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KATE LLOYD

*Stage
Fright*



STAGE
FRIGHT

The background of the cover is white, decorated with numerous light gray, semi-transparent petals or leaves scattered across the page, creating a soft, ethereal atmosphere. The petals are of various shapes and sizes, some appearing to be in motion as if falling.

STAGE FRIGHT

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Lloyd

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Stage Fright

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To Roberta Kehle

CHAPTER 1

THE CASTING DIRECTOR opened the door to the auditorium and scanned the high school's hallway, then frowned at her clipboard. "Jessica Nash?"

My mouth went dry. "Um—" I cleared my throat. "Over here."

A dozen or so community theatre wannabes jabbering or leaning against trophy cases fell silent and looked me over—no doubt sizing up their competition.

Clutching my sheet music, I lifted my chin and followed the director through the door onto the stage. She descended a staircase, melded into the blackened seating area, and landed between a man and a woman.

Downstage right, above the empty orchestra pit, a middle-aged guy sat at a piano. Trying to appear poised, I passed him my music with a shaking hand.

Had I ever been more terrified? I hadn't stood on a stage for decades.

My shoes pinched my toes, and my throat felt scratchy, like I was coming down with a cold. Getting sick would knock me out of leaving on the church choir's performance tour of England in two days. A once-in-a-lifetime trip I'd looked forward to for months.

I turned to position myself at center stage but before I could reach my destination, the pianist started plunking the introduction to "I Dreamed a Dream" from *Les Misérables* at a walloping speed. With only one bar to go, my brain scrambled for the first words. I gulped a chest-full of air and parted my lips.

Nothing came out.

Get a grip, Jessie, I told myself. I looked to the pianist for help, but he'd dropped his hands into his lap and stared at the sheet music as if he'd forgotten I was there.

Feeling the backs of my knees weaken, I reminded myself this was only an audition for community theater. A frivolous Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. What was I doing here anyway?

Oh, yeah. The audition was my vocal coach Muriel Frank's idea, to help me conquer my paralyzing fear of singing in front of an audience. There was no reason to come unglued. Yet I'd be thrilled to snag the smallest role in the chorus just to prove I could sing.

Cottoned-mouthed and woozy-headed, I blinked against the harsh lights. My eyes struggled to focus on three faceless heads floating in the darkened auditorium. I forced a meager smile aimed in their direction.

"Could I start over?" I asked.

The pianist yawned, then pounded the keyboard at an even faster tempo. As I sang, my legs trembled too

much under my black calf-length skirt for me to think about breath support or intonation, the exercises I'd studied for months with Muriel. What was wrong with me? In front of my darling third graders, I was easy-going and confident Ms. Nash—most of the time. And I tried my best to remember all the kids' names after the first week.

In a flash, my song was over.

"Thank you." The casting director scribbled on her clipboard. A tall man and a lady perched on either side of her spoke in her ear. The three conversed for several minutes, no doubt assessing my feeble voice and lack of stage presence. Then they chuckled. Couldn't they contain their laughter until I was offstage?

The casting director called out to me: "We'll let you know." I figured her polite way of saying "take a hike."

I wanted to say I typically sang better, but why lie? I only sounded good in Muriel's living room or my shower. In front of an audience, I was plug-your-nose material. Week-old tuna on stale rye.

As I found the exit, tangled thoughts flooded my mind. Producing a luminous vocal note, alive with color and mood, filled me with joy. But singing also exposed my core, displaying me under a microscope for the world to see. I wished I didn't care what others thought. I wished I could laugh off the audition, but I'd endured rejection too often.

Out in the hall, the air buzzed with chitchat.

Roxanne Miller, my friend from our church choir, breezed over to me cradling a songbook of show tunes for altos. Her longish tunic and loose pants draped her

rotund figure, and her short, hennaed hair framed her round face.

“Hi, Roxie,” I said.

“How did it go, girlfriend?” Her voice swelled with optimism.

“A disaster. I should be a standup comedian.” I was still miffed at the man and the women who’d laughed at me.

“Jessie, I bet you sounded great.” Before she could speak more words of encouragement, the casting director called out a name. A willowy beauty in a mini skirt strutted forward and disappeared through the stage door.

Roxanne hugged the book to her ample bosom. “I hate auditions, don’t you?”

“I can’t think of anything worse, except being pushed over a cliff by a gorilla. And that might be less painful.” I folded my music and stuffed it into my purse. “I’m glad we don’t have to audition to get into our church choir or I wouldn’t have anywhere to sing.”

“Don’t be silly, Jessie. Old Hal would let you in.”

“I’m not so sure.” I remembered joining the choir nine months ago. Director Hal Sorensen had welcomed me by pointing to a vacant seat in the soprano section and hadn’t spoken to me since. “Sometimes I wonder if he even knows I’m there.”

“That’s just Hal and his peripheral vision. He’ll get to know you on our choir’s trip to Great Britain and maybe offer you a solo when we get back.”

“I doubt it.” Thinking of the other sopranos who sang with me on Sunday mornings, I knew there wasn’t

much chance. And for good reason. Young and flashy Clare Van Arsdale could fill the sanctuary with dazzling sound without even warming up first. Marci had a lovely voice too.

“We should have been born tenors.” Roxanne’s gaze skated over to a young man leaning against a metal wall locker. “Then we’d be singing three hundred and sixty-five days a year.”

I couldn’t help smiling. “You’re lucky to be an alto.” I thought of Roxanne’s grand, confident voice. Standing six inches taller than me, she possessed chutzpah, as Mom would say, capturing the audience’s attention even when not in the spotlight.

“But all I get are old-lady parts.” Her plump shoulders sagged as she expelled a breath. “Never the lovely young ingénue.”

“Be glad you’re not a soprano. At age thirty-seven it’s hard reaching the high notes. I’m too old to compete with these young women.”

Onstage, I thought, or anywhere.