

Still snowing. Still frigid. But I ploughed ahead anyway, tasting the snowflakes and trying to ignore my aching face and soaked feet.

I turned off the main road on to Wolf Trace Lane. I shivered in the sudden darkness. No streetlamps shed light, and several houses didn't even have their porch lights on. Maybe the Sorensens weren't the only ones who'd escaped down to Florida to avoid winter in New England.

Their house was at the end of the street. It looked abandoned. No lights on. No sign of a car in the driveway. The snow and the wind would muffle any noise I'd make if I crept closer. Maybe I could peek through the windows, see if anything looked suspicious.

The drapes were drawn, and curtains covered the basement windows. I spotted a narrow slit in a rear basement window and headed toward it. I knelt down and pulled out a flashlight I carried in my backpack for emergencies. I shone the light through the narrow slit and gasped. A dark figure was slumped in an office chair, the head tilted at an odd angle. It didn't seem to have any arms.

My knees felt wobbly, but I hauled myself up and pulled out my phone to call 911. I jumped and nearly dropped my cell when something hard pressed into my back. A hand roughly grabbed my hair and yanked my head back.

"Well, well," a familiar voice said, "what do we have here? Hand over the phone before I shoot you."

Chapter One

Five Weeks Earlier

Four-thirty on a wintry Wednesday afternoon and it was already growing dark. The wind rattled against Ms. Wells' studio windows. I didn't care. Tucked away in this cozy space working with her on "Dove Sono," Mozart's aria from *The Marriage of Figaro*, I felt warm, safe. And so alive. Singing was my refuge.

The moment I finished my first run-through of the piece, Ms. Wells gestured for me to come sit by her on the piano bench. There was plenty of room. She was real tall but not very wide. I slid in next to her and breathed in the jasmine scent of her perfume.

"This is coming along beautifully, Leisha," she said. "You're going to knock the socks off those college reps at the NATS competition. But we still have some things to clean up." She gestured to the score. "Can you guess what passage I'm going to pick on you about?"

I pointed to the build toward the climax where I'd felt my voice straining on the highest notes.

"Smart girl. That's exactly right." She rattled off corrections to fix the problem. "I'm still seeing too much tension in your jaw. That's going to produce constriction around your vocal cords. Remember how we talked about relaxing your jaw, almost as though you were yawning? And don't forget that you need to form the vowels with your tongue without changing the shape of your mouth."

I held up my hand and told her, "Let me write down what you just said, so I can remember. Mind if I borrow your pencil?" I pointed to her bun where she habitually stuck one.

She laughed, pulled the pencil out, and handed it to me. “Leisha, if all my students took my corrections as seriously as you do, I’d be sending busloads to competitions.”

A rush of heat streamed through my body, and I gave her an embarrassed smile. When I finished writing, I stood and produced an exaggerated and noisy yawn.

Ms. Wells laughed. “You are too much.”

“Just getting ready. Let me try that passage again.”

When I finished, she clapped her hands. “What an improvement!”

“Thanks. I don’t know what it is, but when I write things down, it’s like they stick so much better. I can almost see what you tell me moving across this screen inside my head.”

“I’m all for whatever works. You are one giant sponge, you know that? Teachers aren’t supposed to admit they have favorite students, but I have to confess, I haven’t had this much fun coaching a student in years!”

Her eyes glistened, and I knew then. I mattered to her, just like she was important to me. It wasn’t only that she was the best teacher I’d ever had. She really listened, cared. Whenever I fantasized what it would be like to have a mom, an image of Ms. Wells popped into my mind.

And I already couldn’t wait for Saturday’s coaching session. “What do you want me to work on for next time?”

She paused. “My thought is it’s time to focus on your dramatic interpretation. Mozart gave almost no indications on the score, and that has given singers tremendous freedom to develop their own approaches. I want you to study the translation. The Countess is devastated by her husband’s betrayal. She mourns the loss of his love, even as she still loves and wants him. See if you can immerse yourself in those feelings of pain and longing.”

Pain? Longing? I knew all about those. “Will do,” I promised.

I thanked her and packed up my stuff. I closed the door behind me and turned left to head down the hall. That's when I nearly crashed into a bulky figure bent over a cluster of white roses, carefully arranged just to the side of Ms. Wells' door.

The figure looked up. Randall! He was one of my classmates and a super talented tenor who'd been studying voice for years. Ms. Wells was also coaching him for the upcoming competition.

His faced turned crimson. He hauled himself up and took off down the hall without a word. You would have thought I was a cop with a warrant for his arrest.

So Randall was crushing on Ms. Wells? I wasn't really surprised, even if she was way older. She was beautiful. And so passionate about music. Just like Randall.

And me.

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At 8:30 Saturday morning, I raced across the quad to the performing arts building. The cold stung my face, and I pulled my parka tighter around me. Except for the sound of my boots crunching against the salted walkway, the snow-covered campus was deathly still.

When I'd first arrived at Stonefield Academy, the early morning and late night quiet crept me out. In the Bronx, it's never quiet. Music blares, cars honk, the subway rattles through—and always, police sirens scream in the middle of the night.

But now, the quiet didn't bother me. Even the cold didn't faze me. I was fired up. I'd worked really hard on my interpretation of the Mozart and couldn't wait to sing it for Ms. Wells to see what she thought.

I pushed open the heavy door to the performing arts building and stamped my feet against the mat. My boots squeaked on the linoleum as I hurried down the hall.

Weird. The glass window in Ms. Wells' door was dark. She was never late. She always said being early was one of the ways she communicated respect for her students. I knew she walked to campus, so it wasn't like she'd had to drive through the snow.

Could she be meditating in the dark? Mr. Pridock had given that workshop last month on "releasing your stress through mindful meditation," and Ms. Wells told us choir students we should give it a try. I tapped on the door softly, waited for a few seconds, and then knocked louder. Nothing.

I checked the bathroom. No sign of her. Then I fished my phone out of my backpack and scrolled through my contacts. She was in here somewhere. She wasn't big on texting, but she'd called me once or twice about ideas she had for my pieces.

When I found her number and punched it in, her phone went straight to voice mail.

I bit my lip and slid down against the wall to a sitting position. It was drafty in the hallway, so I wrapped my arms tightly around my body. I tried to push away the thoughts that swirled in my brain. Something wasn't right. In the months I'd worked with her, Ms. Wells had never been a no-show.

By the time Randall arrived for his session an hour later, I'd abandoned my spot on the ground and was pacing up and down the hall.

"What gives?" he asked.

I shrugged. "She never showed, and she's not answering her phone."

He pulled off his ski hat and pushed his dirty blonde hair out of his eyes. “No shit?” He shifted from foot to foot. His eyes darted around as though she might magically appear if he looked hard enough.

“Well damn,” he said after a couple of minutes of awkward silence. “Let me know if you hear anything, okay?”

“Will do. Same for me.”

“I hope this isn’t my fault,” he mumbled, and then wheeled around and shuffled down the hall.

His fault? “What do you mean?” I called to his departing back.

He threw up a dismissive hand and didn’t answer.

I stared after him. Tenors have a rep for being super emotional and temperamental, but why on earth would he blame himself for her not showing?

I wanted to talk to him, but first, I headed over to Ms. Wells’ apartment building to check on her. I hadn’t been there since she had the Concert Choir over for a Christmas party after our holiday gala. Her place was only two blocks from campus, on the top floor of an old Victorian that had been converted into apartments. I pressed her intercom button in the musty vestibule over and over, but she was either not answering—or she wasn’t there.

Next stop was the Admin building. It was after ten, and Mr. Ainsley, our headmaster, usually came in on Saturday mornings to catch up on paperwork. Every Monday morning, Mrs. McAllister complained to me, her work-study student, that she couldn’t find a thing after he’d been in the office by himself.

Anyhow, if anything had happened to Ms. Wells, Mr. Ainsley would know. Those two were as tight as corned beef on rye. Ms. Wells dropped by to see him all the time. Behind his

closed door, her laughter rang out like staccato high notes, while his was more of a deep-throated roar.

He was always in a better mood after she'd come by. He'd grab some M & M's out of the snack drawer (M & M's were for good days; Kit-Kats were his drug of choice for the bad ones). Then he'd tease Mrs. McAllister about her latest hair color, which she changed at least every other week, or he'd ask me to hit a high C to "prove" I really was a first soprano. I always refused—until one day, he demanded I stop filing and sing him an aria. I decided to call his bluff. So I stood tall and sang my heart out—no warmup, but I nailed that sucker, a Strauss song I'd worked on for weeks.

There was total silence when I finished. "Whoa," he finally said. "Ms. Wells wasn't kidding. I see why she insisted we find the money to send you to that competition. Leisha, that voice is a gift from God."

Mrs. McAllister dabbed at her eyes with a Kleenex and choked out, "I had no idea! That was amazing!"

Heat rushed to my face. Truth? I'd had no idea I could sing like that either. Until I met Ms. Wells, I didn't even know what an aria was. I just knew when I sang, I felt different—like I could fly up and perch on the shoulder of God. Back home, I'd sung a lot of gospel in church, and people said nice things about my voice. But Gramps always told me to pay no mind. "You're not going to throw your life away like your mama did singing in some low life club. You are smart, girl. You can be a doctor someday. You hear me?"

I heard. But I loved to sing. That was the one thing my mama had left me—my voice. But I didn't think about doing anything with it. Who ever heard of a singing surgeon? And then one

day, Ms. Wells plucked me out of Concert Choir and said, “Come to my studio after classes today. We need to talk.”

The rest, as they say, is history.

The moment I peeked in Mr. Ainsley’s office, the invisible bands around my stomach squeezed tighter. Mr. Ainsley sat slumped over his desk, his hands pressed against his temples. When I knocked on his door frame, he looked up and gestured me in.

Especially after what happened to Mama, my Aunt May is not a big fan of white men. But even she would have to admit he wasn’t bad-looking—well, for an older dude anyway. He has deep set eyes the color of cornflowers, a cleft in his chin that makes him look real boyish, and thick salt and pepper hair. But today he looked... awful. His skin had taken on a grayish tint, and his cheeks sagged beneath his bloodshot eyes.

“I’m sorry to bother you, sir,” I said. My words tumbled out in a rush. “But Ms. Wells, she didn’t show up this morning for coaching sessions, and... and she never blows us off... and I can’t find her. I’m worried.”

“You’d better come on in. Sit down,” he said in a heavy voice, as he gestured toward the high-backed armchair in front of his mammoth oak desk.

I sank down and twisted my hands nervously in my lap. Mr. Ainsley’s grim look matched the gloomy faces of the nineteenth century Stonefield founders whose dark portraits hung on the wall behind him. Once I’d asked him why none of the founders were smiling, and he said it wasn’t the fashion in those days. When I first started working in the office, I’d fantasize about painting smiles on their faces to cheer the place up.

He cleared his throat. “I was actually going to call you before I made the announcement to the whole school. I know how closely you’ve been working with Ms. Wells.”

My stomach dropped somewhere around my knees. He paused and ran his hand through his hair, then settled it on the back of his neck as though it was painful to force the words out. “I’m sorry to tell you that this morning, I received an email from Ms. Wells. For personal reasons, she’s resigned, effective immediately.”

Confusion swept over me. For a moment, I couldn’t speak. Finally, I managed to stammer, “Wha... What? B ...Bu ... But why? Did she say why?”

“Only that it was personal.”

“But... but where did she go?”

He sighed and shook his head. “I wish I could tell you, but she didn’t say. I got a message from the super at her apartment that she left all her belongings, and he wants me to get them out of there, so he can rent the place. Apparently, she’s already gone. No forwarding address—no nothing.”

My heart thudded in my chest. “I don’t get it! She was so excited about the choral concert, and working with Randall and me for the auditions. This doesn’t make any sense! We have to find her!”

Mr. Ainsley tapped the cleft in his chin with his index finger and then looked out the window for several seconds before dragging his gaze back to mine. “Sometimes people do things we don’t understand, and we just have to respect their privacy. I know how disappointing this must be, but I want to assure you we’ll locate a replacement as soon as possible. I’ve put in a call to Mr. Wilcox to help us get the ball rolling on an interim search.”

I gritted my teeth. Mr. Wilcox? Great. He was the one person on campus who’d undoubtedly be thrilled Ms. Wells had taken off. Ever since she’d replaced him as chair of the music department, he’d stormed into the office at least once a month to complain about the

direction of the music program. I didn't have to eavesdrop to figure that out. When he got going, his fog horn of a voice shook the chandeliers in the front office. Anyone with more than six brain cells could figure out why Mr. Ainsley decided to put Ms. Wells in charge of music. She didn't make you reach for your stash of Kit-Kats after spending five minutes with her.

“So that's it then?” My voice jumped up an octave. “You're just going to let her go? She's one of the best teachers at Stonefield. That's not just me saying that. You can ask any student who's ever had her.”

“I agree. I'm sad too, Leisha. She's been a remarkable colleague.” His lower lip quivered. For a moment, I wanted to comfort him.

Still, he'd hung out with her. They were friends. Surely he'd know she never would have checked out on her students, on him, on the whole school without saying goodbye.

But I didn't say that. Gramps had drummed it into my head I had to respect my elders—even when I knew they were dead wrong.

In the deepest part of my gut, I felt it. Something smelled as rank as the garbage left out on the streets back home. And I sure as hell was going to find out what it was.