

CHAPTER 1

MORE THAN ONE PERSON wanted to strangle Judith Pence Friday night. I was not one of them.

Okay, I lied. I was one of them.

And my thoughts weren't limited to strangling.

After two hours of rehearsal, we weren't even halfway through Act One of the musical *Carnival*. Nothing, I mean *nothing*, was making our director happy. "It's community theater!" I wanted to yell at her. "Not Broadway!"

I am not a yeller, though.

I just sat quietly in the orchestra pit, adjusting the weight of the accordion—yes, accordion—on my lap and thinking mean thoughts. Later I would feel a little guilty about those mean thoughts, but at the time they were therapeutic.

Suddenly Judith's voice was right behind me. "When are you two going to learn those lyrics?" she yelled.

I turned around cautiously and saw her standing at the railing of the orchestra pit. She was glaring up at the two actors on stage.

"Sorry!" said Feleesha Farnsworth, the blonde playing Lili, the lead. Rumor has it that she had changed the spelling of her name from "Felicia" to "Feleesha" when she went to New York City to make it big. She obviously hadn't made it.

“I know I screwed up, too,” said Joe, the male lead.

“That’s an understatement,” said Judith.

Joe bristled. “I’m working on it! I just haven’t had time to get that song down yet.”

“When the blazes do you intend to *find* the time? We open this weekend.” Judith rested her script on the metal pit railing, took her pen from behind her ear, and clanked it against the metal over and over again. She was clanking a little too close to my head for comfort, so I leaned forward a bit.

Finally she said, “Go to the greenroom, both of you, and work with Erin on your lines. *Again.*”

Joe joined Erin, the stage manager, but Feleesha lingered. She crossed her arms in front of her, giving herself a little hug. Finally she said, “It’s just that we’ve got so *many* songs, Judith.”

“That’s what happens when you’re the lead. Now go.”

She went. Quickly.

Judith shouted, “Celeste! Victor!” The two understudies scrambled from the wings. “Fill in for Feleesha and Joe, and see if you can do it off book.” She looked down into the pit at Becky, our conductor and musical director. “Play that song again, and slow it down.”

Becky took a deep breath and fingered the cross around her neck for a moment. Then she lifted her baton, and we played “I Hate Him” again at exactly the same speed as before. Celeste and Victor sang flawlessly.

Judith had not one word of criticism, and Judith always had at least one word of criticism.

An hour later, after yet another lecture about responsibility and commitment and honoring our implied contract with the audience to provide high quality entertainment, Judith finally dismissed us.

I slipped my accordion, Tillie, off my shoulders and settled her carefully onto the wooden stand next to me. (I have a tendency to name objects I love. My accordion. My car. My favorite purse.) I always leave Tillie in the pit for the duration of a show, alongside the drums, because she's too heavy to lug up and down the stairs and lift in and out of the car every day. I hate to go home without her, as she is such a nice accordion, but the theater is always locked when we aren't there. Besides, as the other musicians tease me, "Who would steal an accordion?"

I stood up and pulled back my shoulder blades, then stretched both arms overhead, getting the kinks out of my back. Next to me, Gordon put his trombone in its case and snapped the locks. "A flute," he said, continuing his nightly routine of suggesting instruments I might play that aren't "the size of a small refrigerator." He picked up his case. "No back problems with a flute."

"But no one knows what to call you," I said, continuing my routine of rejecting his suggestions. "Flautist? Flutist? Fluter?" I stretched my neck from side to side. "A little yoga before I go to bed, and I'll be fine."

I would probably pop a couple of Advil, too, but I wasn't about to tell Gordon that. I am a bit sensitive about my instrument of choice—well, not my choice exactly. My Polish great-grandfather is the one who decided to enroll me in accordion lessons when I was six. Jaja loved the accordion, and to everyone's surprise, I soon did, too.

There isn't a lot of modern accordion sheet music in the world, so my teacher gave me music from the decades when the accordion enjoyed more popularity—the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. Like a duckling, I imprinted. Then in high school I discovered musical theater, and show tunes took their place beside the old standards in my brain.

“Thank God you have us,” my two older brothers reminded me often. They taught me to beat-box, saving me from, as they put it, “complete musical nerd-dom.”

“What in the Sam Hill is beat boxing?” my grandmother had asked when she learned about it. When I explained that I could use my voice to imitate the sounds of a drum machine, she looked skeptical. When I demonstrated, she was not impressed. “Too much like spitting,” she said.

Gordon gave me a wave. “I’m outta here.” He and I had become friends a couple of years earlier during a production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. He’s one of the dozens of people who have given me copies of the Gary Larson cartoon: *Welcome to heaven...Here’s your harp. Welcome to hell... Here’s your accordion*. I could paper a wall with them.

“Say hi to Annalise and the kids,” I said.

I pulled my purse out from under my chair and then looked over at the drummer. I hesitated, then said, “See you, Stan.” He muttered a crabby, “Yeah,” as usual. Was he *ever* going to get over my turning him down for more dates?

Carefully, I made my way through the orchestra pit toward the steps, trying not to dislodge or trip over all the cords snaking across the floor, and saying goodbye to other band members. I went up the steps out of the pit and was heading up the stairs to the stage when Judith yelled, “Ella!”

What now? I stopped midway up the stairs, momentarily enjoying a sense of power from standing above her.

“I’m just not happy with that opening,” Judith said. “It doesn’t look like Aiden is really playing the concertina.”

“That’s because Aiden *isn’t* really playing the concertina.” I managed to hold back a “Duh!”

Carnival opens with a lone figure walking across the stage with a concertina and playing the beginning of “Love Makes the World Go Round,” the only song anyone ever recognizes from the show. But in our show, Aiden just pretends to play while I actually play the song from the orchestra pit on my accordion. I play because, despite my best efforts to teach the teenager the simple melody, Aiden can’t begin to do it. He has the musical talent of, oh, a coffee table. I have not even been successful teaching him to *fake* play the song believably.

“You’ve got to try again to teach him to play it himself. I don’t like this fake business.”

“But...”

She gave me what Gordon and I call her “Mama Morton” look, a reference to the prison matron in *Chicago*. “Just do it,” she said. Then she turned and walked away.

I wasn’t about to do it, but I wasn’t going to tell Judith that.

I am not a confronter.

Poor Aiden. I suspected that he was in the show only because his mother wouldn’t have agreed to be musical director unless Judith found a part for him. In addition to his brief appearance walking across the stage with a concertina, he also plays a tightrope dancer in the ensemble. That hasn’t gone well either. He has a decent voice, but he is uncoordinated.

The choreographer has tried to help him blend into the background with easy steps, but an awkward fifteen-year-old with a bright shock of red hair doesn't blend easily. His costume of purple Spandex doesn't help.

When I went to the greenroom to get my sweater, I saw that Feleesha and Joe were still going over their lines, only now it was Feleesha's mother, Paula, coaching them, not the stage manager. As wardrobe mistress, Paula sews, organizes, and maintains the many costumes for the show. Did her responsibilities now include coaching?

"I have to go," said Joe, closing his script and getting up. "Really."

"Not exactly committed, are you?" sniffed Paula.

"I'll get the lines. But now I need some sleep." He took his script and walked away.

I heard him mutter "bitch" as he left. I wasn't sure if he meant Judith or Paula.

CHAPTER 2

THE NEXT NIGHT, I pulled into the theater parking lot a little early for rehearsal. The Juniper Theater is part of a thriving downtown in our small community along the foothills of the Colorado Rockies. Juniper has become known as an artist's community, with downtown businesses and galleries hosting pottery workshops and exhibitions that have gained a national reputation.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary as I parked the car. It was just another night in a string of rehearsal nights. If I'd known that I'd later be asked to reconstruct every detail of the evening, I'd have taken notes. Or pictures.

But as it was, I just headed for the greenroom, hoping the lasagna I'd grabbed at Whole Foods wasn't cold yet. I remember seeing two teenage cast members—dancers—already sitting at the mirrors piling on makeup. They never appear without heavy eyeliner, blusher, and perfectly blown-dry hair, even for rehearsals. One of the girls, Helena, wears camisole tops and brightly printed leggings that outline everything she has, and what she has is definitely worth outlining. Everyone knows her name, but not the name of her not-so-spectacular-looking friend.

Then I sat down at a table beside Feleesha, who was carefully eating five carrot sticks and some hummus. She

had wrapped an orange and blue Broncos fleece blanket around her shoulders to take off the chill. “Not exactly a big supper there, Feleesha,” I commented. She weighs maybe 100 pounds. Surely she wasn’t dieting.

“Not supper. Just a little snack to keep me going. Gluten-free, of course.”

“Of course.” I gnawed on the giant roll I’d slathered with butter to go along with my lasagna.

Feleesha looked around. “Is Judith around?”

“I haven’t seen her,” Stan said, sitting down with a cup of coffee and a granola bar.

“Good.” She reached inside the small cooler beside her and pulled out a packet of string cheese.

Joe sat down beside us, sucking down a chocolate shake. “Keep an eye out for her, Ella. You’re facing the door.” Judith has a policy forbidding all singers from eating any kind of milk products before a show or a rehearsal—something about it causing phlegm. But Joe, among others, says that theory is nonsense.

I remember that Noreen, the woman who runs lights for the show and is in charge of the facility during rehearsals, came in late. Although she is much easier to get along with than Judith, it’s not a good idea to cross her. She has rules, and she expects us to follow them. She also has a temper.

Stan asked her to borrow a music stand light because his was acting “kind of wonky,” and she said she would go up to a storage room in the balcony area to get one. I remember that bit of conversation because I love the word “wonky.” I zoned out for a few moments, thinking about other “w” words I like—wheeze, willowy, wriggle . . .

Then I noticed Caleb coming in late, too. He works for

the theater and runs sound for our show. He collapsed in a chair and pried open a Styrofoam container.

“You seem a little stressed,” I said.

“I’m late. My wife got tied up at work, and I had to pick Jamie up from soccer practice and feed him,” he said. “Guess what kind of take-out an eight-year-old won’t eat.”

“Sushi?” I hazarded a guess, looking at his chopsticks.

He frowned at me. “How did you know?”

“Seaweed . . . kids . . .”

“Of course I didn’t get seaweed. It was California rolls.” He slid a piece of chicken off a stick and onto his rice. “Tonight he says he hates California rolls. Two weeks ago he loved California rolls.” He shook his head.

Then Noreen came back and handed Stan a light. She picked up a waste basket and slammed it on top of the table. “Smell this, everyone!” No one seemed eager to sniff. “You’re supposed to put the food trash *only* in the green trash bin because it is the one Caleb and I empty every night. But somebody used this one!”

“It smells like rotten beef,” Feleesha shuddered. I didn’t smell anything, but then I didn’t have Feleesha’s nose, or Noreen’s. If anyone put on even a tiny spritz of perfume, they smelled it, and we would get a lecture about respecting the sensitivities of others.

Noreen continued. “You guys have got to remember to clean up after yourselves. If you sit in the auditorium when you’re not onstage, don’t leave your gum wrappers or sweaters or notebooks or Kleenex packs or whatever in the seats or on the floor. Same with you people in the pit. And if you’re leaving stuff in the greenroom, put it in a bag, not scattered all over the damn place.”

She was on a roll. “And for God’s sake, act like you were raised in civilization. I found sunflower seed shells in a pile on the floor last night, still slimy. Have you never heard of wastebaskets? And when I went up to the balcony to get the light for Stan, I opened the women’s restroom up there, and it smelled to high heaven. Three of the toilets had been used—one of them for serious business, if you know what I mean.” She looked at those of us eating and muttered, “Sorry,” and then continued. “Who *does* that? Who doesn’t even have the common decency to flush? And I’ve told you before, you are not even supposed to *be* in the balcony area. There’s a reason for that red rope across the stairs. It’s off limits during rehearsals!”

She was gaining momentum. “And don’t leave your props and costumes in the area in front of the fire exit! How many times do I have to tell you? Last night I found a hat with a stuffed rabbit in it.” We all looked over at the guy playing Marco the Magnificent, who gave a little shrug and muttered an “Oops.” “*Plus* a boa, a bra, three tutus, and a pair of tap shoes. Get your act together, people!” She turned to Caleb. “Let’s go. We’ve got stuff to do.”

As she headed for the door, Stan called after her. “You do realize that most people aren’t here yet, right? And didn’t hear you?”

“Spread the word when they get here,” she ordered, and left.

I remember that Caleb grabbed two California rolls, one in each hand, and followed Noreen out of the greenroom. I scraped the sides of the container for the last bit of lasagna. Feleesha relished another package of string cheese, and Joe slurped his shake while we all kept an eye out for Judith.

All of that I remember pretty well. But what I remember most clearly was what we heard next.

A scream.