

Get ready for a sensual and original story of two opera singers who find that their careers are not all they need in life.

BORN TO SING

Donna Del Oro

Devine Destinies

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Contemporary Romance

Would you sacrifice your life's dream for love?

Two gifted, good-looking opera singers, from different cultures and opposite sides of the track in Texas, discover that falling in love is wonderful. But love may not be enough if it interferes with their dreams of success in the ruthlessly competitive world of opera. D.J. McKay's dream of singing in European opera houses clashes with his rich daddy's prejudices against such a "sissy" career; his obsession with beautiful Eva doesn't sit well with his socialite mother, either. Meanwhile, Eva strives to help her poor family by achieving success on the stage. So what happens when their passion for each other thwarts their dreams? How can their relationship survive separation, treachery and the drive to succeed? Will their ambitions to succeed kill the only true love they have ever known?

PG-13 Sneak Peek Excerpt:

His hair was a mass of dark brown curls, cut close to his head. Black, finely arched brows drew my gaze, that first day in Advanced Voice class, to his sapphire-blue eyes, so deeply set and luminous against his tanned, handsome face. Despite myself, my heart began to pound in my chest so that I had to take a deep breath to calm down.

He was tall, too, slender with wide shoulders stretching a red polo shirt, and narrow hips that just managed to hold up tight, faded jeans. When he turned around to sit down in front, I noticed the rounded rump and long, muscular legs. My stomach did flip-flops for a moment. As if he sensed my stare, his head turned and deep blue eyes flicked up to meet mine. Only for a second or two but in that brief moment there was ... something.

Alright, so he's gorgeous, I thought, but can he sing well enough to solo? Or is he Professor Woronicz's window dressing? One of the studs who'd looked good last year in the chorus of men, one whose tenor voice was drowned out by all the hefty baritones and basses? Oh yes, I'd noticed him last year, too, but this year, our senior year, was different. He'd been chosen out of the chorus to be the featured tenor this year. If we sang together--which we'd most likely do--would he complement me or bring me down? My future career was on the line here and I hoped Prof Nits (as the students called him) knew what he was doing.

It was 1985 and The Phantom of the Opera was a huge hit in London. During his last visit, Professor Woronicz had seen the modern opera three times and was now raving about it. He wanted his best soloists to perform numbers from the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical for the Winter Concert. Moreover, he said he enjoyed the way D.J.'s "resonant, masculine tenor" blended with my "lilting soprano" and decided to pair us up for one or two numbers. From out of nowhere, a cold audition conducted before class even began that fall, the professor wanted to solo this trust-fund, rich-punk yahoo with me.. D.J. wasn't even a Music or Voice major; his major was Agribusiness., supposedly meant to take over the supervision of his father's big ranch in central Texas. I'd worked my tail off since high school to win a scholarship in Music and to get high marks in Voice and Instrumentals once I arrived. I'd already charted a career path to the opera world in Europe, had studiously excelled in French and Italian, the languages of all the operas I loved, and catching up with a smattering of German, too.

Here, D.J. just waltzed in and took the tenor lead. With hardly any effort on his part. He had high school German in his resume but that was all. No linguistics training—just a few years of Voice. No drama or dance classes. That kind of injustice always

irked me. Nothing ever came easy to me except my coloratura voice, which my father said was a gift from God. D.J. was the kind of guy that everything came easy to—money, looks, academics, sports, women--especially women.

He was a spoiled Anglo dipstick—and I hated him for it!

Prof Nits had taken us through our usual voice warm-ups, running the scales, flexing our diaphragm, keeping our lungs filled and working like ballasts, resonating the air flow through our nasal cavities—the usual. We were preparing for the Music Department’s annual winter concert.

The winter concert was always a fundraising event that ferreted out all the major alumni-donors and was designed to be a major crowd-pleaser. Prof Nits knew people would enjoy a sneak preview of Webber’s hit musical in London, for it might be a year or two before it premiered on Broadway.

The professor had informed me the day after Advanced Voice class started that he was promoting D.J. to featured vocalist. This rich kid was going to sing the phantom’s role to my Christine. Everyone I spoke to assumed it was because of the McKays’ wealth and political influence in Austin. His daddy was owner of the baseball team, the Texas Troopers, and controlled half the commercial real estate in Austin in addition to the family ranch which reportedly raised the best Angus beef cattle in Texas. I assumed the same, that Prof Nits has succumbed to political pressure from someone on UT’s Board of Trustees and was basically placating his bosses.

Well, at least I’d attained my position as one of two featured sopranos by my talent and dedication. I had scholarships and two part-time jobs to attest to that dedication. I was functioning on six hours sleep a night but managing to hold it all together somehow. Prof Nits thought I had the talent, and that was good enough for me. Believe me, that kept me going!

So it was with a certain amount of resentment seething inside of me (along with the creeping flush and heat in my head, neck and chest) that I stood beside him in front of the class minutes later. A graduate student played the brief overture as D.J. stood

stiffly, glancing over at me once while I tried to get into character. We'd all read the Phantom's libretto, knew the story and characters, had toyed with the various songs, which all the students loved. Now we were rehearsing in earnest. We wanted to impress Prof Nits as well.

I focused and slipped into the character of the ingenue, Christine, a young virginal dancer whose voice had captivated the deranged, reclusive phantom. As D.J. began to sing, "Music of the Night", I briefly closed my eyes and listened to the timbre of his voice. I'd never really listened to his voice before. It had an unusually velvety tonal quality with occasional gravelly nuances, strange for a tenor. His tenor had hearty, masculine undertones even as he hit his stride by the middle of the song and executed a few high notes. It was lacking in depth, perhaps, but his musicality was strong, his pitch perfect. Grudgingly, I had to admit his voice definitely had the potential of a leading tenor's. For a non-musical major, this guy was a natural talent.

But D.J. McKay was undisciplined, frequently came to class late and unprepared. Yet, the professor was giving him his chance to shine. Was it the McKay money or did the esteemed voice teacher detect in him a gift that the others just couldn't see?

By the second half of the song, I'd surrendered to the phantom's seductive voice and sensual hands. I'd let him move his big hands down my arms, around my midriff until they were brushing down my hips, clasping me to him as he sang the last verse. My head lolled against his hard chest as I inhaled a whiff of musky cologne ... and sweat.

D.J. McKay was nervous. The realization made me smile inwardly. He should be, I thought; if he blows this rehearsal, Prof Nits will never let him solo again. Still, I was just as nervous. And it wasn't because another soprano wanted Christine's part for the concert. Everyone was aware that local talent agents came to UT's drama and music productions. One of them could launch a singer's or actor's career in ways one could never guess. Or one could relegate you to second or third rate regional opera companies.

No, I was nervous because frankly, D.J. made me

embarrassingly horny. It'd taken me a year to finally admit to myself that I was wildly attracted to this swaggering, spoiled rich kid. Then another few months to get tired of hiding it.

"Fine, that'll do, D.J." Professor Woronicz had been holding one fist against his mouth during most of the song, his forehead furrowed in a perpetual frown. "We'll have to work on your phrasing and timing ...but not bad for a first run through."

"Thanks, Professor. Did you think the roving hands were over the top?" Although D.J. was asking the professor, he was leveling his vivid blue eyes on my face. "That's how I see the phantom. A real frustrated horn-dog. When he gets the chance, he's going to feel her up. Before her trance wears off."

A titter rippled around the class, positioned all over the first two rows of the campus music hall.

"Yeah, one demented dirty ol' man!" one of the guys hollared.

"That's D.J.'s excuse!" another yelled.

The older, silver-haired prof shuffled some music sheets at his work table on the stage, already distracted, ignoring their sophomoric comments.

"You'll have to ask Eva. If she doesn't mind--this is a student production and naturally everyone expects a young interpretation. If you want to sex it up, go for it. The tenor I saw in London was creating a tormented but sensual character of the phantom role. And you certainly need to make your gestures larger than life for the audience. But I think a heavier baritone is more suitable for the phantom. Let's give him a more sinister sound. D.J., you look and sound more like a young Raoul. Let's have the Christine and Raoul duet. Your two voices together might be quite melodious. Frank, you have the music, don't you? The 'All I Ask of You' number?"

I'd already turned to the pianist, pretending to feel unmoved by it all. Whatever. Whether he sang the Phantom or Raoul, I was going to have to get used to singing with D.J. and deal with reining in my emotions. It was too easy to lose concentration and slip out of

character, singing so close to him. Prof Nits was determined to feature him, no matter what, it appeared. And I certainly wasn't going to let D.J. know that I was attracted to him. Girls threw themselves at him all over campus. I would have died rather than join that flock of dizzy-headed gold-diggers following him around, hoping to trap him into marriage.

I was looking over the sheet music when I felt fingertips graze the back of my arm. Even a simple touch from him gave me the shivers.

"So was it over the top? The touching?" D.J. was asking me softly.

I nonchalantly shrugged, feigning little interest.

"It suits the part. The phantom's seducing her ... or trying to. She's innocent and naive and lets him. It doesn't bother me. Either way ..."

"This duet, y'know, between Raoul and Christine should have them kissing at the end," D.J. said, smirking. His fingers were still on my arms and so I shook them off with an abrupt turn of my body. It didn't take a genius to know what he was up to.

"You actually came prepared today?" I asked sarcastically, "And no, I don't think it's necessary, D.J. All the touching, I mean." I said this as coolly as I could manage. He was goading me, teasing me into embarrassing myself but I was too clever to fall for it. I'd been in love before, or thought I had. I knew the wiles and seductive power of men and their predatory ways. Or thought I did.

"How can you say that? They're declaring eternal love to each other--'let me be your shelter, let me be your light'. You don't call those declarations of eternal love? What DO you call love, Eva?"

I was taken aback by his question, spoken so intently that only Brad, the pianist, could hear. The professor was speaking to David, one of the baritones vying for the Phantom role, now that it was vacant, and the rest of the class had broken up into their individual groups, each one beginning to prepare its concert piece. As usual, Prof Nits' Advanced Voice class was a melange of

controlled chaos and noisy vocalizations. Somehow, out of all this apparent confusion, a brilliant concert would emerge. I never understood how.

“What do I call love? I have no idea.” I turned away, dismissing him. “Brad, are you ready?” I asked the graduate student, a talented pianist whose part-time job was to accompany the divos and prima donnas of Advanced Voice. How he must’ve hated us! We were all prima donnas in a way, for we had the best voices at UT and therefore assumed the world was holding its breath, waiting for our debuts. Later, we discovered how small a world the campus really was, and how talented the competition was out there in the real world.

“Anytime you two lovebirds are,” Brad muttered. “Professor?”

Prof Nits held up a finger in the midst of his earnest conference with David, his leading baritone. I’d dated David a couple of times and luckily for me, there wasn’t any physical chemistry between us. We were good friends and I wanted to keep it that way. I didn’t need any complications in my life, certainly didn’t need a Casanova like D.J. McKay screwing things up for me. I had to stay focused to get through this difficult senior year. Beyond June, the world of professional opera awaited. So I hoped, anyway.

“Eva Villalobos, why are you ignoring me? I think we should kiss at the end of this number. Are you with me or not?” D.J. growled gently, a sly twinkle in his deep blue eyes.

Until the professor hushed up the class, I had no choice but to respond to this skirt-chasing, wannabe leading man.

“Fine, fine, whatever. Just don’t overdo it, okay? No tongue, for Pete’s sake.”

He leaned over me, his face inches from mine. “Huh, kissing you’ll be like kissing cold marble. What they say about you is true, you’re an icy, prissy prude with a bug up her ass--”

I gasped, flattening myself against the side of the piano to escape him. Brad snorted a short laugh and started tinkling the

keys, honky-tonk style. He broke into a burlesque version of "Some Enchanted Evening".

D.J. was turning this rehearsal into a personal grudge-match. Fortunately, no one else but Brad seemed to notice.

"Vain and vulgar, too," I retorted coldly, lifting my chin, "A gabacho."

He stuck his face into mine and lowered his voice. His eyes were angry slits. I wanted to punch him in the face.

"Don't talk Mexican with me. I know what gabacho means. We've had Mexicans working for us for years. I hear your daddy raises dirt and your brother raises the tooting kind of grass."

D.J. was imitating a guy taking a marijuana drag. Now incensed--no one impugned my family's dignity without a fight although most of what he'd said was true-- I squinted up at this offensive upstart, laying on the country drawl as thickly as peanut butter. He was making fun of me but I'd never bow under the hurt that lanced through me just then. So my parents were hippie farmers, barely eeking out a living raising hay, a few stud horses and Mexican donkeys on their sixty-five acres. So what? So I subsisted on a scholarship and two part-time jobs and wore three year-old, torn jeans and tee shirts most of the time. So what? So I was a Latina hick-from-the-sticks, so what?

I lifted my right leg and began swinging my foot threateningly.

"You back off and apologize, D.J., or so help me, I'll turn you into a falsetto. I was raised with a mean older brother so don't think I can't aim a good kick."

He widened his eyes in mock terror but did withdraw a foot or two. His expression changed in a flash, from smug to contrite. I think he'd seen how much he hurt me.

"C'mon, Eva, it was just a joke. Let me buy you lunch, Evita ... as an apology."

Well, that surprised me. Insulting me was his way of coming

on to me? If he used that ploy with all his girls, how'd he get such a reputation as a ladykiller?

“Save your breath, Mr. McKay. I wouldn't take food from you if I was skin-and-bones starving,” I drawled dulcetly.

Not too soon, Professor Woronicz called the class to order. A minute later, D.J. and I were Christine and Raoul, pledging undying love and devotion. In full character, we gazed into each other's eyes, holding each other lightly, his hands on my upper arms, mine barely grazing his chest, alternating singing our lyrics.

We ended together, blending the melody together with our very different voices in double harmony, singing: “Anywhere you go, let me go, too. Love me, that's all I ask of you.”

I stayed in character a moment longer, entranced by Christine's and Raoul's love and heartfelt words of devotion. Christine believed it with her whole heart. She could trust Raoul and love him for all eternity. He was the man for her, the love of her life.

Staring into his blue eyes, I knew Christine could have no other man. In his face, Christine saw her own joyous love reflected there. And so, in complete rapture, Christine and Raoul came together and kissed. The kiss lengthened and deepened. Myr arms encircled his neck, his tightened around my waist. I closed my eyes and surrendered to the sensual fog.

I stopped thinking as Christine and returned to myself, but the music still resonated deeply inside me. A lovely, stirring melody. This man tasted lovely, too. His mouth was smooth and warm and wet. We didn't French kiss but rather explored each other's mouth gently. His hard, lanky body fit mine like a perfectly contoured glove. We were both tall and slim, long legged. The way we fit together was like two puzzle pieces, interlocking hardness and softness, almost as if we were made to fit together. I felt I could stay this way forever ... then I remembered who I was and what I was doing. I was kissing NOT RAOUL ... BUT D.J. MCKAY. Everything I despised and resented in my little, biased worldview.

Ever so slowly, like emerging from a drugged sleep, I heard the prolonged silence, which was suddenly broken by resounding waves of laughter. I ended the kiss and pulled away, not before

recognizing the stunned look on D.J.'s face. A flush burned through his tanned cheeks. My own head and neck were on fire.

“Well, that’ll work,” Prof Nits remarked matter-of-factly to the class as the laughter subsided, “We’ve found our Christine and Raoul. Though this interpretation, I must admit, is a bit--what did you call it, D.J.?--over the top.”

More laughter. “Now, ladies and gentlemen, let’s rehearse the ‘Masquerade’ number ... Everyone on stage. Hank, come over and block this number for us. Frank, the music ...”

D.J. and I were still holding each other by the arms. Absolutely stunned. Shocked, we jumped away but our eyes never left each other’s faces. He looked stricken and surprised, like I’d slapped him without warning. My head felt like the top of my skull was going to blow off. My heart was beating a mile a minute. My ears were ringing.

Oh, shit, I thought. I’m in big, big trouble.

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Donna Del Oro is an award-winning author of romantic comedies and romantic suspense