

Murder In The Pit
By Erica Miner

Chapter 3

*Non esser, gioia mia, con me crudele:
lasciati almen veder, mio bell'amore*

Don't be cruel, my treasure:
I beg for one glance, my beloved.

Mozart, *Don Giovanni*, Act II

On her way to the women's locker room, Julia passed Abel's dressing room, where the "*Maestro Trudeau - Do Not Disturb*" sign was posted on the door. She felt a little flutter of excitement and glanced at her watch.

Fifteen minutes, and he'll give the downbeat for my first performance.

Even with the door closed, she could easily distinguish the raised voices from behind the closed door as Abel's and Sidney's.

"You son of a bitch!"

"For God's sake, Sidney, keep it down."

"You said you'd leave her out of it!"

Abel lowered his voice. "I had no choice."

"Over my dead body."

Julia couldn't fathom what caused the personality conflict between the hotheaded Sidney and the self-assured music director. It made her uncomfortable.

They're only the two most important men in my life.

Sid continued at top volume. "If I find out you've done something stupid, I'll ...I'll write a whole new finale to your opening night!"

"The trouble with you, Sidney, is you think you're too damned important." The contempt in the maestro's voice distressed Julia. "No one is indispensable around here. Now get the hell out of my dressing room."

We've got a show to do."

A whole new finale -- what does that mean?

The booming sound of the P.A. system made Julia jump. "Curtain for *Don Carlo* in fifteen minutes." She took a tense breath and let it out with a sigh of relief as the door opened. Sidney stormed out of the dressing room, slamming the door behind him, and ran right into her.

"How long have you been there?"

His dark tone alarmed her. "You know I get concerned when you and Abel -- "

"Who are you, my mother?"

"What's going on, Sid? Why were you going at it again?"

"Since when do you answer a question with a question?"

"Since I'm Jewish." Julia tried to charm him with a smile, but his expression remained grim. "Can't you two just call a truce already? Please?"

His rage softened. "Look, kid, it's what parents do."

"But it's so distressing." She attempted a smile. "You're acting like a jerk."

Won over, he returned the smile, until Tony disrupted their caring moment.

"Time's getting short 'til curtain." Tony tapped his baton against his palm in short, tense gestures. "You two better hustle."

Sidney glared at Tony. "Don't you ever get tired of ordering people around, Rossi?"

As Sidney turned to walk away, Julia turned and saw Charles Tremaine appear, balancing a full cup of coffee in each hand. "Coffee, *Maestro?*"

Julia knew Sid had never picked up a baton, but she tried not to stare at the movie-star looks of the tenor understudy, who had a tendency to hang out with musicians and stagehands. According to rumors, he did this to fend off his own bitterness at constantly being passed over for big roles despite having more talent in his left thumb than tenor star Giuseppe had in his entire body. Julia sympathized with Charles's plight, but she couldn't understand why he blamed Abel for his own lack of recognition in the opera world. Still, eavesdropping on Charles and Sidney's conversation helped Julia endure Tony's scolding.

"It's an understudy's duty to provide overworked musicians with their 'fix.'"

"Right, that's all I need, Charlie. Something to make me even more hyper." Nonetheless, Sidney took the cup and gulped it down.

"And don't worry about paying me back. I'll think of something."

Charles's grin made Julia's heart quiver, but she kept nodding at Tony.

Sidney scowled at Charles. "And don't call me 'Maestro.' I'm no conductor."

"It's a term of endearment." Charles flashed his best Rat Pack smirk.

Julia suppressed a smile. She, too, felt the term "maestro" should be reserved for conductors, the great ones at that. But she couldn't help thinking Charles's misuse of the phrase was apt. Sidney's strong opinions on everything gave him an air of authority.

The door to the maestro's dressing room opened. "Julia, come in please."

Abel did not look at the others. They all stood still, caught off guard by his unexpected appearance. Tony walked off, miffed. The rest of them continued their conversation as if nothing had happened. Julia walked into Abel's dressing room, and the door closed behind her.