

Chapter 74

I Have Lived for Art, I Have Lived for Love
A Loyal Foster Parent Seeks Comfort

The way Vinnie had set up the Central Park concert was, that Margaret should sit in the front row of the audience, so far as possible incognito, while Vinnie warmed them up. Then, at a suitable moment, he would call on her. It all seemed rather artificial to Margaret, but the showman side of Vinnie's nature would not be denied, so she grudgingly agreed.

By way of disguise Margaret first settled on a head scarf and sunglasses. Mrs Mo, however, said this was much too conspicuously inconspicuous. People (said Mrs Mo) would peer at her to see if she was Mrs Onassis or Princess Di, especially if, as Margaret first mooted, she was wearing a long gown. Better with just the sunglasses, and a plain pants suit.

Waiting for their moment, from the apartment window they watched people drifting across the park to the Great Lawn. They were to go to the concert together; Mr Mo was house-sitting in Southampton.

"So many people!" said Mrs Mo. "I'm surprised the park can hold so many."

"Imagine if it was China," said Margaret. "A free concert in a public place—there would be people all the way to the horizon."

"Yes. That is China's problem. The fundamental problem: too many people. I always felt that in China. I think we all feel it. My husband used to say: 'Lost in a sea of people.' Perhaps that's why we Chinese people treat each other so badly."

At the right time they left, crossed over Fifth to the park, and headed for the Great Lawn, showing the passes Vinnie had supplied them with and being ushered to seats in the first row beneath the stage. The crowd was vast but good-natured, stretching back behind them as far as Margaret could see.

Vinnie came on in full evening dress, though it was a warm day, and the crowd cheered him to the echo. He sang: Puccini, Verdi, “Vesti la giubba”, then a couple of Italian folk ditties, and soon had the audience entranced. It was marvelous to see him working them, lifting them up and carrying them with him. He sang “Celeste Aida”, then “Una furtiva lagrima” from Donizetti’s *L’elisir d’amore*. This last was a piece he was well known for, and got a great ovation. Grinning, bowing, waving to them, working them, amplifying the off-the-boat Italian accent, he roared out: “Oh, so you like-a Donizetti, eh?” Yes, yes, they roared back. Donizetti, Donizetti! Vinnie held up his palms to shush them.

“My friends! Forgive me! I am going to spring a surprise on you!”

Margaret had an attack of nerves. In her seat at the front, she froze. She could not! She could not do it! She knew her voice would fail, or her nerve would fail, or her heart. She could not. Frantically she signaled with her hand to Vinnie: No, No.

Vinnie was smiling down at her. “The lady is *riluttante*,” he announced, pronouncing it English enough that they could understand, reaching out his arms in her direction. “She ’as been out of the public scene for so long . . .”

People in the front row were craning forward to peer along at her. Some behind were standing up to look. Margaret buried her face in her hands.

“ . . . during which absence, like our beloved Floria Tosca, she suffered greatly for ’er country and ’er people.”

Now Margaret heard her name called out from somewhere way behind. *Margaret!* Then again, somewhere over to the left; and now applause was starting, many voices were calling out. *Margaret! Margaret!* They only use your surname when you’re dead, she remembered Vinnie telling her, an age ago.

The applause was rising. Dozens of voices now were calling her

name. Lifting her face from her hands, she saw Vinnie coming down the steps at the side of the stage, coming towards her.

“I can’t, Vinnie! I just can’t!” she protested when he was in front of her. “My voice . . .”

Vinnie reached down and removed her sunglasses, handing them to Mrs Mo at Margaret’s side. Then he took her hands. Helpless, she stood.

“I can’t. I can’t.”

“What, my little pearl? Do you mean to tell me you were not afraid to face the tanks and guns, yet you are afraid to face your friends?”

“They are only my friends if I sing well.”

He beamed at her: huge, irresistible. A force of nature.

“But you *will* sing well, Perlinetta.”

He led her carefully up the steps on to the stage. Everyone was standing now, standing and applauding—the orchestra too. They applauded, applauded, calling out her name. It seemed to go on for a long time. Vinnie held her hand and they bowed, bowed, and the people clapped and cheered. Margaret looked out across the meadow. Such a crowd! From up here the whole park seemed to be full of people. There were even people in the trees, as there had been on White Stone Bridge Road, when the students marched to the Square, under the same sky, in Beijing two years before.

Vinnie disengaged his hand and quieted the crowd. Without another word, he turned to the orchestra and nodded.

“What is it? Oh, what is it?” asked Margaret in a panic.

“‘Verranno a te sull’aure’, my butterfly. Just as we practiced. Just follow me. Can you see the conductor?”

“Yes.” The orchestra was arrayed as for a concert performance, the musicians right up on stage with them, the conductor at one side so that both they and the musicians could see him. At another nod from Vinnie the music began, and they sang the love duet from *Lucia*. Margaret thought she was terrible. She wobbled disgracefully on one of the high notes, and she knew her lower tones were not forceful. Vinnie was her savior, coaxing her along with his eyes, watching her more than he watched the conductor. There was a storm of applause, which Margaret felt must

surely be sheer kindness. As they bowed, Vinnie whispered: “The Countess, the Countess. Can you manage it?”

“Yes.” Vinnie stepped back and Margaret went straight through “Porgi, amor” with an ease that surprised her, though she had sung it a hundred times. Vinnie saw her confidence had come back, and nodded, and grinned, and applauded her with the audience.

“Straight to ‘Trionfal’,” he whispered, naming their third song, a duet from *Tosca* with a difficult a cappella stretch in the middle. They had decided on this in place of “A te, O cara”, which really needed two more voices for full effect. “Trionfal” went very well. Margaret felt in control of her voice, found all her notes and carried off the a cappella with only a slight loss of tempo once—the kind of thing that no more than one per cent of this audience would notice. The applause this time was long, with two or three bravas.

She stood back for a rest while Vinnie sang “Nessun dorma” and the flower song from *Carmen*. Then she came forward for “Ah! non credea mirarti” from *Sonnambula*, the nearest thing she had to a personal trademark aria. She sang it with no faults, and the crowd roared long and fulsomely, chanting her name and calling *Brava! Brava!* Margaret’s heart filled up with their love and adoration.

It was supposed to be her last number, but of course they would not let her go. She curtsied to them; she curtsied to Vinnie; she curtsied to the conductor and orchestra. She went to step away, but they called her back. Flowers were presented by the concert manager, and she curtsied appreciation, but still they would not let her go.

Margaret had agreed with Vinnie that for fear of straining her voice, which was still not quite re-accustomed to performance, she would sing at most one encore: “Una voce poco fa” from the *Barber of Seville*, transposed to F major to show her voice at its best. It was an aria she usually loved to sing, full of character; a spirited young woman declaring her strategy for winning the love game. It showed off some of her voice’s darker colors, as it was supposed to be played with a certain degree of sensuality, yet included some fine fioritura passages to delight the ear. Yet it was wrong for her present mood. The dash and dazzle of bel canto was all very well, but this was not the time. She wanted to

reveal herself to these people—just a little, just a glimpse—and she knew how she wanted to do it.

“Do they have a full score for Tosca?” she asked Vinnie while the crowd was still applauding.

Vinnie grinned, reading her thoughts—reading them very well.

“You want to sing ‘Vissi d’arte’.” He was so sure, there was no inflection to make it a question.

“Vissi d’arte” means “I have lived for art”. It is performed by Floria Tosca, an opera singer who has been caught up in revolutionary politics against her will, and asks God why he is testing her so. It was somewhat unorthodox, in a concert of this sort, to sing two songs from the same opera, but she could see she had Vinnie’s agreement.

“Yes. Can they do it?”

“Ma certo! My beautiful Perlina, I ’ave *hanticipated!* They all ’ave the music.”

Vinnie spoke with the conductor, the crowd only murmuring now. The conductor spoke to his leader, the leader to his second, then to his woodwinds. The woodwinds passed words one to the other, the brass leaning forward to share the secret, and calling back to Percussion. Scores were shuffled; random notes sounded. A cellist laughed; a violin tried out the first notes; the conductor nodded.

“They are ready,” said Vinnie, back at her side.

He went to the front of the stage and spread his hands. The audience went dead silent at once.

“My friends. Ladies and gentlemen. Our honored guest is in training after a long habsence from the stage. From concern for ’er voice, she can sing only one encore. ’Owever, it is an especial song she will give us, one that ’as especial meaning for me and for our Margherita.” He turned to acknowledge her. The audience turned, too—twenty thousand eyes, excited, expectant.

“Many years ago,” Vinnie went on, “in a place so remote you will not find it on any map, a tiny mountain village in central Asia . . .”

He pronounced Asia as “Aaaah-zeee-aaah”, pumping up the guinea accent to make them laugh, which they duly did.

“. . . In a concrete ’ut with a tin roof, I auditioned a shy young girl. She sang ‘Vissi d’arte’ for me, unaccompanied.”

People laughed again; and some began to clap, knowing now what was coming. Vinnie turned with a great sweeping gesture to indicate Margaret.

“Now that girl is a woman. A woman, a mother, a soldier of freedom— A ’EROINE!”

Much applause. While it was going on, Margaret leaned up to him. “It was not unaccompanied,” she protested. “There was the cassette player.”

“A white lie, bambina. For dramatic effect.”

The applause was dying down now. They were hushing each other: eager, expectant.

It dawned on Margaret suddenly that she had not sung this song for three years. She had a moment of panic, nerves shrieking. Seeing it, Vinnie took her hand gently and kissed it. This made the crowd roar. In the roar he said: “Don’t be afraid, Perlina. Sing just as you sang for me there in the mountains.”

He flashed his sunniest smile, the entire Mediterranean beaming down at her, then began to back away, applauding. They all applauded: then, quite suddenly, stopped. There was that moment of terrible expectant stillness every stage performer knows—that black pit of silence into which she must fling herself like a skydiver, trusting to her own talents alone to see her safely down to the earth. Vinnie was over on the side of the stage, watching her. On the other side was the conductor. He smiled and nodded at her encouragingly; then raised his baton. Her eyes half-closed, looking up at the sky, trying not to see the vast crowd, holding the conductor’s baton at the edge of her vision, Margaret sang.

I have lived for art, I have lived for love.

I never did harm to any living thing . . .

The song came almost unbidden, Margaret thinking: *if only babies came out this easily*. Like “Porgi, amor”, she had sung it so often she could sing it without thinking about it. Instead she thought of the first

time, ten years before, in the auditorium at the Beijing Conservatory. She thought of all that had happened: of her country, of the movements, of Father in the next world and Half Brother at his mysterious duties, of Norbu in his camp. Thinking of things so far-flung in time and space, the immensity of all creation was suddenly made plain to her, borne to her on the music, and she was flying, flying, *flying*.

I gave my song
 To the stars, to Heaven, that they might be beautified.
 In this hour of my sadness, why,
 Why, Lord,
 Why do you repay me so?

Margaret finished as effortlessly as she had begun, having no idea whether she had sung well or badly. The first loud *Brava!* sounded out from off to the left, a heartbeat after she had closed the last phrase, before she had even lowered her head, bringing her back to this world of shadows. Then all was lost in a great yell, ten thousand voices all at once roaring love and joy and acceptance. Margaret lifted her arms in the traditional gesture of acknowledgment, and raised her eyes to the open sky; but no sooner did she see the limitless blueness of it than it began to turn, to spin, and the roaring of the people was something happening in the far distance, the roar of voices in the town heard from the army barracks, in the Cultural Revolution, when she was a child, and the trees and the awning of the stage drifted into view as gravity was switched off, the way they had switched it off in Tiananmen Square under the orange light of the tracers. Vinnie caught her before she hit the stage.

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After the concert in the park there were reporters at the entrance to the apartment for three or four days. Margaret had to run the gauntlet each time she came in or left. She did not mind. It was flattering to be noticed, even if only for a few days. Mrs Mo had cut out all the newspaper and

magazine clippings about the concert, and bought a huge album from the Hallmark shop on Madison Avenue to put them in.

In spite of her having passed out at the concert, Margaret's confidence was all back now. She *knew* she could sing—as well as, or better than, before. It was only practice, enlarging and strengthening her voice, perfecting her technique, finding her way through the role. Gradually she began to understand Norma; and it was wonderful to her, endlessly fascinating, to feel this woman coming to life through her own efforts, through her voice.

At first her role had been only words on a vocal score—Italian words, of course. Quickly the words were decorated with Margaret's annotations and translations in tiny printed Chinese characters, surrounding and smothering the score like a ground-covering plant. From this mess Norma began to emerge—a woman of character and passion, of spirit and courage, torn by impossible conflicts.

Margaret was thinking of Norma when she came home late one afternoon, left the cab and crossed the sidewalk to her lobby. She was hunting for the right balance of emotion between Norma's various loves—for her children, for her people, for her centurion, for her religion. The right *color* for each love. How to display her anguish in a way people could understand, in a way *everyone* could understand? She had been turning this over in her mind all the way from the theater, and was still abstracted when she left the cab. There were no reporters now—it was more than a week since the Central Park concert—only a single fan, an oldish fellow-countryman, following her across the sidewalk with his eyes. Margaret ignored the man, being still wrapped in her thoughts; but as she passed, he addressed her in a low, penetrating voice, speaking Mandarin with a thick Cantonese accent.

“Mistress Han. I need a word with you.”

Margaret stopped, right at the door (which Joe was holding open for her). It wasn't the usual fan approach. She took a good look at the Chinese man. He was in his late fifties, at least, his face lined and weathered. He looked like a worker, yet he was sharply dressed, with a beige summer jacket and pale blue open-neck shirt, neat tan pants well-creased and cut perfectly to break at his polished brown loafers. He was holding

a piece of paper in his hand, perhaps wanting an autograph—but no, she saw now, it was an envelope.

Disconcerted, Margaret repeated her usual formula, this time in Mandarin. “I’m sorry. I really prefer not to talk unless it’s a formal interview.”

“I have come from Liang Weilin.”

Margaret was too much taken aback to speak. Her instinct was to turn on her heel and walk away; but for the moment she could not. She stood paralyzed before this gnomish emissary from another life. Joe was by her side now. He had come out of the lobby altogether, anxious for her safety.

“Is everything all right, Miss Han?”

“Yes. It’s all right Joe. Nothing important.” Now she turned away.

“He is dying,” said the Cantonese man behind her. “Perhaps only a few days now. He begs for your forgiveness, before he makes his report to Lord Yanwang.”

Lord Yanwang was the Emperor of Hell, to whom all must report for judgment. Margaret had not often heard his name spoken. She thought the last time she had heard it was from Norbu. It was faintly ludicrous to hear it uttered now, in this context, on Fifth Avenue in the United States of America, under the early summer sun; yet somehow the man’s voice, his guttural Cantonese accent, the urgency and sincerity with which he spoke, gave it terrible power. Lord Yanwang—Emperor of Hell! Quite involuntarily she turned back. The man was in exactly the same place, but now was holding out the envelope to her.

“Please. Only read it. I will wait here. An hour or so.”

Margaret opened the envelope in the elevator. It had not been sealed, the flap just tucked in. Inside was a single sheet of paper. It was common note paper, lined, ragged at the top where it had been torn from the pad. On the paper was a simple line drawing of two butterflies. Beneath were two lines of verse in Chinese, the characters ill-balanced and unsteady:

Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai
Found their peace at last, in the sky.

In the apartment, Little Vinnie was sleeping, Mr Mo in the kitchen

preparing dinner. Mrs Mo was at the bureau writing a letter. Margaret sat on the sofa and began to weep. Seeing this, Mrs Mo at once sat beside her and took her hand.

“What is it, Little Sister? Tell me.”

Margaret showed her the paper.

“What’s this about Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai?”

“Do you know the story?”

“Of course! Who doesn’t?”

“We made a game of it. When we were children—oh! so long ago!”

She told Mrs Mo about the Chinese man at the entrance.

“He said William is dying. He begs for my forgiveness.”

“Well, you should give it. You don’t want his ghost to come back and haunt you, do you?”

“Elder Sister, I can’t. I hate him too much. He is evil, I know it. How he tried to destroy me! And now his punishment is coming. Of course he regrets what he’s done! Who wouldn’t regret it, on a deathbed? He’s not sincere. He’s just afraid of a judgment in the next world.”

“You are wrong, Little Sister. If you can do this good thing, you should do it. This life is too short, too full of distractions. We have very few opportunities to show our humanity. Why withhold what you can so easily give? And when *you* come to judgment at last, how will you explain it, that you had the chance to help a man cleanse his soul before death, but you refused to do it? And even in this life—how will you feel a year or two from now, when it is too late, when you know you could have done this good thing, but you did not do it?”

“I think I shall hate him just as much as I do now.”

The older woman nodded. “Yes, you think so. You think so, but it will not be so. Trust me, I know. I have suffered great wrongs, too. But when the one who wronged you is dead, and you are still alive, it is difficult to hate him. Life is such a great gift, what can we feel for the dead except pity? I tell you, if you ignore him now, you will be bitterly sorry in the future. There is a right way and a wrong way, Little Sister. To offer him your forgiveness, that is the right way. To let him take your bitterness with him into the next world, that is the wrong way. In your heart you know it. How can you not know it? So easy to see!”

Margaret considered. Mrs Mo was right, of course. To bear a grudge beyond the point of death, into the next world—that could not be right. She stood up and went over to the speakerphone.

“Joe, that Chinese gentleman. Is he still there? Good—send him up.”

Mr Mo opened the door for him, and let the man precede him along the hall into the living room. As soon as he saw Margaret the stranger fixed his eyes on her, then made an old-fashioned *bai* greeting, clasping his hands together in front of his chest and bowing slightly from the waist. Margaret thought it a bit incongruous, since they were all in western dress. Mr Ng used the Mandarin form of his name to introduce himself.

“I am Wu Xuantai, from Hong Kong. I was William’s foster father in his teenage years.”

“Sit down, Mr Wu.” Margaret indicated an armchair. She herself sat on the sofa with Mrs Mo. Mr Mo slipped back into the kitchen.

“You said William is very ill.”

“Yes. He has AIDS.” Mr Ng’s eyes did not move or flicker. His look was so unwavering, it unnerved Margaret a little.

“Isn’t it dangerous to be with him?” asked Mrs Mo.

“No.” Mr Ng kept his eyes on Margaret, always addressing her. “I thought so at first, but the doctors explained everything. Actually it’s very difficult to catch AIDS. It has to go from blood to blood. So long as you practice some simple precautions, there’s no danger. I’ve been with him three months now. He’s tried all the medicines, but none of them is any good. Now he’s in the last stages. He hasn’t been able to walk for three weeks now. His mind is starting to cloud over. He knows, when he’s lucid, he knows what is happening. And what will soon happen. That’s why he asked to see you. He wants to apologize, to beg for your forgiveness, while he can still think clearly, at least some of the time.”

“He’s been very cruel to me. Tried to destroy my life, not once but twice. Used all his money, all his power against me.”

Mr Ng nodded. “I know that. I know everything.” Now he dropped his eyes for a moment, seeking the right words. “William is . . . he has . . . I don’t know what you can call it. A weakness of character. He is one of

those people who needs a strong hand guiding them, otherwise they can't see the right path. I tried to be the strong hand for him, to show him the right way, but . . ." Mr Ng shrugged, looking at Margaret again now ". . . He was only with me for a few years. And already sixteen when he came to us. You know the old saying:

In childhood circumstances form the character.

In adult life character forms the circumstances.

William had a very hard childhood." Mr Ng was looking evenly at Margaret, now.

Margaret could not meet his eyes. "Yes. In part, it was my fault."

"Yes. You helped them to kill his father. He can never forget that."

Margaret felt for Mrs Mo's hand. Mrs Mo took the seeking hand in her own, squeezing it.

"We were just children," said Margaret. "Hardly knew what we were doing."

"I believe he understands that now."

Margaret held tight to Mrs Mo's hand. "Perhaps I should have stayed with him. When he knew he had AIDS."

Mr Ng shrugged. "I won't say so. It had to be your decision. Nobody could decide that for you."

"Does he still bear resentment against me for that?"

Mr Ng considered. "Perhaps. I don't know. You must ask him."

"Where is he?"

"East 46th Street."

"In midtown? So close?"

"It's a small apartment. All he can afford now. He has no money left, you know. They sequestered it all. Just allow him enough for rent and necessities. His medicines I pay for myself, from my own funds."

"You do business in New York?" asked Mrs Mo.

Mr Ng shook his head. "In Hong Kong. I own a factory. Makes buttons. Costume jewelry too, now. We just started that last year. Actually, my wife looks after everything. She's very capable." He smiled. "I can be away until . . . well, as long as necessary. It doesn't matter. Will-

iam bought me this factory, you see. When he was prosperous, before all these troubles started. It was a gift for me, for my fiftieth birthday. That was the first thing he thought of, when he got rich—to pay me back for helping to raise him. He's not all bad, you see. And now . . .” For a beat or two Mr Ng seemed unable to speak, his lips pressed firm together for control. “Now I must look after him again. See him safe to the Yellow Spring. That's my duty, my responsibility.”

Mr Ng lowered his eyes. Nobody said anything for an awkward minute.

“He was a good boy,” murmured Mr Ng, not looking up. “Such a good boy! A handsome boy, and a good boy!”

Mrs Mo stood up. “Take us to see him. Take us now.”

She turned and cocked her head at Margaret, to say: Let's go.