

Contemporary Fantasy 1

Norroway Automotive was a far cry from the opera halls of Venice.

Commented [CS1]: Nice promise

Cadenza wove a trail through the ranks of new and used cars in the front lot, the sun flashing off windshields, and price stickers shouting out their bargains. The “normal people” cars lived out front—commuter sedans, minivans, used pickups. Norroway kept his specialty of high-end, import models in the indoor showroom, near his office.

Commented [CS2]: nice

Commented [CS3]: This was kind of a jarring transfer of Norroway being a car dealership to a person, but that might be me being a distracted reader. I'll ask the others.

Cadenza headed that way, her thoughts still in Italy. One sister already singing in Venice. The other sister singing in Napoli. And their agent had booked her *here*, this back-highway, Central California town that she'd hoped to never see again.

To sing car dealership radio jingles.

Commented [CS4]: I like the promises this is making about the character

Not that she would complain. Neither her career nor her finances put her in a position to play diva right now. This gig didn't pay much, but it did come with the use of an on-site apartment, and Cadenza needed every cent.

There were her mother's conditions to meet.

Nerves fluted in the pit of her stomach. She halted just outside the showroom door. Drew in a breath. Tried to pull her mind away from Italy and back to here and now. Heat from the asphalt radiated through the soles of her shoes. Bass notes flowed from the heat, tendril-like, up from the ground. They played around her ankles, vibrated in her calves.

Commented [CS5]: interesting

No, not right now, she pushed the music down. *Focus, Cadenza. Don't screw this one up.*

She tossed her hair back, squared her shoulders, and put on her best smile before pulling open the showroom door. A salesman emerged from behind a Porsche 911 Carrera as soon as her heels clicked on the marble floor. He flashed a smile of unnaturally white teeth and spread his hands.

“Welcome to Norroway Automotive. How can I help you?”

Cadenza shook his hand. “I’m Cadenza Cavalieri. Norroway is expecting me.”

“Oh, you’re Cadenza!” The salesman gave her a once over and his grin grew broader.

Oh, boy. One of those. Cadenza’s smile faltered.

“He mentioned you’d be arriving today,” the salesman still had a hold of her hand. “I can show you to his office if you like.”

Cadenza reclaimed her hand as politely as she could. *Only temporary*, she reminded herself. “That’s ok. I remember where it is.”

She headed to a hallway at the side of the showroom. This wasn’t her dream job, but she had to admit, it would be good to see Norroway again. Really, she owed this gig as much to the friendship between her late father and Drostan Norroway as to anything she or her agent had done. She hadn’t seen him since her father had passed away, and she’d been young enough then for Norroway to call her “Caddie,” and for her to call him “Uncle Norroway.” Her father had been the only mechanic Norroway had trusted to work on his Italian imports, and Cadenza had often accompanied him on his trips to Norroway Automotive’s repair shops. When she had tired of helping her father work, Norroway would pull out a package of turtle cookies and tell her tales about the artifacts and family heirlooms from Scotland on display in his office.

The office door was ajar. Strains of a Dougie McLean song drifted out into the hallway, and she could hear Norroway’s gravelly voice singing along.

“Hello?” Cadenza knocked on the door, before pushing it the rest of the way open.

“Caddie!” Drostan Norroway’s grey beard split into a grin as he shoved away from his desk. “Gie’ yer Uncle Norroway a hug, lass.”

Apparently she was still young enough for him to call her Caddie.

Commented [CS6]: nice

Commented [CS7]: nice background info/context

He swallowed her in a hug, and Cadenza felt some of the nerves in her stomach fade away. A feeling rushed through her. Unfamiliar at first. Then it hit her. It felt like home. Like *famiglia*.

How long had it been since she'd felt that?

Norroway pulled back. "Look at how you've grown! Last time I saw you, you weren't but yay high," he held a hand to his middle. "Come away in, dear." He waved her into the office and pulled a chair up to the desk for her.

She glanced around the office, as Norroway brought over mugs of tea he'd had waiting.

"They're all still here." She pointed to the collection of heirlooms on display. A leather arm brace that had deflected an arrow in a Jacobite battle. A stirrup from a saddle used in cattle raids across the Scottish-English border. The dagger that Norroway swore up one side and down the other had been instrumental in persuading the Roman, Hadrian, to build that wall.

"Oh, aye, the 'story things' you called them when you were wee." He chuckled to himself. "It's true, not much has changed around here."

"How are Ruairi and Cyrus doing?" Cadenza nodded at a framed snapshot on the desk of Norroway with his two sons. Both boys had been in their early twenties already when she'd been a child, so she hadn't known them well.

"Oh, they're fine, fine. Working off in..." He waved a hand in a vaguely southern direction while he rummaged through the mound of papers on top of the desk. "Aha! Here they are." Norroway handed her a set of keys. "For the apartment," he explained. "There'll be paperwork and such, of course, for the contract, but you'll be wanting to get settled in first. Come on."

They drove Cadenza's car around to the back of the lot, to where several repair garages and Drostan's own cottage were out of sight of the sales lot. Behind the outbuildings lay the racetrack. Norrway Automotive hosted regular NASCAR races as well as sold and repaired vehicles. Part of her contract entailed singing the national anthem at the races.

Commented [CS8]: is it weird she's calling him this? She even said "Uncle Norrway" earlier, when usually uncle is with a first name?

"Just in here," Norrway pointed to one of the repair garages, and clicked an opener on Cadenza's new key ring. The overhead lights flickered on as Cadenza pulled her sedan inside. The garage sat empty except for one other car hidden under a cover, like furniture in an unused house. A metal flight of stairs climbed the back wall of the garage to the apartment door. The faint smell of tire rubber, and oil soaked into cement rolled over her when she opened the car door. She breathed in deeply. It smelled like her father.

Commented [CS9]: where did this come from? (It's phrased like I should know about it instead of an introducing new information)

"You're sure I'm not going to be in the way here?" She pulled a duffle bag out of the trunk.

"Wheesht!" Norrway banished the suggestion with a wave of his hand. "It'll make it easier for the races if you're living on the estate."

Cadenza smiled to herself. She had forgotten how Norrway always referred to the automotive grounds as "the estate."

"Besides," he threw a glance at the covered car. "We don't use this garage anymore save for storage." He hefted a box out of the back seat and headed up the stairs to unlock the door with his copy of the key.

"This was one of the first buildings we put up back when we opened. The apartment used to be the staff lounge," he pointed to a window in the wall of the living room that overlooked the garage below, "but it should work. We cleaned it up and kitted it out after booking you."

Cadenza dropped her duffle bag on the couch. "We?"

“Aye, young Canon and myself. You’ll have met him on the way in, he works the sales floor. Could sell water to a drowning man, that lad. Has a fair voice as well. He’ll actually be singing in the commercial with you.”

“Great.” Cadenza’s stomach sank, but she tried to smile anyway. First impressions could be deceiving. If Norroway liked him maybe he was actually a decent guy.

The stairs clanged and echoed on their way back to her car for another load. The shape of the covered car caught her eye and she ran a hand over the roof.

“What’s under here? It looks fast.”

“Oh, that?” Norroway averted his eyes from the hidden car and busied himself with another of her bags. “It’s just...something that doesn’t want to go anymore.” A buzz sounded from his pocket and he checked his phone. “Caddie dear, I’m wanted up front. I’ll let you finish getting settled. Tomorrow we can head to the studio for the first commercial, alright?”

She nodded. “Sounds good.”

She watched him jog back across the lot towards the showroom and leaned against the mystery car. Recording would start tomorrow. Good. She didn’t have much time to come up with the money to meet her mother’s proposition. As good as it was to see her father’s friend again, she had a goal. A goal that would finally kickstart her opera career.

She patted the car. “You don’t want to go, and I don’t want to stay. What a pair. Still...”

She reached in her pocket to touch the key ring. This wasn’t the trajectory she’d envisioned for herself. Radio jingles and car races. But it did mean no more living out of her car or crashing on friends’ couches. No more lying to her agent that she was “just fine” for fear of being dropped as a client. She had a place of her own again. At least temporarily.

Commented [CS10]: glad we have a goal. I’m wondering what she gave up to be here—if it was giving up? Or is she just disappointed? How is this going to turn into an opera career?

Commented [CS11]: nice

One more trip was all it took to cart the rest of her belongings up to the apartment. Sliding glass doors led from the living room to a balcony with a view of the rest of the grounds and the old Highway 108 that ran through her home town of Sonora, past the “estate” and further east. Beyond the highway rolled the foothills, on their way to becoming the Sierra Nevadas.

Commented [CS12]: oooh I'm from the foothills! Farther north than Sonora! Not that it matters!!

A brief hallway ended in a bedroom and bathroom, and a kitchenette opened off of the left side of the living room. Cadenza made a quick inspection and found that Drostan had stocked the fridge and cupboard for her arrival.

A package of turtle cookies waited on the two-person dining table.

Commented [CS13]: Aw!

That feeling hit her again. Still rusty from disuse, but she recognized it faster this time.

Famiglia. Being cared for. Safety.

Commented [CS14]: Different kind of aww 😊

Shaky, she exhaled and dropped into a chair. A breeze blew in from the open balcony door, a melody caressed her face, wrapping itself around her like a blanket. Cadenza began to sing, *sottovoce*, lullaby-like.

Babbo, she sent the thought out to the sky, not really knowing if he still existed in any form that could hear her, *I miss you*.

Commented [CS15]: ? If this means dad, she hasn't referred to him this way yet.

She slid a cookie from the package and wandered back to the balcony. The hills beyond the sales lot shone in the evening sun, baked gold in the August heat.

Babbo loved those hills, she nibbled at the cookie, brooding. They had spent hours driving the back highways just to enjoy the hills. Well, that and to see how fast they could take the curves in whichever fantastic import he'd been working on for whichever wealthy owners had sought him out. He always said the hills reminded him of his native Toscana.

Commented [CS16]: Awkward phrasing?

A Toscana she still had never seen.

She was going to change that though. She called up her mother's email on her phone to read it for the hundredth time.

Cara Mia, (Cadenza had snorted at this the first time she'd read the email. Since when had she ever been "dear" to her mother?)

I have good news for you. A good chance. One of the ladies has been cut from The Magic Flute. I have spoken to the direttore about you. (Another lie. She had found out later that it had been her eldest sister, Giulia, who spoke to the director. But far be it from her mother to let others take the credit.) *If you can put together the funds for your plane ticket, the part is yours. And in Teatro la Fenice, Cara! You can stay with me, it will be fun, like a party! But I need to know soon. You will need to have your ticket by the end of October, or they will have to give the part to someone else in time for rehearsals.*

—Ilaria

Ilaria. Not "Mamma." Not even "Your Mother." Just her name. Cadenza rolled her shoulders and sighed. **After this many years, she really shouldn't let the lack of maternal affection get under her skin. It's not like it was a surprise. She had already responded telling her mother she would do it.** Nevermind that she didn't have the money, she would get it. Her credit cards had been cut off a year ago, so she had to get the cash together ahead of buying her ticket, but she would make her dream happen. **Starting tomorrow.**

The window overlooking the garage caught her eye and she contemplated the hidden car. It wasn't like Norway to leave a vehicle unrepaired. What was he keeping down there? Curiosity sparked, she jogged down the stairs to the mystery car. Dust clouded as she yanked back the cover and she coughed. When the dust cleared, her eyes widened in surprise.

Why was Drostan keeping a *Ferrari F12 Berlinetta* hidden away in storage?

Commented [CS17]: Oh, okay. So... this seems like a weird order to get the information in? I immediately started filling in gaps because this felt like a cool fantasy plot thing that she isn't going to tell us right away with PAYOFF when we figure it out, but...now I'm not sure why I needed to wait for it? I jumped to the wrong conclusions, so when it's not A CURSE or MAGIC or HER MOTHER IS A SCARY WITCH AND IS GOING TO EAT HER BONES I'm kind of let down?

Commented [CS18]: How long is this contract? It would have to be long for her to get an apartment to go with it...right? And I thought it was long term—singing for the races and all that. It sounds like she's on retainer. No end in sight.

Breath held in reverence, she traced the sleek sides with her fingertips. She circled the machine, taking in the efficient angles, the night-sky-black paint job. She could almost hear the growl of the engine, and hummed a tune to match.

Cadenza tried the handle expecting it to be locked, but the door opened with a small snick.

“In storage *and* open?” Her eyebrows shot up. She threw a quick glance over her shoulder, but with the garage door closed, no one walking through the compound would see her.

Guilt lost a lightning fast battle with her appreciation for beautiful machinery—she was her father’s daughter after all—and she slid into the driver’s seat. The black leather interior matched the outside of the car, and something was carved in bas relief across the dashboard where the *Ferrari* logo should have been. She traced the carving with her fingertips. The line wove under and over itself, leading back to where she had started, with a stylized wolf in the middle of the design.

“You aren’t exactly standard issue, are you?” she whispered to the design. As a kid she had seen enough examples of Celtic knotwork in Norrway’s office to recognize it, but in all the years of her father working on custom sports cars, she’d never seen anyone decorate one like this. Although, if it was Drostan’s car, it made sense that he’d add his own flair to it.

This car was obviously something special to him. Why was he keeping it hidden away and nonfunctional?

“You who are made to outrace the angels,” she whispered to the *Ferrari*, “you ‘don’t want to go anymore?’ You are content sitting here in this garage, going nowhere?”

She thought of the apartment, and the cookies upstairs in the kitchen. Norrway could have easily hired someone local for the NASCAR races. And recording radio jingles was a day

Commented [CS19]: I Like this

Commented [CS20]: This sentence has a lot of ideas in it

gig. Giving her a place to live went above and beyond what he needed to do. Gratitude welled in her heart. After months of not having a place of her own, Cadenza's material possessions had been whittled down to essentials, but she did still carry her father's tools with her. His intricate knowledge of Italian sports cars, she carried in her head. Perhaps she could do one small thing to show Drostan she appreciated his help.

Cadenza laid her fingertips over the wolf and closed her eyes, this time looking for the music, rather than pushing it down or simply letting it come to her. A sense of something old and sleeping washed over her. Old and sleeping, but with a tune buried underneath. She coaxed at the song, trying to tease it out. A few notes peeked through, tasting almost familiar.

She gave the car a little smirk. "I think I can convince you to go again."

Commented [CS21]: Restating information

Commented [CS22]: ...all she had was a duffle bag. She has her father's tools??

Commented [CS23]: huh

Things we like:

- I like the voice, we immediately get lots of music references (which is nice since the mc is an aspiring opera singer) and like that she connects cars to her father. There are also some immediate comparisons between her and her sisters which show us some character motivation, which very quickly feeds into stakes.
 - Lots of character in the appreciation for cars too
- Flows really nicely, I like the introduction to Drostan and the connections between her memories of him and how he's kind to her now (turtle cookies!) contrasted with her relationship with her mother.
 - Second the appreciation for the prose. Very clean and clear, I didn't get confused anywhere. Appropriate amounts of time spent on most details, only one place concerns me - mentioned below
- I like the physical descriptions of Cadenza's magic and that it's connected to music--very intriguing.
- I really enjoyed the description of her father's friend's heirlooms as "story things." It was a nice character voicey moment, but it was also an entirely appropriate way to describe them considering what we learn of her magic later in the submission.

Wait we learn about her magic? Last two paragraphs where she's sensing the car and gets like flashes of its history and that she can make it work again? I assumed psychometry, like, seeing the past in objects. Oh ok. Hm. I think it's a hair too subtle for me. Would not be surprised at all if it turns out to be magic, but if you hadn't said anything I would have reserved judgement till more evidence was given. The music in her bones/the things around her was what got me thinking magic.

Things that might need a second look:

- I wondered about that letter and her mother asking her to stay with her--Cadenza has no emotional reaction to the idea of not only seeing, but living with and accepting a huge favor from her mother. It seems like there are Feelings here, but they don't extend to the next stage of this journey for some reason? I'm not sure what she's giving up to take this job--it doesn't seem like a HUGE sacrifice to be doing car jingles, only kind of embarrassing? But also a godsend? And what is she giving up to take the opera part, and is it worth it (and how will we know when we get there and she either takes it or gives it up?)
 - I got the impression she wasn't really giving up anything, that such was the point. She's broke and homeless, this is about taking an opportunity not giving something else up. I seem to have read this very different than you two
 - I think I read it the same way as you Cameron, where she's just snatching at an opportunity for success and it happens to come from her mother, but considering that her mother is the source of a LOT of angst, I think I'd have liked just a little more thinking about that specifically. I kind of agree that the emotions could be tied tighter to the events here. Is Cadenza worried about being in debt to her mother i this works out?
 - What I mean to say is, it seems like the way things are set up, it feels a little backward? OR isn't she giving something up by reconnecting with her mother? It's like "I'M TAKING THIS AWFUL JOB. IT'S AWFUL." But then it turns out it's not that awful in comparison, and is, in fact, a springboard.
- So because this is contemporary fantasy, when there's a little bit of mystery surrounding Cadenza's relationship with her mother and some cryptic "mother's conditions" and taking a janky job to make ends meet, I immediately jumped to HER MOTHER IS A SCARY WITCH AND IS GOING TO EAT HER BONES IF SHE DOESN'T PAY TRIBUTE TO THE OPERA THREE or THERE'S A FAMILY CURSE or something magical and nefarious, so when it's just that she has to come up with the money for a plane ticket so she can take this part in The Magic Flute she's always wanted (which part? Pamina? The Queen of the Night? Something smaller?) I was, like, a little disappointed because my imagination had already had so much time to run wild. There's no reason to keep any of that stuff a secret so far as I can tell, which made me, as a reader, slightly less confident that gathering clues and guessing about what's REALLY going on will pay off in the future. If nothing's really going on, keeping your reader guessing doesn't do you any favors :)

Same, this is an instance where the suspense was too good for the pay off. Pursuing dream singing in Italy is a fantastic motivation, but it's not '*mother's condition*' fantastic motivation=