

# *Death* IN HIGH PLACES

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*Antwerp, Belgium, Day 1*

In twenty-seven hours, she could be dead. Glancing over her shoulder, Riley Williams scoped the pedestrians on the sidewalk in front of Antwerp's Opera House. Her breath whooshed out. No fisted daggers, no eyes riveted on her. A brisk September breeze fluttered the newspaper clutched in her hand.

At least they hadn't run her picture with the article.

American soprano who foiled terrorists in Antwerp in June debuts with *Vlaamse Oper* tomorrow evening.

All she needed was more publicity putting her on terrorists' radar. Terrorists who might decide to attend the performance. Finish the job they'd tried to do three months ago. Shudders rippled across her shoulders as she tucked the copies of the *Antwerp Gazette* into her tote bag. She'd need them for her press kit and scrapbook.

*If she lived long enough to fill a scrapbook.*

No. God had protected her last summer. He would be with

her now. Heels pounding the sidewalk, she strode toward the backstage entrance of the palatial opera house. Beaux Arts architecture, narrow medieval and renaissance gabled buildings—tucked between contemporary steel-and-glass structures. Modern-day Antwerp. She loved every bit of it.

Riley flicked a piece of lint from her navy pantsuit. She had too much riding on these performances to dwell on faceless terrorists. If she aced this gig, maybe the house would offer her a regular contract and she could work close to Brussels, to Jacob. Then, maybe—just maybe—they could set a wedding date. Unless Interpol sent him on another international assignment. She squared her shoulders and entered the opera house.

Curls spilling over her shoulders, she leaned over the porter's desk and scrawled her name in the register. A cacophony of scales and arpeggios floated down the hall as soloists and choristers warmed up their voices. Adrenaline pulsed through her veins. All her life she'd dreamed of singing on operatic stages. And now, here she was, a small-town girl from Cuero, Texas, living her dream.

If only Lacy were here to share it with her.

God had been so good to Riley. At twenty-eight, and only five years as a professional singer, her guest contracts were increasing. Thanks to God and her agent's efforts on her behalf. So many operas had roles for mezzo-sopranos and a coloratura. Riley swallowed the knot in her throat. But leukemia had stolen her twin Lacy's dreams, her life. Some sweet sixteen.

"Mrs. Schoonhoven is expecting you for a costume fitting in room three." The porter slipped the pen in his blue lab-coat pocket.

"*Dank U*, thank-you." The last Queen of the Night she'd replaced had been four sizes larger. Better that than four sizes smaller.

How much would this gown weigh? Pounds of boning and beading on heavy fabrics and hips panniered out the wazoo made

her Mozartian-era costumes cumbersome. Not to mention a ginormous headpiece jabbed into her wig.

Inside the dressing room, Mrs. Schoonhoven waited beside a rolling clothes rack. “*Dag*, hello,” she said, her voice crisp as a pair of shears. “Let’s see now ...” Eyes narrowed like a mental tape measure, she raked Riley’s body shoulder to heels. “You’re taller than I expected.” The seamstress turned to the rack, leafed through the black leotards and tights, and snatched a set. “Try these.”

“Uh ... this isn’t my costume, is it?”

“Didn’t you know this is an avant-garde staging?”

“Nope.” Contracts didn’t spell out production details. Just the number of rehearsals, her pay, the performances dates. Penalties for cancellation.

Riley shed her pantsuit and blouse. Thank goodness she worked out and kept in shape. Stifling huffs and grunts, she squeezed her body into the spandex tights and leotard. On her five-foot-nine frame, the tights hit her calves like kiddie pedal pushers. Good thing she’d remembered to shave her legs. “What about shoes?”

“These are the director’s choice.” Lips pursed, Mrs. Schoonhoven dangled a pair of black combat boots from her fingertips.

If directors kept up this insanity, the woman would be out of a job. Wearing a pair of ped shoe-liners, Riley laced up the boots. As she strode across the room, the coarse plastic chafed her heels and mashed her toes. Ten more steps and she’d have bleeding blisters.

But the other boots on the shelf were perfect for Cinderella or too big for Goliath. Sighing, she sat at the dressing table. Mrs. Schoonhoven brought over the Queen of the Night’s headpiece.

The contraption looked like they’d stolen it from Elsa Lanchester in the *Bride of Frankenstein*. Two-foot-tall spikes of silver-and-black metal poked from every orifice in the skullcap. Mrs. Schoonhoven slipped it over Riley’s curls and pinned it in

place. She winced as the underside of the metal tips scraped her scalp. Maybe she ought to rethink another contract here.

“What about makeup?” Riley was almost afraid to ask.

“Ja.” Mrs. Schoonhoven whipped a photograph from her lab-coat pocket and laid it on the dressing table. The model wore silver and black eye shadow winged like cat’s eyes, extended to her temples. Red lips, glittered eyebrows, and red Fu Manchu talons that would shame a dragon.

“Hmm.”

A knock on the door, and a perky teenager practically pirouetted into the room. “Let’s get you ready, *Ja?*”

“I can hardly wait.”

Muttering a Belgian hard-rock song under her breath, the young woman plunked her makeup tray on the dressing table and set to work. Four songs later, she tossed her pots and brushes on the tray. “*Voilà*, there you are.”

“Right. Thank you.” *I think*. While the four-inch talons dried on her nails, Riley stared at her reflection in the mirror. The rhinestoned glue itched and tugged on every hair of her eyebrows. All she needed was a diamond-studded leather jacket and a motorcycle for her entrance. A regular crime boss-lady. Don’t. Give them. Ideas.

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DRESSED, made-up, and voice freshly warmed up, Riley walked backstage. Heart pattering a little too fast. She snugged *The Magic Flute* score beneath her armpit and blew out a couple of breaths. The blocking should be easy to remember. All she had to do was walk on, sing two arias, speak a few lines, add her two bits in the finale. No wonder her contract stipulated a single rehearsal and thirteen performances. Time-saving, money-saving.

But potentially hazardous, since European dress rehearsals invited key people she and every other singer needed to impress. Journalists, agents, patrons, music critics. Writing up the

production before the audience took their seats. She squelched the horror stories of botched stage entrances through the wrong piece of the set. Or worse. Nope. Nope. Wasn't going to happen.

A mere slip of a young woman in jeans and a sweater paced behind the side curtain in chic high-heeled boots. She pivoted toward Riley and raked her gaze over her headpiece down to the combat boots.

*"Dag."* Riley stuck out her hand.

The young woman flicked her long braid over her shoulder, shoved her fists inside her elbows. "I'm your understudy." Her eye daggers said it all—you'd better be great, because I'm ready and waiting to take your place.

Swallowing, Riley forced a smile. She'd have to watch her step. This woman's sting could be as bad as a Texas cave scorpion. "Nice to meet you." Riley glanced at the stagehands waiting in the wings.

A scrawny man in shabby jeans stood against the back wall, a toolbox gripped in his hand. Black hair plastered to his head made his sharp-edged nose more prominent. Eyes beaded on her, he shifted his weight from foot to foot.

Why was he watching her? Stifling a shiver, she walked over to the lady tending the prop table. "I believe you have a dagger for me to give Pamina. And the locket the ladies give Tamino."

"No locket." The prop mistress handed her a cell phone. "You'll give him the cell with a photo of Pamina saved on it."

"Right."

The director must not have read the libretto and studied the music. How could Mozart's text and music work if Tamino and the three ladies sing about a locket/cell phone prop they should already have in hand ten minutes before the Queen made her entrance onstage? And now she arrives and gives him the prop five minutes after he's sung his love song to a portrait/cell phone he's never seen. If this was the director's idea of deconstructing an opera, she'd call it the destruction of a masterpiece.

Sucking a calming breath, Riley walked onstage. She squinted

beyond the proscenium arch. A sea of dark heads among the stalls and seats. Focus. Focus. Not on journalists and music critics.

“Ah, I see our evil Queen of the Night has arrived.” The orchestra conductor waved his baton in a salaam.

“Maestro.” She leaned over the edge of the stage and shook his hand.

Not all the singers were Belgian. Thankfully, her fluency in German, French, and Italian should make communication easier. Probably no chance to use Romanian today. She turned and greeted the Bulgarian soprano playing Pamina, the lead soprano.

Thank heavens for singers’ names on the posters outside the opera house. Guest contracts, tight budgets, and minimal rehearsals made bonding with her colleagues almost impossible. And dressing the huge cast in leotards and tights made recognizing a singer’s role next to impossible.

Stroking her Rapunzel-length blonde wig, Pamina swept Riley from head to toe with her gaze, flashed a fleeting smile. Mrs. Schoonhoven had layered the soprano’s generous girth with a gauze cape and skirt over her expose-all white leotard and tights. The poor woman still probably felt naked onstage. Then again, maybe not.

The tenor singing Prince Tamino grasped Riley’s hand and kissed it. Somehow, he merited turquoise tights with white side stripes, a matching tank top that accentuated well-developed pecs, and a pair of snakeskin cowboy boots.

Riley glanced around the stage. No backdrops. A throne that looked more like a decrepit La-Z-Boy stood stage right. Probably for her alter-ego, Sarastro, Pamina’s father. At the back of the stage stood metal scaffolding about ten feet high. A set of steps led to center stage.

A gulp knotted Riley’s throat. No railing. Ten feet. Only ten feet. She could do this.

“Miss Williams, you look smashing.” Slicking back his gelled hair, the director trotted up the house stairs to the stage. “Lars



Smitten.” She shook his outstretched hand. With his Van Dyck beard, skintight black jeans, and turtleneck, he could pass for one of the cast.

“You’ll sing your arias from the lift as it carries you around the stage.” Lars pointed above. “First visible from the rafters.”

“Lift?” Riley’s voice squeaked. A motor whirred behind her. She spun and stared at a hydraulic lift lumbering downstage. The convulsing platform extended forty feet above the stage. Every inch of her lungs seized. *Dear God, no.* No way could she do this. “I—I don’t do heights.” The view from a high window invaded her thoughts. She shuddered. How long would that memory haunt her?

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’ll puke. Or faint. I’ll never be able to sing up there.”

“But ...” Lars raked a hand through his hair. “Surely you know the Queen often appears onstage on a platform. Or sings from a catwalk.”

“A stable catwalk, yes—but not from a *moving* contraption.”

Wheezing like a convict on death row, the lift shuddered to a stop beside her. To her right offstage, the stagehand stabbed the buttons on the control panel. Nothing happened. Then the platform shuddered down to stage level. A backdrop, painted to look like a graffitied wall, had been weighted to the back of the platform. At least the lift had a railing.

“As you sing the roulades, the lift will move over the orchestra pit—”

“You want to do *what?*”

“It will be sensational. You’ll be the talk of all Antwerp.” His voice rose in near ecstasy. “Of all Belgium. Europe.”

So would Lars and his staging. What choices did she have? Hand fluttering on her opera score, she gripped the music to her chest. If she refused, she’d be dubbed a temperamental artist. She’d destroy any hope of building her career beyond a smattering of house auditions and fewer guest contracts.

Acoustics in European opera houses were kinder to small

voices like hers. Most American opera companies hired only as guest contracts, and their venues had lousy acoustics, making it difficult for small voices to project.

Or she could marry Jacob. But right now, their relationship was about as stable as this lift, with his international assignments and her performances scattered across Europe.

Operatic roles she longed to sing flitted before her eyes. She could do this. All she had to do was make it through the runs, the high notes without cracking, no puking. Easy, right?

Heart in her throat, she climbed aboard. She braced her feet wide, gripped the handrail. Don't look down. Isn't that what they told mountain climbers? But with the delay hearing the orchestra from the stratosphere, she'd have to watch the conductor. Could she even see his baton from the next galaxy?

Offstage left, the stagehand jabbed a button and the motor hummed to life. As the platform swooped upward, a scream clawed up her throat. Jaws clenched, she clamped it off. *God, please help me through this.*

Shimmying left and right, the lift jerked to a stop, inches shy of the rafter's floodlights.

Within seconds, their searing heat scorched her skin through her black leotard. Sweat trickled into her eye makeup, stinging her eyes. Soon, she'd look like Alice Cooper. Then again, Lars would probably love it. After all, she was playing an evil queen.

Six miles below her, the maestro lifted his baton, and the Queen of the Night's ominous music wafted toward her.

Drawing a breath, she launched into her aria. What a laugh. Here she was, telling Prince Tamino not to be afraid. Manipulating him with her version of Pamina's abduction, pleading with him to rescue her daughter.

The lift's railing wobbled beneath her white-knuckled grip as the platform dropped her to ten feet above Tamino. What was she supposed to do—throw him the cell? Not missing a note, she leaned over the railing and extended the phone toward him like

an imitation of Michelangelo's fresco, *The Creation of Adam*, God's finger reaching out, almost touching Adam's finger.

Upstage arm stretched toward her, Tamino leapt for the cell with the balletic grace of Nijinsky, but the chasm between their hands seemed twenty phones apart. Not her problem if her three sidekicks hadn't given him the cell for his aria minutes ago as he extolled Pamina's beauty. If they used their own phones, she could text him Pamina's picture. Or tomorrow night, she'd just toss him the phone. Either way, it'd fit with this ludicrous staging.

Seconds later, the orchestra launched into the aria's allegro section. The lift squealed to life, zigzagging left and right, as the stagehand mimicked the ascent and descent of her lightning-fast runs. Nausea churned Riley's stomach, threatened to spurt up her throat.

The phone fell from her hand and clattered on the stage.

Tamino darted forward and retrieved the cell. He stroked the edge of the phone, eyes tender as a lovesick lad.

Without warning, the lift lurched the other direction. Her ab muscles loosened, and her high *F* cracked. Heat flamed her face. No, no, no. She'd done the unpardonable.

Never mind the terrorists who might threaten her life—she wanted to sink through the stage floor trapdoor and die. She'd cracked on a high *C*.