

Readers Guide  
Inside

*in the*  
LIGHT  
*of the* SUN

A Novel



ANGELA SHUPE

*in the*  
**LIGHT**  
*of the* **SUN**

A Novel

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*For my mother:  
her bravery, love, and compassion,  
and the beautiful voice with  
which she sang into my life each day.*

Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind,  
flight to the imagination and life to everything.

— ATTRIBUTED TO PLATO

Where there is life, there is hope.

— FILIPINO PROVERB



# Rosa

DECEMBER 1, 1941

*Florence, Italy*



The room crackles with energy.

Dots of silver glimmer along the princess's gown, luminescent stars against the midnight dark of the stage curtains. I listen to the mysterious prince's declarations. Finally, the princess's heart of ice melts, no match for his love. At the dazzling spectacle of music, drama, and costumes, the crowd erupts into applause.

My ears ring as I applaud, adding to the ovation following the closing notes of Puccini's *Turandot*. The tenor's performance of the "Nessun dorma" captivated every soul in the audience. Hearts, including my own, are bolstered by this rallying cry offering hope to the most unfortunate in love.

"Stunning, yes?" Nonna's smile is as wide as the stage. I wonder if she is remembering her own past triumphs. She was a prima donna and still is.

She's right. I've never seen anything like this, and I am speechless. This—this is why I came here. Why I left the Philippines and the family I love. To one day perform upon such a great stage and,

I hope, to leave listeners enthralled. Exhilaration from hearing the powerful notes sung with such emotion buzzes through me, head to toe.

“*Andiamo*, come.” She leads me from the box and down the sweeping marble staircase to the lobby where people have gathered for an after-party gala. My grandmother’s sophistication hasn’t faded with age. How many times has she descended these stairs after her own triumphant performance?

“Serafinal!” Conductor Signor Gastani greets Nonna like the oldest of friends.

Nonna smiles warmly. “Rocco! *Perfezione*, as always!”

“*Grazie mille!* You are too kind. But now, I haven’t yet had the pleasure of meeting this one. Your granddaughter? Rosa, isn’t it?”

“Sì, she is finishing up at conservatory.”

“Your duet at last year’s festival was exceptional. You have your Nonna’s gift. I see good things ahead for you, Rosa.”

My cheeks flush. Having a tenth of Nonna’s vocal abilities would be more than enough. In the presence of the illustrious conductor, my nerves twinge, and I’m grateful for the champagne, which, fortunately, stills the butterflies fluttering in my stomach. “*Grazie*, Signor Gastani!”

A woman in an emerald gown beckons to him. “Ah, I must go. But I look forward to hearing you sing again, Rosa Grassi!” He takes my hand and shakes it gently before ducking into the crowd and pursuing a flash of green.

This is more than I could have hoped for—Signor Gastani’s kindness. My head buzzes, and I can’t tell if it’s from the champagne or the excitement. It has been the most extraordinary evening.

Nonna circles the room greeting friends old and new, and she introduces me to those I haven’t yet met. As the crowd dwindles, we take our leave. I wrap myself in my shawl against the winter chill till all that is seen of my ruby satin gown is the hem. The dress was a bold choice, but its rich hue exudes confidence.

Outside, on the steps of the theater, we wait for Nonna's car. She continues her goodbyes to a longtime friend, a former violinist. Though I've been here two years, it still amazes me. Rarely is there a time we're out that someone doesn't offer Nonna a hello and their good wishes.

*"Per favore, Signorina. Can you help us?"* Someone taps my shoulder, and I turn to find myself face-to-face with a woman who can't be more than five years my senior. Clutching at her skirts is a young boy, maybe five or six years old. Her son, I presume. Both wear tattered coats. Meager protection against the cold. From the haggard look on their faces, I know they are hungry.

"I . . . I'm sorry, I don't have any," I say, wishing I'd brought money. Anything to give to this mother and her child.

"Here," Nonna's voice comes from behind me. "This should be of some help." She hands the woman a few banknotes.

Tears well up in the woman's eyes as she steps away thanking Nonna profusely for the lira. *"Grazie! Grazie! May God bless you for your kindness,"* she says, then leads her son across the street.

As our car pulls away, my gaze lingers on the two. Thank goodness Nonna had money to give. No one should live in such distress, especially not a child.

"What did you think, Rosa?" Nonna's voice breaks me away from my thoughts. She dips her head to the libretto in her hand. I share my thoughts, and she quizzes me about particulars as we break down each singer's performance. All part of my training. But I love it! I know what a gift it is to be mentored by someone as esteemed as my grandmother.



When we return home, it's nearly ten o'clock. But sitting in the living room is my Uncle Lorenzo. Nonna is as surprised as I am to find him here at such a late hour.

"Lorenzo." Nonna greets him.

"Mama," he says, not moving from where he sits. He says noth-



ing to me.

“Why don’t you give us a minute, Rosa.”

“I’ll go change.” I’m relieved to get away from the tension hanging in the air like a suffocating blanket, and I take my time before heading back downstairs twenty minutes later.

“The Duce can make things difficult for you, Mama. There is only so much I can do!” As I enter the living room, Uncle Lorenzo nearly knocks me over. Frustration oozes from him. He pushes past me muttering, “*Mezzosangue*.”

I inhale sharply as if slapped.

“Lorenzo!” Nonna snaps.

“Bah!” He ignores her, then turns to leave. Heavy footsteps are followed by the thud of the front door slamming.

Half-breed. Mixed race. My stomach curdles in anger. Aside from those insults, my uncle has barely spoken a word to me since I arrived in Italy years ago.

The silence in the room is deafening. Nonna, her face etched with sadness, stands. “Come, Rosa. He is ignorant.” She ushers me into the kitchen.

That Lorenzo could be Nonna’s son is a mystery. He is nothing like her. Nothing like my father, the younger of her two sons.

Nonna makes tea, and we sip oolong before the fire.

“I have something for you.” She makes her way to the cabinet and pulls something from the top drawer. Her eyes brighten as she hands me a bundle in pearlescent paper tied with a navy velvet ribbon. “An early Christmas gift.”

“Nonna, you didn’t need to!”

“Shame on me if I can’t spoil my granddaughter! Open it, darling.”

My breath hitches when I pull the gift from its wrapping. Enveloped in marbled Florentine paper is a journal covered in peacock swirls in the richest hues of rose and gold.

“It’s gorgeous!”

“You like it? I saw you eyeing it at the stationer’s and thought

you might.”

“*Grazie!* Thank you!” I embrace her. Though she is in her late sixties, I can feel her strength as she holds me tight.

“I know you miss your family. And the post is nearly impossible. I thought, with this, you could write and share your thoughts. And maybe one day, if you choose, you can share it with them.”

I hug her again. To be so loved warms my heart, especially when regular bouts of homesickness arise. “*Grazie, Nonna.*”

She stands to take our cups, and I stop her. Nonna smiles warmly. “Thank you, Rosa.”

“*Buona notte,*” I say as she retires for the night. After taking the empty cups to the kitchen, I pluck the journal from the table and head to my room. Excitement pulses through me. I lie back on my bed, reflecting on the night, on Signor Gastani’s words. But I can’t sleep. I carry the journal to my desk, then begin writing.

I want to capture the wonder of the evening in words, knowing Caramina, my youngest sister back home, would have loved the performance. She’ll want to hear every detail. Like me, Cara longs to follow in Nonna’s footsteps. Her plan to voice train in Florence can’t come soon enough for me. But she isn’t old enough yet.

I recount the night’s splendid performances. Crystal flutes with sparkling bubbly. Antipasti served on expertly balanced trays by handsome waiters circling the room. Influential people in opera, even some from the ranks of the Ministry of Popular Culture, attended. Men in their best suits. Ladies in the most exquisite gowns. All lit by the warm glow of chandeliers. Delightful.

But I know, this is such a contrast to life outside the theater. With rationing increasing, the city’s mood is grayer than the cobblestones lining its streets. People are struggling. They have been for some time. I can still see the faces of the woman and her young son etched with hunger and exhaustion, and my heart aches. I’m grateful Nonna offers help when she can. I feel guilty to have such comfortable arrangements.

Yet Lorenzo’s words haunt me. Nonna is no fan of the regime.

Just last week, she told me how Nonno Vittorio died. Arrested and beaten after voicing displeasure with the rampant corruption in the government—and that was decades before Mussolini. Bribes and bullying. But things have only gotten worse under Duce. Uncle Lorenzo's support of monsters like those responsible for his father's death is reprehensible. I think he, like so many, is drunk on power and its accompanying privileges. He lives well in Rome. Perhaps he sees supporting Duce as a way to look out for himself and Nonna. But his words worry me. Is she in danger?

There are two Italys now. The one my father spoke of—*Bella Italia*, the land of light, passion, artistry, heavenly music, and ambrosial flavors—is waning. A darkness is falling as Mussolini and his Blackshirts tighten their grip. I'm relieved Papa isn't here to see his beloved Italy under Duce's shadow.

Memories of home come to mind. Thank goodness for President Quezon and our government. They'd never allow Filipinos to fall to such oppression, especially when our country is only a few years from full independence.

My hand cramps from writing, and I rub my palm. Can anyone really change things for the better?

I place my journal in the desk drawer, then climb into bed. I toss and turn. Finally, haziness overtakes me and tiredness descends. I give way to an unsettled sleep.



In the morning, I find Nonna staring at old photographs of Lorenzo and Papa from when they were boys. Sadness fills her eyes. I know she misses my father. I'm certain she must, even more after Lorenzo's shameful behavior.

"Lorenzo had a meeting with the rector of the University of Florence," Nonna says.

"To make sure they're meeting 'state requirements'?" The words slip from my mouth before I can stop them. Nonna gives a pinched look, brows arched.

We move on to more comfortable topics of conversation. After a quick breakfast of espresso and toast, I make my way to the conservatory. I enter the Piazza delle Belle Arti, thoughts swirling over my uncle's words. As I pass through the dark wooden doors of the school, a thought stops me in my tracks. Have I placed Nonna in danger? What I've already written in my journal is enough to cause concern. My breath catches as I realize I must hide it.

Many share my thoughts about the government, but penning them is a dangerous matter. Certainly, Nonna didn't intend her gift to be used this way. Men have been thrown in jail for less. A professor at conservatory recently complained about the ban on foreign music. He was arrested and taken to the Villa Triste.

I don't want to think about what might happen if the journal is discovered. I want to race back to the apartment. But I know I'm being overanxious. Surely it will be safe for the next hour and a half. I go to class, then rush home the moment it ends. At the apartment, I race up the stairs. Relief courses through me when I open the drawer and see the journal untouched.

In the corner of the room is a loose floorboard that lies hidden by a rug. As I pry the board free, my pulse thumps in my ears. Carefully, I set the journal in the small space before replacing the board and rug on top.

I exhale, relieved. But still, a question nags. Is Lorenzo right? Is Nonna in danger? I vow to do whatever I can to keep my grandmother safe.



# Caramina

DECEMBER 7, 1941

*Manila, Philippines*



Papa always says the light on this island is a true light. A lustrous gold that accentuates beauty and lifts truth to the surface in the most ordinary of lives.

This is a golden time. Tomorrow I turn fourteen. Tomorrow, I will cross the threshold into the rest of my life and become a young woman. I don't know how one day can change a person, but my hands tingle with excitement.

Blush-pink silk organza falls in waves around me, pooling at the floor. Light radiates through the delicate material and shimmers. I haven't found a single dark spot in all of today's preparations. Tiny holiday lights strung from the ceiling are iridescent against the jacquard walls of the dressing room. Garnet roses on an ebony table lend a pinkish hue, like sunsets over Manila Bay. I stand illumined before a mirror.

"Turn, turn, Caramina. See how it lifts so lightly on a breeze," says Florenza, the dressmaker, as she stands back admiring her handiwork. "Perfect for a young lady's birthday party. Ah, and the

dancing.” She winks at my older sister Isabella. Isabella smirks, and I blush.

“I’ll leave you two to talk.” Florenza snatches her pincushion and ambles out of the fitting room.

“It’s just like yours,” I say, peering at the dress.

“It’s what you wanted?”

“It’s perfect!” I step off the stool and sashay back and forth, arms held out toward an invisible partner. “What do you think?”

“Handsome. Yes, definitely, handsome. But a bit heavy on his feet.”

I hum a waltz and laugh as Isabella twirls me. Steadying myself, I step back to gaze at my dress. “Is it really okay, Isa?”

My sister’s beauty and style is admired by all the ladies in our neighborhood. She spends hours poring over stacks of *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*, studying designs, and crafting her own. When Isa barraged Florenza with questions during fittings for her own debut gown two years ago, the seamstress, recognizing a budding talent, happily gave her copies of her favorite magazines and has been sending her old issues ever since. Isa even convinced Papa to bring our mother’s old sewing machine to her room after promising to do all the mending. It serves as good practice, since she hopes one day to design elaborate gowns like the one I’m wearing. If Isa approves, I’ll know the dress is right.

Isa surveys the gown. “You look like a lady. Almost fourteen, and you’re all grown-up. The dress is perfect, Cara. Mama would have loved to be here.”

That’s when the tears come. Isabella stepped into the role of mothering when Mama passed away after our youngest brother Enzo was born, and even more after our sister, Rosa, left for Italy. The reality of Mama’s absence today, of all days, simmers just below the surface. My heart pricks as the pain bubbles over.

How can remembering someone so loved create such pain? It isn’t the memory of Mama but the reality she isn’t here to enjoy days like today that hurts the most. It’s like enjoying the vibrant

bougainvillea that grows in waves alongside our home, then getting pricked by a thorn. I will myself to remember Mama today—her laughter, beauty, and love—and wipe away a rogue tear.

I gaze into the mirror, its dark mahogany frame carved in exotic vines with oleander blossoms. The young woman in the reflection looks like me, but at the same time someone altogether different. Someone far more sophisticated. Mature. Where's the girl who climbs trees and chases down her brothers?

"No sadness, Caramina. Mama would have wanted you smiling and laughing for your birthday." Isabella stands behind me.

"Sadness? What sadness? No. No. There is no sadness for my little lady today. Come, let me see." It's Papa. His deep Italian accent echoes through the room.

I walk to the entryway of the fitting room. "Oh my!" he gasps. "*Bellissima!* Beautiful! Ah, but you look beautiful splattered with mud after running through the mango grove with Enzo!" Papa bows and holds out his hand. "May I?"

I take his hand, and he waltzes us through the shop as he hums Strauss's "Blue Danube." His smile beams as we move back and forth, faster and faster, until laughter threatens to topple me.

At last Papa stops. He catches his breath and peeks at his wristwatch. "We must go. Esther will have my head if we're late for dinner." He gives a mischievous wink.

Florenza emerges from the back room. "Ah, Signor Grassi."

Papa holds my hands out as if I'm on display. "She's beautiful! Yes?"

The attention is unnerving. "Papa!"

He chuckles. Though my father is a quiet man, laughter comes easily to him. There's no question he loves me and my siblings, all five of us.

"All right, Little Bird. Change now."

I close the door and slip out of the dress. As I pull on my simple cotton skirt and blouse, Isabella folds the gown. She sighs wistfully before placing it in its box and leaving the room.

"It was a challenge for me, but not one I wasn't up to." Florenza's voice drifts into the room. "These Italian styles are so beautiful. It really is perfect on her."

When I open the door, Papa and Isabella are standing in the shop's entrance. Papa holds a newspaper stretched open before him, brow furrowed. I glimpse the cover with its bold headlines telling of war taking place far away.

"Papa?"

He rustles the paper, quickly folding it, then tucking it under his arm. My heart aches seeing him worry about such things. Perhaps he's concerned for Rosa and Nonna. If only I were older, I'd be there now, taking in the beauty of Florence and singing at a prestigious school. Oh, how it stung to watch Rosa leave with Nonna the last time she'd visited. I had bit my lip to stop tears from falling.

When Italy joined Germany in the war over a year ago, there was talk of Rosa returning home, but Nonna felt strongly that she, herself, needed to remain in Florence. Since there is no fighting in Italy, Rosa opted to stay, much to Papa's dismay. In Rosa's last letters to me, she hadn't mentioned anything other than food being rationed. Everything else seemed fine. Surely Papa needn't worry. Rosa and Nonna are safe.

"Look, girls!" Papa points to the lights twinkling overhead in Florenza's window display. White paper stars, lit from within, hang from a silk ribbon and float midair. The *parols* cast a warm light on the chiffon and silk dresses in the window.

"*Maligayang Pasko!* Merry Christmas!" We bid her goodbye as we walk out into the sunlight.

My eyes are immediately drawn to the baubles adorning the trees along the sidewalk. "I love Manila, especially in December. It sparkles . . . like a woman in her finest jewels."

"Your imagination, Caramina." Papa laughs. "But it is beautiful."

Compared to where we live on the northern outskirts of Floridablanca, Manila is a grand city. Our town is small and set deep in a valley of fertile soil rich with crops of sugar and rice. Swaying trees



and fragrant blooms make our neighborhood all the more dramatic, set against the backdrop of Mount Arayat. A beautiful place to live, though quiet.

“Can’t you feel it? The excitement?” I ask. The city pulses with energy along its busy avenues of tall buildings. When Nonna last visited two years ago, even after touring all of Europe, she was convinced Manila was the Paris of the East, the Pearl of the Orient. Its bay opens to the deep blue waters of the Pacific, welcoming the world to its shore.

Papa stops and stands still. “Yes, I think I can,” he says, humoring me. “I’d say this was a successful trip. Sì?”

“Yes!” Isabella and I chime in. She’s enjoyed it as much as I have. We rarely go to the city. Not just because it’s a few hours from our home. Trips are reserved for special occasions, like our visit to the dress shop. Rosa and Isabella have only one or two dresses like the one Florenza made. They’re costly, but Papa insists we have them.

As Floridablanca’s official town gardener, Papa provides a comfortable lifestyle for us. He loves gardening and reaps the rewards of excelling at his work. Mama’s parents, who died long before I and any of my siblings were born, had owned a sugar plantation and were part owners of the biggest mill in the province. When they passed away, Mama’s inheritance helped purchase our family home. We rarely want for anything. Even so, gowns like the one we bought today are an extravagance. One day, I hope, I’ll wear it for my debut performance as an opera singer.

Papa drives us past the Manila Grand Opera House as we begin our long trip home. My gaze lingers on the honey-colored building. I can picture the stage, balconies, and rows of seats behind its unassuming exterior. Years ago, Nonna described it for me in great detail. Often, I imagine being on that stage.

“One day, Cara, it will be you performing there.” Papa glances at me as if reading my mind. “Your ‘Ave Maria’ last week was superb. *Bellissimo!*”

A week ago, I sang at St. Joseph's, our church. Notes floated from my lips to the listening ears of the congregants. Joy blossomed within me as I sang the sacred aria, hoping it was flowing straight into the hearts of those perched on the dark wooden pews. With the last note sung, I opened my eyes to a hushed, candlelit church. The scent of frangipani wafted on a warm breeze. I brimmed with life. Singing had that effect on me.

"Father was moved by your song, and he wasn't the only one," Papa says.

He'd watched as one of the neighborhood grandmothers tapped me on the shoulder afterward and presented me with an orchid of the palest of pinks. "*Magandá*. Beautiful," the *lola* said, her eyes glistening.

Now in the car, driving away from the city, I picture myself in my new gown singing in the Opera House, enraptured by music. Maybe Papa is right. Maybe one day, my voice will rise from that stage, meeting the ears of those in the highest balconies. My heart thumps wildly at the thought.



Rays of morning sun pour through the crack between the curtains and onto my bed. Today is my birthday! I'd begged Papa for months for a big party and couldn't wait for the festivities. But my hopes went beyond celebrating. My party, I'd hoped, would help people see me for who I am and accept me. Singing is like that, too. A way for me to prove myself.

But now, my head is pounding, adding to the scratchiness I felt last night in my throat. I massage my temples, willing the pain away. An unfamiliar noise hums faintly. Not the usual sounds of church bells or noise from the occasional passersby. This is different. A distant thrumming. My skin prickles warm, and perspiration dampens my nightgown. It must be an exceptionally hot day or maybe I've struck a fever.

My father comes into my room to see why I'm not up yet. Papa

frowns, then walks over and puts his hand on my forehead. "You're sick, Caramina. You must stay in bed and rest. What kind of father would I be to let you go to church today?" he says. "Rest. Just rest. I promise, when we return, we'll celebrate."

"But the party?" I spent weeks helping to plan and prepare, and I relished every moment. Seeing all of my hard work wasted is devastating.

"Caramina, if you are sick, we'll postpone the party. But not to worry, we'll still celebrate." Papa pauses and holds out a small box, wrapped carefully in light-blue paper with a white satin ribbon. "It's from your grandmother. I was going to give it to you later, but I think now is just right."

"*Grazie*, Papa." Nonna had to have planned months in advance for it to arrive in time for today. I prop myself up and slowly unwrap the box. Perched on a small robin's-egg-blue velvet pillow is a gold necklace with a locket.

Seeing the sunflower etched on the front, I smile, remembering Nonna's words from when she last visited years ago as she comforted me after I'd had a grueling day at school. "Look at the sunflowers, Cara. See how they keep their faces to the sun. '*Buongiorno*,' they say. See how happy they are. We must do the same and keep looking for the good. It's all around us if we just look."

"It's beautiful!" I say, then I gently push the tiny lever. The locket springs open, revealing a picture of Mama, and I gasp. Mama eyes are filled with the warmth of love.

Papa bends close to see the photo. "Thank goodness your Nonna loved singing here! Or I wouldn't have met your mother. I still remember the first time I saw her. The picture of pure elegance as she listened to Nonna's aria. I couldn't take my eyes off her. Afterward, I followed her into the lobby. She looked angelic in the glow of the chandeliers. When she turned and spoke to me . . . Oh *mio*! I was smitten. We were inseparable during the after-party." He smiles at this precious memory. "We fell in love, and I never left."

"Here, Cara. Let me." He secures the necklace around my neck.

As I lean forward, my dark, wavy curls tumble down, the locket falling against me.

"*Perfetto!*" Papa smiles. "Ah, there is a letter, too." He rifles in his pocket and hands me an envelope with my name penned in Nonna's sweeping script. I pry it open and pull out the two-page letter. Papa kisses the top of my head and then leaves.

My hopes for my big day have crumbled. But this—a present from Nonna—fills me with happiness. From my bedroom window, I watch as Papa, Matteo, and Enzo greet neighbors on their way to church. Only Isabella stays, promising to look in on me. Carefully, I unfold the letter and breathe in the familiar, subtle scent of orange blossoms from Nonna's perfume. It's as if she's right here in the room. I can't help but smile.

October 5, 1941

*My Darling Caramina,*

*How is it you are already fourteen? Your father sent me the photograph of you singing at church. He told me you sang the "Panis Angelicus." So beautiful! He is so proud of you, as am I. Your mother would have been so proud to see you. You remind me so much of her, Caramina.*

*I know it is your desire to sing. You must continue to practice, as I taught you. I told you, when I come again, I will bring you to Florence for voice training. Singing for a living is a dream come true. But it is also the result of much hard work, which I know you will do well.*

*Most of all, you must sing because it is in you. It makes your soul come alive. This is a gift from God, who has entrusted it to you. Sing for joy, and those around you will be blessed, too.*

*I hope you will enjoy my present. Remember the sunflowers and always look for the good.*

*You are in my heart, mia bambina.*

*All my love, Nonna*

I peer up at the framed poster from Nonna's performance at the Manila Grand from long before I was born. One of my most treasured possessions, it makes me smile again, thinking of her beautiful singing. Carefully, I fold the letter, yawning as drowsiness sweeps over me. I drift off to a fitful sleep. When I again awaken, my throat pinches, dry and achy. Thirsty, I grab the glass at my bedside. The warm water does little to refresh. Despite the heat engulfing the room, I shiver.

There is that noise again, only it seems much closer. A relentless thrumming vibrating through my body. I stand. Unsteady, I reach for the bed. The sound pulses into my toes pressing into the dark bamboo floor. As the noise gets louder, I feel my way along the hallway. Even the walls tremble. I'm desperate for something to cool this fever and stop the pounding in my head.

The savory scents of *pancit*, *lumpia*, and Papa's special pasta fill the hall. Despite feeling ill, my stomach grumbles. I've not eaten at all this morning. I step into the kitchen, grateful for its cool dimness. Then, I see it. I stop, stunned by the marvel before me.

One of the most ornately decorated cakes I've ever seen rests in the center of the table. Esther created such a perfect confection. I circle the cake, studying its ornamented layers. Various shades of lustrous pink blossoms over silky white frosting. I fight the urge to swipe my finger for a taste. I'd have to answer to Esther. But this is my cake. I may not have my party but, surely, I can have a small taste. Gently, I pry off one of the tiniest sugared flowers skirting the base and pop it in my mouth. The heavenly sweet melts on my tongue as I stand admiring the shimmering blooms. It is all so lovely I almost forget the thrumming.

Then, I hear a scream. Isabella is racing down the hallway toward me. I stare at her, guilt now souring the sweet's taste.

"It was just a tiny flower. You can't even tell. What's wrong?" It isn't like Isabella to be upset over something so small.

"Caramina!" Isabella yells. "We have to take cover!"

What is she talking about?

The walls begin to shake, and the crushing sound of an explosion deafens my ears. I stand frozen on the kitchen tile. Another explosion splits the air, and the icebox next to me shakes.

Isabella screams, her words piercing through the chaos. “We have to get out of here!”

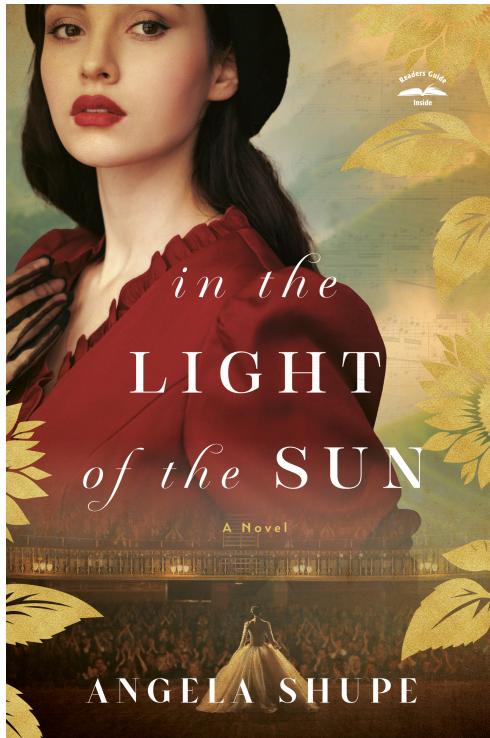
Noise explodes into the room. The icebox lurches, then violently rocks back and forth. My chest tightens, and my pulse pounds in my ears. I squeeze my eyes shut, willing it all to stop. Then something hits me, throwing me hard across the floor. I feel myself smack against the tile, and then there is a crash.

“Caramina! Caramina, answer me!” Isabella is shaking me by my shoulders.

I pry open my eyes, terrified of what I might see. On the floor next to me, the table lay in splintered pieces, crushed by the icebox. In the dim light of the kitchen, I look up at my sister, who stares back with terror in her eyes. Isa brushes my hair from my face.

“Isa.” I attempt to speak, but my voice is a strained whisper.

When she pulls away, I see her hands. They are scarlet, covered in blood.



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