

CHAPTER ONE

*“All the world’s a stage and all the
men and women merely players:
they have their exits and their entrances;
and one man in his time plays many parts...”*

— William Shakespeare, As You Like It

THE CHORUS OF gulls was inspired by the noise they heard through the open windows. Adrian Williams watched their raucous display from her office perch. They strutted around on the neighboring rooftops, squawking and flapping with delight. The actors in the room outside her door seemed to be doing much the same thing.

The opening night excitement was palpable. She could see below that the small theater on the bay was welcoming a stream of enthusiastic patrons. Cars filled the parking lot that touched the lapping sea, as guests waved their way to the box office. It was sure to be a memorable evening.

There was a knock at her office door. “Enter,” she called above the din.

A young pirate stuck his stubbly face through the opening and smiled a large, obvious grin. “What do you think? I blacked out a tooth. Cool, huh? It goes with my tattoo.” He was referring to the viper he had artfully drawn on his forearm in permanent marker. “You can’t even tell it’s a fake.” He flexed his wrist a few times, making the reptile undulate.

“That looks good. Very authentic.” Adrian shifted gears and asked with apprehension, “Larry, you do remember you have to help Lucas down from the

crow's nest during the first blackout, right?"

"Right. Help Lucas down from the crow's nest." The pirate nodded and added, "Got it."

Adrian was not through. "And make sure that in the process you don't take him out with your sword."

"Right." The pirate nodded again. "Don't skewer the pipsqueak with me sword. I got this, Adrian. Don't worry." He danced from foot to foot, nervously. "How long before you call *places*?"

Adrian checked the schoolroom clock on her office wall that ticked away like the voice of reason amidst the colorful array of theater posters, photos, and memorabilia. "You've got fifteen minutes. Can you spread the word for me?"

"Sure thing, matey!" With a sharp salute, Larry marched out the door, slamming it behind him with a vengeance. His voice echoed as he yelled to the occupants of the nearby dressing rooms like a town crier, "Fifteen minutes, everyone!"

Adrian returned her attention to the large window that overlooked Sinclair Bay for one last moment of peace. It was a beautiful, warm August evening. From her second floor vantage point, she could see the boaters and fishermen motoring through the salty water toward the city dock. The flotilla of dinghies and cabin cruisers waited in a haphazard line to load onto trailers and drip their way home after a perfect day on the Puget Sound.

The water rippled slightly as a flirtatious breeze caressed its surface. The tiny waves reflected the vibrant sun in long strands of golden light as it touched the Olympic Mountains in the West. Adrian watched the blazing orb turn bright orange and then darken to gradients of crimson and gray; the edges softened and bled into

the intensely blue sky. The benevolent sun slowly dipped into the rugged mountain range leaving a trail of wispy fuchsia clouds in its wake.

Adrian's heart was picking up speed, pounding in her chest like a captive begging to let out. She placed her hand on her chest as if calming an excited child. The sun was almost out of sight. She placed her fear and trepidations into the remaining sliver of light and watched it disappear, extinguished by the waiting peaks. "And there they go," she said quietly. A deep breath filled her with a semblance of peace.

The large upstairs gathering room felt warm and close. Costumes depicting every era since the dawn of man lined the walls like curious spectators. The well-worn witnesses surrounded a fearless band of pirates and a bevy of beautiful maidens as they stood in a large circle awaiting their director's final words of instruction. Adrian spoke to them calmly. "Well, you all look fabulous. I'm pleased with how everything has come together." She gave the cast one last quick inspection and settled on a tall lanky pirate who wore a stippled beard and ragged vest. "John, you were right," she said. "The parrot is a nice touch."

The young man smiled smugly. He adjusted his plastic feathered friend one last time for good measure, straightening him on his shoulder.

"I know you're all excited for tonight. You've worked so hard these past three months and I am grateful. This is going to be a stellar production of *The Pirates of Penzance* and I'm sure the audience will love it. I just want to encourage you all to be brilliant and have fun out there. Any questions before we go to places?" She searched the faces for questions.

A hand shot up. It was Max, one of the newer actors. He was playing a pirate in

Act One and a policeman in Act Two. He had an anxious look on his face as he asked, “What do we do if something goes wrong?”

Adrian shrugged. “Like what?” she said.

Max stuttered, “I don’t know, anything could happen. A costume could rip, a sword could break, someone might forget their lines, or miss their music cue, or screw up an entrance, or...”

“I don’t think anything’s going to go wrong,” Adrian said. “But of course, this is live theater. If something unexpected happens, you have to cover for each other and do the best you can. Please don’t worry, Max. You’re all well-prepared and definitely ready for an audience so just go out and have fun. Okay?”

There was nervous laughter and subdued chatter around the room. The clock on the wall approached seven-thirty. Adrian shouted out in a confident tone, “Okay everyone. Places.”

The audience was cheering. Adrian smiled as she peered over the railing to revel in their transfixed expressions. Teetering between the darkness and the light she stood at the edge of the stage. She hid just out of view as she assessed the evening’s performance. It had been a great opening night. She had no complaints of her amateur acting troupe. In fact, the performance pleased her. Everyone stepped up and rose to the occasion. All the months of hard work and exhausting rehearsals paid off in the sheer excitement of the moment. *This is what live theater is all about.* She thought to herself. *We do it for this moment of fulfillment.*

The finale met with vigorous applause and shouts of approval. The voices, full-bodied and bright, brought the first performance to an exquisite close like the last

stroke of paint completing a masterpiece.

Adrian felt a huge sense of relief. Her heart was filled with satisfaction. She could breathe comfortably again. Just then, she began to notice something in the emptiness behind her. It was a familiar yet atypical sound. Buried in the raucous applause was a soft even pulsing - drip, drip, drip – as if a large icicle was steadily melting in the midday sun. She tried to ignore the sound and pushed it out of her consciousness as she relished the end of the show. But the rhythmic pulse continued to nag at her like water torture. Within a fleeting moment, the noise built to a level that demanded her attention. Behind her, in the hallway leading to the lobby, the gentle dripping suddenly burst into a full-fledged waterfall. Water poured through the ceiling, from every outlet it could find. It filled the hallway and raced toward the lobby.

From her vantage point above the audience, the spotlight operator sat wearing a stunned expression. She watched as a large sheet of water cascaded through several light fixtures and two smoke alarms. “Uh, Adrian...” was all she could manage to utter.

But Adrian had already jumped into action. “I’m on it!” she called out. She slid under the icy waterfall, through the wet lobby, and headed up the stairs as fast as her middle-age body could carry her. The audience was oblivious to the emergency as they roared and applauded for the bowing cast members. The blaring music muffled the boisterous downpour that streamed with abandon on the other side of the thick wall.

“Just hold off! Please, hold off!” Adrian called out in vain as she reached the upstairs landing. She knew the inevitable was coming. She waded through several

inches of water to the flooded restroom that sat just outside the men's dressing room. The lone toilet resembled a small basin of the Trevi fountain, bubbling and gurgling away. It was only lacking the coins. She reached down behind the brimming bowl and turned the knob to the right, shutting off the water source. Then, with lightning reflexes, she grabbed the waiting plunger and proceeded to pump like a wild-woman. The culprit was quickly dislodged and the gurgling fountain was no more. The water in the tank receded to its normal level like an ebbing tide.

With the immediate crisis averted, Adrian looked down at the flooded floor and her soggy sandals. There was no mop in sight. A bloated roll of paper towels floated past her. She knew it was just a matter of moments before the next problem would arrive. She waded back to the top of the stairs. From the theater below, she could hear the cheers subsiding as the curtain call came to an end. Then, as anticipated, it happened: the piercing sound of the fire alarm shrieked through the building like a heart attack, as the emergency lights flashed wildly. "Thank you for waiting!" she called out to the vigilant warning system as she slogged down the long staircase to the lobby.

The alarm was deafening. The waterfall continued to cascade like the excess flow off a hydro dam, through the ceiling outlets and out the smoke alarms. The free-flowing water was now contained; funneled into three large garbage cans complete with floating debris, cups, and napkins. Volunteers scurried to find the absentee mop and bucket. Voices on stage yelled over the shriek of the alarm system, directing the audience to file out the side emergency exit.

To Adrian's surprise, the strident alarm and flashing lights hadn't dampened the evening. She could hear laughter and appreciation ringing throughout the theater.

The thrill of the epic flood had just added to the excitement. The audience mulled around outside the building waiting for the third part of the event – the arrival of the fire trucks. They didn't have to wait long.

Adrian was busy pushing buttons on the security pad by the front door, trying to remember the code to disarm the relentless alarm, when a grunting gleaming fire truck pulled into the parking lot. A tall young man dressed in heavy black boots, yellow pants, and the obligatory suspenders bound to the front door. It took him no more than two or three giant strides. His bulging muscles pressed against his thin t-shirt. "What's the problem, ma'am?" He smiled at her. His years of experience had allowed him to ascertain the lack of any real panic in and amongst the crowd.

"Well, it's not a fire, that's for sure." Adrian felt apologetic for rousing the fire department to attend to the results of a stopped up toilet. "It's quite the opposite, actually." She finally managed to punch the right combination of buttons and the blaring alarm fell silent. "That's better. Come on. I'll show you our new water feature."

The young fireman shook his head in disbelief. He watched as water continued to drain down the walls, through the light fixtures and out the soggy CO2 detector, which up to this point had only detected H2O.

"We had to file the audience out the back door," Adrian said. "They were compliant; no problems. At least we got through the show before the alarm went off." She gave the strapping young man a weak smile.

"So, did a pipe burst or something?" The fireman asked. His triceps bulged as he crossed his arms over his chest, considering the source of the problem.

Really? Are firemen required to have bodies like this? His defined physique

distracted Adrian. *He's like the perfect, stereotypical fireman. He should be featured in a calendar or something. Eye-candy like this must be shared.* She regained consciousness and said, "Uh, no, nothing as glamorous as that. The upstairs toilet overflowed. Operator error. It's happened before. It looked like the toilet had been running awhile. The water seeps around the base and through the old floorboards, and pours into the first floor smoke detectors. That sets off the fire alarm."

It was now his tremendous pectorals that caught her attention as he placed his hands on his hips, striking a pose that resembled Paul Bunyan without the ox. He delivered the bad news. "Well, the problem you're going to have, after you clean up this mess, is that you can't reset your fire alarm system with a wet detector. Once they get wet, they're shot. You'll have to get it replaced before you can rearm and you can't have the public in here until the alarm system is up and running. Too bad it's the weekend. You'll have to have someone come out Monday to fix it."

Adrian chose to smile rather than cry. "That is a problem, since we have two more performances this weekend and sold out houses for both," she said.

"Hm. That's not good. Well, I'm sure the alarm company has a technician working late. Though you'll have to pay those exorbitant weekend rates. Just give 'em a call. I'm sure they'll be glad to help a lady in distress." He flashed a toothy smile and gave her a friendly wink. Despite his attempts at cheerfulness, Adrian's spirits remained waterlogged, much like the crumpled cups and napkins floating in the garbage cans that were now serving as holding tanks.

The young fireman took Adrian's name and number for his records and then bound back to his shotgun position in the gleaming truck. With a creak and a grumble the impressive vehicle trudged it's way back down Bay Street.

Adrian watched them leave, then turned back to discover the faces of a crowd of incredulous actors. The dripping ceiling and sloshing garbage cans stood between the director and her crew like a Red Sea that refused to part. She mustered a little energy to ease their concern and said, “Wonderful show tonight, everybody! The audience loved it! Thank you for all your hard work.” The actors stood in awe of the flooded hallway and dripping ceiling, not knowing what to say. With as much cheer as she could muster, Adrian continued, “Don’t worry! We will have this all cleaned up before the next show. So get some rest and be ready to wow them again tomorrow night!” After her oh-so-optimistic speech, it occurred to her that she was probably the best actor in the bunch.

Slowly, the disillusioned crowd of pirates and maidens began to disperse. Adrian added, “If any of you would like to stay and help mop up...” There was a sudden burst of energy amongst the ranks and the room cleared in no time. She sighed deeply and said to herself, “No, I thought not.”