

Chapter Two



SUN AND MOON

(Ages Six to Ten)

It could have been that I was a child.

It could have been that I was biased because she was my mother.

Or it could have been that Margot-Sophia Lalonde was massive, larger-than-life, riveting, take-your-breath-away vivid, and astonishing.

In spite of all the years and everything since, I still think of her that way.

Up on the stage in performance or rehearsal, or even in one of our living rooms in one of the European cities we lived in so briefly, Margot-Sophia drew breath and opened her mouth, and the sound, the music that came, it shook the air, made all the colors brighter.

My mother's voice pulled something from the depths of me that made me feel everything all at once, things I didn't have names for yet and maybe never would. It was huge, marvelous, magnificent.

It wasn't just me. The vocal coaches and directors and fellow musicians who came in and out of our various temporary homes regarded her with barely disguised awe, and the care required for the nurturing of her—voice, body, soul—was significant. There were special teas, optimum percentages of humidification and temperature, with the requisite humidifiers in every room, house calls from the ENT (ear, nose, and throat) specialist in each city, private teachers of yoga, Pilates, Alexander Technique. She was focused and diligent, and everyone around her was focused and diligent, and practically falling over themselves . . . all to maintain the magnificence.

I took piano and violin and breathed music. I would be a singer too, I thought, or some variety of musician or performer. It was a given. Our life had a sense of purpose, of importance, of largeness.

There are soft memories too—warm, tactile memories—all of these also tied up and infused with music. Mom singing me to sleep on the nights she was home, me waking partway, late in the night when she came into my room after a performance, smoothing my hair and dropping soft kisses on my cheeks and forehead and nose. “Don't wake up,” she would whisper. But I wanted to. I always wanted to.

There was my hand in hers everywhere we went: museums, concerts, bookstores, through train stations and hotel lobbies and opera-house lobbies and in greenrooms and dressing rooms, her hand. I can still feel the silkiness of her fingers, the warmth of her palm.

I remember how tall she seemed, how good she smelled,

how loved I was. I remember, when she told me I could be anything I wanted if only I was willing to work hard enough, how I believed her. And how I wanted to be just like her.

But every so often the magnificence faltered. There were days or weeks even, usually between jobs, or after one of our trips back to Canada to check on the house Mom's parents had left her, when Mom was very sad—too sad to do much of anything but lie around, crying and sleeping. It always passed, but it scared me.

Still, life was good.

In Vienna we bought matching coats in elegant red wool.

In Prague we went to the Charles Bridge in the foggy dawn, then had hot cocoa for breakfast.

In Antwerp we gave a mini concert for some of Mom's opera friends, Mom singing and me on piano and violin, and it got written up in the paper.

My education was both odd and interesting. Mom downloaded a hodgepodge of North American and British curriculums for homeschooling, cherry-picking what she thought was important versus not, while still making sure to cover all the basics. She taught some of it to me herself and hired tutors for the subjects she didn't like. Plus there were always the music lessons, history, tennis in certain countries, depending on the season.

In most cities, there would be kids—other opera kids—for me to do my activities with, to take sewing or hat making or dancing or fencing lessons from the costumers, choreographers, or fight directors of whatever opera house Mom was working at. And we would hang out backstage or in the

props rooms, or run around the dressing-room area when no one was there, precocious little opera urchins, making nuisances of ourselves until someone shooed us away. Some of the kids I liked better than others, but we were never anywhere for longer than a few months, so while a few of my friendships were intense, they were also short-lived.

There were a couple of girls I exchanged e-mails with for a while, and occasionally I would end up at an opera house with someone I'd met before, but I went into every friendship knowing that sooner or later, I would be saying goodbye.

Still, I had my mom, and so it was okay.

Once, when I was nine, she handed me a Rubik's Cube and told me that was my schoolwork until I figured it out. This seemed awesome, at first.

"Do you know how to do it, Mom?" I asked a few frustrated hours later.

"No, I do not," she said, looking up from her music stand.

"But . . . then . . . why are you making me do it?"

"So you can learn to sort things out on your own," she said. "So you will learn to persevere. So you will be able to do more than one thing."

I didn't get that. To be able to do one thing, if you could do it as well as she did, seemed to me to be more than enough. But when I presented her with the finished Rubik's Cube a few days later, her eyes shone, and that night she let me stay in her dressing room during the show, and the next day we went to a beautiful little café where we had tea Russian-style,

from a real samovar, and sat, side by side, drinking it.

A few months later came London. Covent Garden.

Covent Garden was a big deal—in and of itself, but also for Margot-Sophia.

I was used to opera houses, but Covent Garden, with its Corinthian-columned entrance, stunning glass atrium, and seating for over two thousand people, was gorgeous. It was also daunting, being so much bigger, in every way, than any opera house Mom had worked in.

I was entranced, in awe, infatuated.

“This is the place they write the music for,” I said to Mom one day near the end of rehearsals, looking up to the three levels of galleries, and farther up, miles up it seemed, to the dome of pale blue with gold filigree.

“Yes.” Mom gazed thoughtfully at me, nodding. “The building . . . whoever designed it, aspired to the music, but now the music aspires to it.”

I sighed, tucked my hand into the crook of her arm, and she pulled me against her.

“Are you scared? When you go on?”

“Always,” she said. “But that is as it should be. And ultimately, I have to believe.”

“In yourself.”

“Not just myself,” she said. “I also have faith in the hours I’ve spent in preparation, in my skill, and in the magic that comes, when it deigns to come, once you have done all that work.”

She didn’t need to explain the magic—I had felt it in the very best performances—the thing beyond technical per-

fection, the thing that made audiences gasp or hold their breath, the thing that shot me straight through and made me feel I might fly or crumble to dust, just from listening.

We believed in hard work, but we also believed in magic.

Just being at Covent Garden was a result of both.

With Covent Garden came a recording, too, the first of many planned, which would ideally bring helpful income for years to come. In addition, the production was going on tour, which would provide more exposure, more stability.

We rented a flat and bought a piano and some furniture: a bohemian mix of antiques and retired set pieces that were donated by various theaters and opera houses for a huge fundraising event. Giddy from her newfound success, and possibly a glass or two of champagne, Mom had gone a little crazy bidding at the silent auction, and won a giant bed, two wardrobes, a non-functional cuckoo clock, and two thrones. It was as settled as we’d ever been or would ever be, I figured. I even made a friend in the building—a girl my age named Emily, whose parents lived across the hall, and whose “normal” life and parents seemed very exotic to me.

By this time I knew there was no father waiting or detained somewhere, planning to come claim us. I was, as Mom put it, “the miraculous result of one very wild, very late, very irresponsible night in the south of Spain,” my father long gone, never missed, and never even searched for, because she didn’t, in fact, know his name. “But he was handsome,” she would say with a smile, “and kind, and knew how to dance the flamenco. I am thankful for him every day, my precious girl, but we are complete without him.”

I believed her. And I liked the London flat. We'd still be traveling, Mom said, but we could now afford a home base.

I was in the audience for the opening, dressed in burgundy silk, and breathless, terrified, hanging on her every note.

I had nothing to worry about. Margot-Sophia, statuesque and dramatic with her flowing, dark, un-wigged hair and espresso-colored eyes, was stunning, captivating, perfect, and magical. There were standing ovations, flowers. Reviews were excellent. After years of hard work and slogging through the lesser and medium opera houses of Europe, Margot-Sophia Lalonde had arrived.

It was such a crystal-clear moment, everything coming together. In my memory, though, except for those occasional "sad days," all the years building up to it were beautiful too. My mother was my sun and moon, and all things were infused with soaring music, tiny luxuries, love, and a kind of velvet fabulousness.

Which makes it hard to reconcile where we are now, how we are.

Chapter Three



THE HARD WAY

(Peak Wilderness, Day One, Continued)

Dear Mom,

We have reached the "camp."

I should clarify: we have reached camp after a three-hour hike, much of it uphill.

Also, I held my bladder for seven hours.

And have killed 255 mosquitoes.

See? I have a list of accomplishments already.

Remember how Ella told us how she bonded with the other girls in her cabin? And her story about that too-hot night where the people on the top bunks ended up sleeping on the floor?

Remember the charming log cabins on the brochure you showed me when we first talked about my going on this trip? And the open-air space with picnic tables, and the tiny buildings with wooden moons and stars carved onto their doors?

At the time I thought it looked a little rustic for my first camp experience, but the longer we hiked today, the better that