The apartment was a shambles. Someone had turned over all the furniture or broken it into pieces. The intruders cut open the chairs and sofa. Stuffing was 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?*

The bathroom had also been ransacked. Bianca noticed towels strewn about the room. The plants behind the toilet were displaced but not damaged. She moved them, opened the toilet tank, and found the sealed plastic bag hidden 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 disorder 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, went to the elevator, pushed the button, and 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 in her RV. The manuscript was safe. She hoped she didn't leave any hint she visited the apartment and 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. It's not a problem for right now, anyway. The manuscript is all that's important."

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

"A few pages."

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

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

Bianca didn't make it back to the hotel. She spotted the black SUV in the rearview mirror and knew 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 thought she could lose the SUV in the maze of city streets around the hotel, but there was just enough traffic to prevent her escape. It stayed far enough behind her to see her 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. Sometimes she saw a long way ahead, other times only a few minutes or hours. *I'd settle for minutes, now*, she thought, *just to stay ahead of them.* It was tough to navigate city traffic and look inward for psychic guidance. Bianca gave up trying.

She called Iris. "I'm being followed. I can't lead them to you. I don't know what else to do. My RV is hard to maneuver in these city streets. 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. We’ll pick a rendezvous place. 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.”

“What?”

“What’re they gonna do to you when they catch you and find out you haven’t got the opera?”

“I won’t let them catch me.”

The black SUV didn’t catch Iris.

They met again 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 turned on a small light over her kitchen table, got out her phone, opened the manuscript, and framed the first page.

“This is a pretty high-resolution camera. 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 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.”

“Must be. Unless…”

“Unless what?”

“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. 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.”

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

“It’s garbled. 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 mysteries. 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. So I guess that’s what it’s about.”

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

“What do *you* want?” Iris asked.

“*That* belongs to me.”

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

“It’s *my* grandfather’s opera.”

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

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

“It’s not for sale. 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 would he write it?” Iris asked.

“That’s not important.”

“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’s 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.”

“Ma’am, I couldn’t do that. 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.”

“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. Carl’s gonna take you home. Aren’t you Carl?”

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

“Thank you, Carl. Nice meeting you,” Bianca said cheerfully. Carl didn’t reply. He took Mrs. McIntyre’s hand and led her to the RV.

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

Chapter 9

Zelda McIntyre sat stiffly in the backseat as Carl drove away from Bianca’s RV.

“You had no right...,” she seethed.

“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...”

“Those crashes weren’t my fault!”

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

“Your problem 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.

“Is everybody okay?” Bianca asked.

“No,” Molly replied, 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 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.” Molly didn’t like her mother’s reply.

“I think there’s a hidden meaning 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?”

“Not a one. But I suspect Ms. McIntyre knows the truth.”

“Surely you don’t think she would tell us?” Iris said. “She threatened to kill us.”

Bianca’s RV pulled into the driveway in front of Zelda’s house. Bianca walked toward the house. Zelda 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.”

“What do you want?”

“I’m here to give you a reading. Why don’t you step into my RV so I can look into my crystal ball?”

“Are you serious?”

“Or you could ask me in for tea.” Zelda thought about it for a moment and then stepped aside. Bianca strolled into the house.

“Lovely place.”

“Thanks.”

“Where’s the kitchen?”

“Why do you ask?”

“So I can make us tea.”

“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. Only *I* know how to make it right. I’ll do it.”

“Very well.”

The myth of Demeter and Persephone 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 any mother ever loved her daughter as much as Demeter loved Persephone. Zelda’s mother Carol never loved her that way.

Zelda remembered when she first heard Demeter’s lament from the opera. She was a little girl who scarcely knew what music was. She couldn’t remember the lyrics but she 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 thought at the time. But she didn’t. She only had a grandfather’s love and he poured it into his opera. He wrote it for her, 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 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?” Zelda nodded. “It’s not just the future I see. It’s the present and 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. I felt you were deeply troubled when you came to us.”

“You’ve no right to probe.”

“You had no right to threaten us. Isn’t probing more civilized than threatening?” 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. 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 those selfish women want 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. “And who was Demeter?”

“There was no Demeter in my life,” Zelda replied, sobbing. 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?”

“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?” Bianca heard a little girl’s pleading in Zelda’s voice. She 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.” Zelda brightened. Bianca recognized that little girl in her eyes.

“You mean it?”

“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. 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?” The full weight of Zelda’s 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 shared 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 didn't. Bianca told them not to. She let Zelda keep the manuscript, her secret, and her grandfather's love.