

Only he who rejects love's power,
Only he who withholds love's pleasure,
He alone can triumph over the magic
that makes the gold into a ring.
But if it be fashioned into a rounded ring,
it may grant measureless power,
and win the world for its master.
-- Wagner, Das Rheingold, 1st opera in The Ring

CHAPTER ONE

San Francisco, California—Present Day

They were crossing the street now. He could see them, so involved in their opera talk they weren't paying attention. Good.

Everyone knew the corner of Franklin and McAllister, the nearest main crossing to the stage door of San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House, was one of the busiest in the Civic Center district. At twilight when people were leaving work, once the gilded California light began to wane, it was hard to see where one was going, or to perceive what and who might be in the immediate vicinity. Performers from the Opera could not avoid crossing that intersection multiple times, day and night. Accidents, pedestrian and otherwise, did happen. They weren't common, but... Common enough.

With the driver's seat window open, he could hear fragments of their conversation. How he despised that voice. Of an operatic tenor who was so arrogant, so full of himself, that he strode about the stage as if he owned it. That he looked down on anyone who wasn't an opera star like himself. Me especially.

Andres the tenor spoke as he sang: telling the world he was the gods' gift to opera. The singer strutted around owning, claiming, the San Francisco Opera stage—and every other opera stage in the world—for himself. Especially when it came to the massive works of the legendary 19th century operatic giant, Richard Wagner. That swine Andres doesn't deserve to be a star. Maestro Merola, our sainted founder, never would have put up with such egregious affectation. But Maestro Merola had been taken from the company much too soon. The Maestro was a saint, who didn't deserve to die before his time.

He wiped away a tear. Then, remembering the afternoon's

rehearsal, he clenched his teeth. The repulsive behavior Andres exhibited that day proved he had not changed one whit since his previous engagement with the company years ago: arguing with the stage director, the conductor. As if he existed in some lofty echelon miles above everyone else, some kind of Valhalla—the mythical warrior’s heaven where the Norse gods live—of his own making. That bastard. The world will be a better place without him.

He could see Andres and Ben were only halfway across the intersection.
Perfect.

Their light turned red, and his turned green. It was time. Bearing down on the accelerator he hugged the right lane, trying to aim for Andres without hitting Ben. He had no gripe with Ben, but if he became collateral damage, well... Peccato.

It would be a shame. But sometimes sacrifices must be made for the greater good: getting rid of Andres once and for all. The impact was swift and hard. He felt the thud of metal striking skin and muscle and bone. He didn’t look back or sideways but raced through the intersection, weaving through cars, precipitously turning left at Turk Street, then right on Octavia to get out of the sight line of onlookers and other cars. Bristling with tension, he wiped one clammy palm, then the other, on his jacket and glanced around. No one seemed to be following him, and traffic ahead was light, as he had hoped. He could slow down and act normal. He was home free.

Would the “accident” be featured on KTVU Evening News? In the San Francisco Chronicle headlines, tomorrow morning? He relished the thought that when he returned to the opera house the next day, voices would be buzzing with theories about who could have wanted to harm Andres Aaberg, the great Wagnerian tenor.

Who indeed?