

Chapter One

Sylvia Mazzoni stepped out the stage door of the Big House, the locals' name for the Stuttgart Opera Theater. In her blue jeans and sweatshirt, she looked more like a member of the cleaning crew than a soprano leaving a rehearsal called solely on her account. She took several deep breaths, releasing the lingering tension with each exhalation. A gust of November wind whipped the trees around, causing shadows to thrust and parry in the dusky Schlossgarten Park. She shivered, pulled a long wool scarf from her shoulder bag, and wrapped it, Pavarotti style, around her throat. Anything to protect The Voice. She removed her hair clasp to allow heavy, dark tresses to cascade around her shoulders.

The music director had engaged her for two performances as Micaëla in *Carmen* after seeing her in the part at the regional opera in Ulm. She had done well this evening, but would she pass the real test tomorrow? Her debut at the renowned Stuttgart Opera could make or break her career. If she failed to impress, she'd be relegated once again to bit parts in provincial houses. She vowed not to let that happen. She had worked too hard for too long to fail now.

The park adjoining the theater, brimming with life all day, was deserted. Sylvia thought of waiting for a colleague to accompany her, but eager to catch the next streetcar, she ignored her intuition and stepped onto the cobblestone promenade along the lake. A glimmer of city lights filtered through the bare branches of giant oaks and sycamores. Dim sidewalk lamps cast long, crooked fingers across the dark water. To shake the foreboding image, she looked for the soft ripples that would precede swimming mallards and swans, but it was late even for them.

Sylvia peered up the dark path. A few meters ahead, the desiccated leaves of a giant poplar rustled in the night air. From there it was only a few minutes to the shopping arcade and the streetcar stop. She pressed on.

A burly man came around the bend, his right hand tucked inside the front of his leather jacket. Startled, Sylvia felt an adrenaline rush. She clutched her umbrella and stepped to her right to give him a wide berth. Out of the corner of her eye she caught a sudden movement, a lunge toward her. She spun around. Glinting metal ripped through her sweatshirt and slashed her left upper arm. She winced with pain as she jammed the metal tip of the umbrella as hard as she could into the attacker's chest. He grunted. The impact jarred the umbrella from her hand and sent it clattering to the ground. Warm liquid trickled down her arm. Sylvia staggered onto the damp lawn. She fought to regain her balance but slipped and fell hard.

Frantic, she looked for the umbrella, but it had rolled down the path, beyond her reach. Get up, she exhorted herself in a panic, but too late. The towering figure came at her again. Heart thudding, Sylvia skidded backwards on the grass. She heard herself scream, "Help, help . . . help me!"

The man drew back the knife and slashed downward again. She rolled. Her face, covered by her tangled hair, flattened against the wet ground. She clawed the hair aside and saw the knife plunge to its hilt into the earth, at the spot where she had been a second ago.

"Damn you, traitor!"

She'd heard that guttural voice before. She raised her head and found herself staring into hate-filled eyes. Could it be . . . ? Before she finished the thought, his massive body crushed her, knocking the breath out of her. She opened her mouth to cry again for help, but could only spit blades of grass. Cold fingers dug beneath her scarf and closed around her throat. Muscular thighs straddled her hips, pinning her so that struggle was useless. She brought her hands up, trying to loosen his grip, but the vise only tightened.

“Ple . . .” Sylvia’s voice trailed off in a gurgle, her trachea compressed in his grasp. Blood rushed in her ears. The man’s menacing face became a distorted blur. Panicked, she fought for a breath. Her limbs went numb. Darkness swallowed her.

Then a sharp thump penetrated the void. Dead weight slumped against her chest. The vise at her neck loosened.

She gulped for air, fighting the crushing weight. One small breath came, then another. She opened her eyes. The attacker’s face pressed at an unnatural angle against her chest. Blood trickled from the man’s slack mouth. Repulsed, she pushed the stubbly face away and struggled to shove the corpse aside. It tipped for a moment, then rolled back on top of her. She shuddered.

Sylvia took several more ragged breaths, gathering her strength, but before she could make another attempt, someone lifted the body off her. Her chest heaved with relief.

“Frau Mazzoni, are you all right?”

She stared at the man. Then she recognized Intelligence Officer Dieter Schmidt.

“Herr Schmidt. What are you—?”

“You’re safe now.” He took her right arm to help her sit up, then pointed at the blood-soaked clothing on the other. “Can you move your arm?”

Sylvia gingerly lifted her left arm. The pain was tolerable. The sweatshirt’s damp sleeve clung to the wound, stemming the blood flow. “I guess it’s okay.”

“Good.” He motioned toward the lifeless body lying in the grass next to her. “Do you know him?”

She forced herself to look. “He’s with . . .” She took a deep breath. “He was with the RAF. Manfred Klau, a friend of Horst.” She shivered. For years she had looked over her shoulder expecting the Red Army Faction terrorists to come for her. They never had. Why now, twelve years later, just when she’d begun to think she was safe from their revenge?

Schmidt nodded. “I was afraid of that.” He bent down and felt for a pulse. After a few seconds he said, “His terrorist days are over.”

Sylvia stared at Schmidt. “Did you shoot him?”

He steadied her on her feet. “We’ll talk about this later. You have to get away from here now—before the police arrive.”

He scrutinized her face. “Can you make it back to your hotel by yourself?”

In a daze, she nodded.

“I have to take care of things here, but I’ll check on you as soon as I can.” He collected her bag and umbrella and thrust them toward her. “Frau Mazzoni, not a word about this to anyone. Go. Now!”

Sylvia stumbled in the direction of the shopping arcade.