

## CHAPTER ONE

When his cell phone chirped, my student musician was clever enough to refrain from answering but failed to contain his grin. I could have powered through the song anyway, but instead I lowered my violin, and the song screeched to a merciful death.

Lalo lowered his vihuela. "I'm sorry, Uncle Andy."

The skinny sixteen-year-old wasn't my nephew. He was my brother's nephew, so the term might have been an endearment. I knew better. He was hoping our connection meant I wouldn't wring his neck, at least not in front of the other six would-be mariachi players: a trio of violinists, a pair of trumpet players, and Memo, the other rhythm player. They cared about one another's reactions much more than they did about mine. Thanks—or not—to the grant that helped us stage the show, we had to follow the stipulation to hire high school students.

"I'll silence it right now." Lalo dug the device out of his shorts and checked the number. "Oh, but it's Dad. Should I—"

What could I say? We were preparing a show for The Latin Lounge, a small Vegas venue that was half lounge, half theatre. Although he did as little as possible, Lalo's father was its manager. "Go ahead."

While Lalo answered, I sat back against the table. Since the stage was under construction, we were rehearsing in the conference room. The chairs had been pushed to one side to allow for the music stands and instrument cases. The lilac walls and Renoir prints were supposed to be comforting, but given my so-called musicians, the only comfort would be provided by the door as soon as I escaped through it.

I would have been more patient except that we'd already been rehearsing for two weeks. We had four more days before our first performance, which, from the sound of things, might also be our last.

I knew better than to care so much about the music—I'd been accused of perfectionism on many occasions even though I knew good and well that I didn't reach it—but this would be Rachel's first mariachi show. My girlfriend had written the lyrics and the melodies, but I'd filled in with the harmonies and collaborated on revision after revision after revision. We'd poured our souls into these songs, and I couldn't stand thinking that the kids could ruin them for us.

Lalo brushed strands of brown hair off his forehead and put away his phone. "Dad is going home now, so you're supposed to take me with you after the rehearsal."

It was a toss-up as to whether it was worse to rehearse seven kids who couldn't play or suffer Lalo's parents for a dinner I didn't want to attend. Normally I enjoyed a noisy family event, but so far, my headache had defied three painkillers.

"Should we take it from the top?" Lalo asked.

Reyna snickered at him. The pretty first violinist with long black hair and a post-braces smile would be the type who governed all the cliques at school. She focused on the music more than the others, but I'd confiscated her cell phone early that morning after it buzzed several times during our first song.

"For now, let's go on," I said.

"Mr. Andy, what's the show about?" asked Eugenio.

My third violin player had the frame of a body builder, which he showed off through droopy muscle shirts. He chatted with the others the moment we took a break and didn't stop talking until I shouted at him. I couldn't fault him for being friendly, but he was the worst violinist I'd ever met. Had he been a true beginner, I would have pardoned him. What I couldn't forgive was the way he boasted about being the best violinist at his high school.

Eugenio thumbed his strings, three of which were out of tune. The seventeen-year-old couldn't draw the bow straight and only played in first position. Maybe that was why he often

stared out the window as we played; he longed to escape, maybe to a wrestling mat.

I saw through his ruse. He asked about the show to waste rehearsal time.

Two could play such a game. “It’s about a man who falls in love with a woman, but she betrays him, and—”

“No, it’s not!” Melody laughed through ringlets that spent most of their time falling into her face. No wonder she couldn’t play the right notes. But my second violin player at least knew enough Spanish to understand the songs, which was why she knew I was lying. Instead, I’d merely recounted the first thing that came to mind, unbidden, my own true story of a woman from right here in Las Vegas.

I wiped my forehead as if wiping away a memory. *Never mind about the past*, I told myself. *Stick with the present.*

“Good, Melody. So can you tell your friend what the show is about?”

“Well, there’s this lady, and she has a terrible boyfriend. He’s really cute but he’s boring.”

“Right. Anybody else?”

“He won’t go out dancing because he’s always too tired, and finally she gives up on him because she’s better off alone,” said Arnulfo. My lanky second trumpet player towered over the rest of them. At six feet, he was nearly as tall as I was, but he didn’t have any gray hairs amidst the straight black strands.

“Terrific,” I said. “That’s why the show is called *Siempre Libre*.”

“Forever Free,” said Jersey, my other trumpet player. He was a squashed-up version of his cousin Arnulfo, as if he hadn’t been nourished enough. They played the trumpet at the same medium level. “Sounds sad.”

It wasn’t, though. With humorous, upbeat music, the show argued that some relationships weren’t worth the trouble. No matter how wonderful it was to have a partner, there was no reason to sacrifice soul, body, and mind at the same time. Did my girlfriend’s songs mostly point fun at men? Yes. I could think of reasons why I—no, they—deserved it. Fortunately, Rachel had written the songs before we’d met, so none of them were strictly autobiographical.

“What happens at the end?” Eugenio asked.

“She decides to give him another chance, but she has some conditions,” Reyna said.

I silently awarded her a brownie point. She too had understood the gist of the show.

“He’ll probably blow it again,” Melody said. “The audience can interpret the ending either way.”

“It still sounds sad,” Arnulfo said. “And lonely.”

I checked the tension in my bow. Too tight was hard on the wood. Too loose didn’t give you enough sound. “Loneliness depends on your point of view, but you won’t be free until we finish this rehearsal, so let’s continue.”

I raised my violin, the kids prepared to play, and six of them came in with me. That was a good ratio. I might have been encouraged, but instead I quit playing and strode over to the guitarrón player.

As often happened, the smallest, thinnest member of the group was the one who chose to play the biggest instrument, the one that functioned as a stringed bass. When Memo held the guitarrón across his chest in the usual way, the most I could see of him were his hands and his face. His eyes were a bit brighter than mine, but we both boasted shades of green.

“What key were you in, Memo?”

“The key of F, Mr. Andy.”

“Yes. And you, Lalo?”

Lalo looked down as if the answer were written on top of his instrument. “D?”

“Yes, Lalo.” I waved my violin as if saluting him. “You started in D and Memo started in F. Why was that?”

The three violinists giggled, but Eugenio was the loudest.

I turned so sharply I felt a muscle twitch. “Did any of you remember to play a B-flat?” I

plucked one so hard that the note rang throughout the room. “No, you did not.”

The trio hushed, but their smirks barely faded. The kids shared the same problems. They didn’t understand mariachi music well enough to care about it. They’d performed in high school venues but hadn’t internalized the fact that our audience would expect a decent performance. I knew when the truth would hit: as the curtains opened for our first performance. Then they would finally understand what we were up against. The question was whether they would rise to the challenge or freeze. Things could go either way. I’d played long enough that I’d suffered through terrible performances. I would survive either way. But to Rachel, the show was everything. I had no choice but to press.

“I know you’re capable of playing this music well, but you have to want to.” I set down my violin and bow so I could wave both arms as I paced. “Mariachi means passion. It means fun. But it also means beautiful music. You can’t play well if you’re not focused on what you’re doing.”

I stepped back and leaned against the table. I’d given the same speech every day for the last two weeks. It had become a daily anthem, but my listeners tuned out as soon as I started. It wasn’t my fault that I lost patience. I’d grown up hearing mariachi music. I’d embraced it as the most perfect musical form. I’d started performing it at thirteen. Nearly forty, I still loved mariachi music more than anything. As a final insult, here were seven students botching in multiple terrible ways the very tunes I’d helped create.

“If we lose our place, is it okay if we make stuff up?” Eugenio asked.

I held the scroll of my violin to my forehead. “This isn’t jazz. Play the song the way Rachel and I wrote it.”

“But if we get lost—”

“In mariachi you only improvise if there’s an emergency.”

Eugenio swung his bow on his little finger, which was a great way to wind up buying a new bow. “What would qualify?”

I thought of Noche Azul, my old mariachi restaurant in Southern California. There my emergencies had been triggered by a sudden loss of memory. Blanking out. Noisy customers. Tripping over the wait staff. But my current charges were playing from sheet music. They would be performing on a small stage where the audience would be focused on every song.

“Are we taking a break, Mr. Andy?” Memo asked.

The only break was going to occur in my eardrums. “Take it from the top,” I said weakly as I tucked my violin under my chin. “In F!”

As I gave the downbeat, I fantasized about being back at Noche Azul. My fellow musicians and I had played as a team, and we’d usually sounded good. To be fair, we hadn’t always paid strict attention to our work. We knew the standard songs so well that we goofed around, flirting with audience members and exchanging jokes. As professionals, we could get away with it. Night after night we still offered a quality show.

In contrast the kids limped through the next measures. I could have stopped to make corrections, but they’d worn me down. I had two rhythm players who couldn’t count, three violinists who couldn’t play in tune, and a pair of trumpet players who fought more than they played. After nine rehearsals, one song was passable. The other nineteen needed work. I wasn’t the Pied Piper leading the band. I was the head lemming racing for the cliff.

I didn’t even stop when my brother, Lalo’s actual uncle, wandered in. Apart from the circles under his eyes and his extra ten pounds, we looked nearly alike. I was thirteen months older and twice as tanned, but people mistook us for twins all the time.

Joey hugged me unobtrusively and stepped out of the way.

“Dang,” Memo said mid-song. It was like pulling the plug in the sink. Without the guitarrón, the bottom fell out, so the kids stumbled to a halt. “Now there’s two of you!”

Joey and I exchanged grins. We both enjoyed the luxury of having a lookalike. Sometimes we orchestrated confusion on purpose. At other times we exchanged favors when we needed to be in two places at once. Usually that meant Joey covering my gigs or my covering meetings with

his architecture clients. Kinder, more patient, more forgiving, he was my better half. But the kids didn't have to know it.

"You won't like rehearsing with him," I lied. "He's got a temper."

Joey laughed. "Rachel said—"

"Let everybody go home early."

"Right."

An extra twelve minutes wouldn't have helped any, but psychologically, it was a present. "You heard him," I told the kids. "Bye."

They didn't argue or waste time as they usually did. They packed up their instruments with unusual efficiency. They were that relieved to get away.

"Tomorrow I want you at nine o'clock sharp!" I reminded them as they fled.

"Is it okay if I get a ride with Memo?" Lalo asked.

When I nodded, he scampered after his friends.

"Key of F!" I shouted after him.

Joey sat beside me. He wasn't smiling. "You've been through terrible rehearsals before. What are you really upset about?"

I took a deep breath. I was reluctant to admit failure, but to ignore the pending storm was to get caught by lightning. "We need to cancel the show."

Joey turned his head so he could look at me more carefully, as if I were a used car that needed to be thoroughly examined. "You would cancel your show four days before it opens."

"To avoid a disaster, yes."

"I thought you wanted to get back into the mariachi scene."

I'd been out of a mariachi job for a year. "I do!"

"I thought you claimed your arrangements worked perfectly for Rachel's lyrics."

"That too! But I can't get back into the game by putting on a lousy show."

"This lounge is so far off-Strip that only diehards will find it. And you've got four more days before showtime." Joey might have been a lawyer. He always found an opposing view.

"What am I supposed to do, wave a magic wand?" I asked.

"You might have to be more patient."

"Rachel said that?"

"No, Lalo did. Rachel is an optimist. But you've never taught music before. Relish the opportunity. Stretch your skills."

"Performing is easy. Teaching is a nightmare. I only agreed because of Rachel."

"You have to lighten up."

"If I were any lighter, I'd fly away. It's no use. Help me convince Rachel to cancel."

"What are you really worried about?"

"You already asked that."

"But you didn't answer."

"The usual. Disappointing the audience."

"Beyond that."

I hated Joey's interrogations. They suggested that he knew more about me than I did.

"Well?"

For a moment I imagined the whole picture: the dark lights, the tables full of cocktails, the happy customers ready to enjoy an evening's entertainment right up to the point when they heard the first note.

"I'm afraid they'll think the problem is Rachel's songs, not the band," I said.

Joey nodded in slow motion. "At least that's honest. But you know what you have to do."

"I refuse."

"It's the only way."

"It's not fair to me, the music, or the audience."

"Blame the Arts Council."

I slapped my arms over my chest. “Stipulating that the musicians be high school students is idiotic.”

“But the two-thousand-dollar grant was smart, right?”

“The kids can’t handle the tunes. It’s crazy to think they would be able to.”

“You and Rachel accepted the terms.”

“I’m fine with hiring a couple of kids who stand in the back where they can be seen but not heard. But depend on them to carry a show? More dangerous than lighting a faulty water heater with a short match.”

Joey yawned. He was unusually jet-lagged, but he’d just returned Stateside from Dubai. “I repeat, you know what you have to do.”

“Joey, no.”

“Four days until showtime. Let me hear you say it.”

“You can’t make me.”

“Rachel and I will carry the songs. That’s what people focus on, the vocals.”

“You want me to forget about the music. Ignore the nights Rachel and I reworked every chord of every measure.”

“The audience won’t care.”

I made a show of checking my watch, but I knew the time. “We better get going so your in-laws don’t worry about us.”

“I’m waiting.”

My mouth was dry, but I couldn’t blame the desert.

“Come on,” Joey said. “I’m getting hungry.”

“You’re still jet-lagging. You don’t know if you’re hungry or not.”

“I’ve been back for three days already.”

“You haven’t slept. I can see it in your eyes.”

“Not true.”

“It’s not too late to call the whole thing off.”

Joey stood. For a moment I thought I’d worn him down, but now I was the optimistic one. “Rachel received a check this afternoon,” he said.

“So?”

“From an anonymous donor. Evidently they heard her podcast about the challenges of staging a show without any money for sets.”

“Why should I care?”

“The memo that came with the cashier’s check said, ‘Break a leg and I’ll see you on Saturday night.’ The check was for six thousand dollars.”

“What?”

“You heard me the first time.”

“Who would give Rachel that much money?”

“You tell me? A former boyfriend?”

I shook my head. “Not that I can think of.”

“Me either. She thinks it’s a producer. Someone interested in women’s projects.”

The prospect was exciting. A woman revitalizing an art form that had been, for its entire history, practically misogynistic. Half the mariachi songs were about place. The other half were about women, mostly devils, and here and there a few saints.

I placed my hand flat on the table. “Getting the support of a producer is exactly what we need.”

“Right. So the show will go on as planned, meaning with the kids. I repeat. What do you have to do?”

I closed my eyes, wishing I could be anywhere else: back in Tucson at an orchestra rehearsal for my current job, back in time when I played in Las Vegas as a high schooler myself, back in Squid Bay before my boss met Yiolanda. Had destiny been up to me, I would have never left

Southern California.

Joey stepped on my foot. “Well?”

“We should end the show with audience participation. Have everybody sing ‘*La bamba*.’”

“Good idea. Before that?”

“That’s not enough?”

He waited as patiently as a frog waiting for a fly. The fly never escaped, and I couldn’t either.

“Simplify the music,” I muttered.

“What was that?”

“Dumb down the music. Snuff the life out of it. Destroy it. Punch a hole through it.”

“Right. But you’ll feel better if you think of it as leaving out a few notes.”

That meant Salieri, not Mozart. Frijoles without salsa.

After all our hard work, we deserved better, but Joey was right. It was like taking a dream and kicking it, but we only had one chance to make a first impression. That left us no choice. If we hoped to succeed, we would have to murder half the notes.