

THE SOLOIST

So far Ryan and I, the priest and, of course, Bryce are the only ones present. Ryan has been worrying the priest about one more detail, but now he comes back toward the choir loft where I'm sitting. His new dark suit is so beautiful I want to reach down and touch it. He holds up a corsage—tiny white orchids.

“Ryan! What is *this*?”

“Please, Karen. Just put it on. And here.” He hands me up a program. Bryce's picture is on the front. Inside are listed the order of the funeral service, including my two numbers, and the same remarks Ryan sent to the paper.

“What do you think?”

“Very nice,” I say.

“They don't deserve all this.”

“Where are they?” I ask.

“They've left the motel. That's all I know. I told his father, don't try to drive; you don't know Oklahoma City. Just take a cab. But old Buster probably never got in anything he wasn't driving himself, so I've been watching for a black Caddie.” Ryan stares at Bryce's casket.

“How's his mother?”

Ryan shakes his head. “He wouldn't put her on the phone.”

“Too upset?”

“He's never let me speak with her.” He stops and glances up. “Please wear the corsage.”

We both look back toward where the young black priest is gazing at the Hebrew symbols in one of the stained glass windows. This little church could have started out as a synagogue.

The whites of Ryan's eyes look stark, Murine-bleached. He looks at the corsage. "I want everything to be perfect for them."

Why? I want to ask. Bryce made him promise he wouldn't send his body back to Abilene. So after everything else he's been through, Ryan had to fight Mr. Fry over that. And I hate to be a pain, but I ask, "Where's Belvedere? I can't sing *Wind Beneath My Wings* without an accompanist. There is no way--"

Ryan's hands are up like a traffic cop only they're shaking. "He's coming. He's coming. I double checked yesterday just before he left for the club."

"You don't know Belvedere. Mondays he sleeps all day."

Ryan has gotten thin this last year, though not as bad as Bryce. Ryan and I went to high school together in a town he and I called Spottlesville after the real name of the con man who founded it. I pin on the corsage. "You look perfect, Karen," Ryan says. I knew he'd like the black dress and the hair up, my willowy lady look.

Ryan's the sort of guy who never stuck to anything very long, but was good at whatever he tried. He worked in a men's shoe store until he got to be the top seller. Then he sold furniture, then drapery and then worked as a florist. He's a real good waiter, too, great with kids and old ladies. But he always moved on, leaving a trail of broken-hearted bosses behind. Until Bryce got sick.

I'm the real drifter, just floating along, letting my talents go to waste. I wait tables at the Ponderosa to pay the rent and sing at Starchy's when someone cancels, but I am nearly thirty, and though I've got a great voice, I haven't done one thing about it. Friends offer to help me

make a demo, but I never take them up on it. The idea of putting something together kind of comes and goes. When I'm wearing my boots, dashing into the spotlight at Starchy's, with Bryce and Ryan standing, yelling, "Go, girl, go"—I can see it. But the very next night when I'm clearing a load of smeared up plates, dodging Buzz Halleck's greasy fingers, I can't see myself anywhere but the Ponderosa.

"I tried to get pall bearers," Ryan says. "I called. Some of our friends are—"

Jerks? I start to say. Wimps? Dead?

Ryan doesn't finish his sentence and wanders back toward the door. Three years he's been an insurance salesman, working straight commission. I cannot think of anything worse.

Thank god, it's Belvedere, coming down the aisle, weaving just a little bit, dirty blond curls hanging in his pale blue eyes. But he's here. This is probably the first Monday morning he's seen in years. I just hope he's had something to drink. He opens the organ and begins to run the sleeve of his jacket back and forth along the keys to pick up the dust. He makes a quick selection of stops and looks down, situating his toes on the pedals.

A few more people have come in, a couple with a little boy. They must be neighbors. I don't recognize them. And six or eight black people. Ryan and Bryce used to give big parties in their swank garden apartment. Bryce had money. Tons of people came to their parties, but there's not going to be any of them here today. Folks don't want to come down to this part of town. A place like this—down on Reno Street— belongs to blacks and gays now. But Ryan loves it. They had real support here. He and Bryce came every Sunday till almost the end. "We're grown-ups now," Bryce said one night when they were in the Ponderosa. "We're learning to face reality together."

The priest is shaking hands with a big guy and a wife in a perfect black suit and a flash of diamonds. Ryan is fluttering; these must be the parents. Ryan escorts them to the front row where he has arranged little bouquets with ribbons to mark the first pews on either side. He sits down alone across the aisle.

Belvedere fires her up and after a little swerve, and a few adjustments of the stops, the old organ pours out a strong, steady progression of chords that remind me that this is a church. I fold back my program and lean over and place it on the music stand so Belvedere can see it. After the prayer I'm supposed to sing "This is My Father's World," a hymn I've been singing since I was three. I stand. This will help me warm up for the big production number Ryan wants at the end. Belvedere is going to be fine. The funeral is underway.

After I sit back down, I study Bryce's parents. She may be fifty, but she's still cute and innocent looking with that kind of blond hair we all wish we could afford. A rich man's sheltered doll. Ryan and Bryce have talked to me about his dad, but even if they hadn't, a guy who looks like old Buster wouldn't be any mystery to me. He went straight from being a big football hero at O.U. to tending his family's cattle and oil wells—one of those people who never stumbled, or if he did, he got Blondie there to cover for him. Mr. Fry has things his way. Once he found out Bryce was living with Ryan he cut off the money.

Ever since Mrs. Fry sat down she's been staring dry-eyed into the casket, her lips pressed into a little red line. Maybe only now is she giving up thoughts of grandchildren. The priest has spoken and we all sing *Abide With Me*, but she keeps on staring. I wish the old guy would put his arm around her.

Belvedere is rolling out a grand prelude for my solo. I bet the priest had no idea this organ could sound like the Mormon Tabernacle. I rise. My little orchids flutter. My voice is

full, what they call throaty, and I don't see any reason just because this is a Catholic Church not to give it all I've got. I let it roll out, filling up the whole space, pressing on the little stained glass windows, rising through the rafters. This is a number for the Broadway stage, but it always seemed to me to be a repentant song, to be sung to someone you're trying to make it up to. The kind of thing a woman wants to hear. I look down at Mrs. Fry. Her face is breaking, red and rubbery.

The priest gives a benediction and we rise. My first thought is to get out into the sunshine and warm up. Belvedere is playing "I Come to the Garden Alone," one of my old favorites. I take the program off the music stand and walk around to get out of the choir loft. As I step down, Mrs. Fry reaches out for me. I give her a hug, but she doesn't let go. "Oh, sweetheart," she sobs, and I let her fold against me. I rock her just a bit. Bryce was her only son. They say that nothing's harder in this whole world than losing a child. She is shorter than me, and she puts back her head to look up into my eyes. She takes a shuddery breath. "Bryce wrote and told me about you. He said he had fallen deeply in love. When I looked up there while you were singing and saw the tears in your eyes, I knew you were the one." She squeezes me good.

I look past her head at Buster Fry. His eyes are wide. His big old rancher's hands are out. He's pleading. He's saying, just let this be. Just give her a brave smile and wave good-bye. He'd probably be willing to drive some kind of bargain for this sweet dream come true. Mrs. Fry holds on. I used to fantasize about having rich, generous in-laws.

Ryan is standing across the aisle, his face white. He can't believe what he's hearing. But he shouldn't mind. This will comfort the poor bereaved mother, to think there's another grieving woman, someone who will miss her boy as much as she does. Ryan should want her to have

this. He's never going to see these people again, anyway. What does he care? His hand reaches out to steady himself on the back of the pew. He will die too.

I watch him sit down, and I know that he's not going to fight this. The priest, standing in the back, his hands clasped, waits for us to move on so he can let in the two men from the funeral home. In the absence of pallbearers, they will roll the casket up the aisle and load it into the hearse. I swallow hard.

I take Mrs. Fry gently by the shoulders and step back. "Mrs. Fry, I want you to meet Ryan Matthews. This is the person who supported Bryce when he had no money. Ryan carried him to see the doctor and fed him and cleaned him up. This is the man who asked me to come here today and sing. He wanted a nice funeral for *you* because you are Bryce's mother."

Ryan steps forward and holds out his hand. His lips are parted. Buster Fry's lower jaw has shoved forward. Mrs. Fry blinks to try to understand. I've blown away her life long shelter. She half turns toward Buster but catches his dark face and looks to me. I nod. She turns back and extends a trembling hand to Ryan. "I've waited a long time to meet you, Ryan."

I slip past them and go out into the sunshine. The priest follows and thanks me for my songs.

"Do you sing professionally?" he asks.

I wrap my arms around myself. "No, not yet. But I plan to."

THE END