



Donna (Girls of Spindrift 2)

Author: V.C. Andrews

Category: Young Adult

Description: Such is the burden of being brilliant.

Being gifted is not something Donna ever wanted. It's difficult enough to have a Latino father and Irish mother, and her genius only separates her even more from the other girls. They don't say it, but they blame her for everything that goes wrong, just because she's different.

And on the precise day she tries her hardest to fit in, everything turns out a disaster. A fight breaks out, and somehow Donna ends up in the middle. It's not her fault, but it's her word against theirs, and this time, the other girls aren't going to stay quiet. The only solution might be to escape to the mysterious school her counselor is telling her about: Spindrift.

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“Calm down. What are you getting so mad about?” Greg Rosario asked under his breath.

He leaned toward me, hoping to keep the others from hearing. I got a whiff of his cologne, which I always liked because of its coconut scent. It brought back memories of Acapulco, when I was four and my father took my mother and me to visit his uncle.

I knew I shouldn’t have sat at Mateo and Greg’s table. I preferred to eat alone or, at most, with Twyla Cross and Meg Adams at what had become known as the “Gray Matter Table” because they were both 4.0 students. My teachers didn’t bother to give me grades anymore. Most of the time, I was doing independent study and simply checked in with my required classes to take exams. They made me do it solely for the benefit of the administration and state laws. I had yet to get less than a hundred percent on any of them.

“She’s just naturally feisty, chico,” Mateo Flores had just said, with that cat-that-ate-the-canary grin on his face. He was a tall, lanky boy, with hair as dark as black licorice and eyes of a similar shade. “But I hear that makes Latinas better lovers, better even than Frenchwomen.”

His eyes brightened with sexual excitement. The others laughed, even the girls.

I refused to stoop to his level. “And you’re still an idiot,” I said.

He pulled back, feigning great indignation, but I knew my negative comments rolled off him like water off a duck's back.

“Oooooooh,” he moaned. “Does that mean there's no chance we'll hook up this weekend?”

Everyone but Greg laughed.

“No. It means there's no chance we'll hook up ever,” I said.

Mateo finally stopped smiling and looked away. Greg peered at me a little mournfully. He was always trying to get me to be friendlier to his friends, the girls as well as the boys. He thought I needed more friends, especially these, but I never liked confining myself to what Mateo called the Latinos in our school. Of course, they blamed my independence first on my superior intelligence, which everyone, not just they, claimed made me a snob, and second on the fact that my mother wasn't Hispanic but Irish. Many times, I was accused of thinking I was better than any Latino because I had a white mother. That was also a stupid misconception. There were many Latinos who were not of dark or even tan complexion.

Life for minorities was harder because we had to navigate all these prejudices and distortions. Who could blame me for trying to avoid it, even in a school forty miles from San Diego, whose population was mostly Latinos? Most of the inhabitants, including my father, a pharmacist for a privately owned drugstore, worked in or very close to the city. My mother was a hairstylist at a local salon and increased her time there when my little brother, Mickey, entered first grade. He was now in fifth, and although he was not the intellectual phenomenon I was, he was one of the brightest in his class.

Like me, Mickey was a good reader, but unlike me, he was also a good athlete, enjoying soccer and baseball especially. He was the starting third baseman on the

Little League team. Also unlike me, he had no problems with his Hispanic heritage and got along with everyone. He enjoyed being bilingual. I rarely spoke in Spanish, even though I was quite fluent, in both it and French. Lately, I was studying Greek and reading Plato and Socrates in Greek, something that made me even weirder to most who knew me or knew of me, those even my mother occasionally slipped and referred to as “normal students.”

The implication, however unspoken, was that I was abnormal.

Some of my mother’s friends went so far as to pity her, and for what? For having a daughter who was so brilliant that the usually accepted methods of measuring intelligence couldn’t do her justice. Because of what I thought was a failure to classify me properly, they called me gifted. According to the guidance counselor and any teachers who came into contact with me, my horizons were limitless. I gathered new information, facts, and statistics so rapidly and processed them so completely that educators compared my mind to a giant sponge and said that what I did was more like osmosis. My absorption of new data had that sort of speed.

Games and sports never interested me, perhaps because I could outsmart my opponents so easily. Forget about playing cards with me if you ever wanted to win. I could instantly imagine the odds of my opponent getting another jack or queen, and once I studied how my opponent thought, I knew exactly what he or she would do. People don’t realize how predictable they are. The same was true for me in one-on-one basketball and tennis, even Ping-Pong, not that I was that skilled. I never lost simply because I anticipated exactly what my opponent would do. It was boring for me and depressing for them. Eventually, the school had excused me from all physical education classes.

I didn’t ask for that specifically. My PE teachers complained about my constant questions and my clever ways of avoiding participation. All my other teachers were able to keep from having to confront me daily. Some were afraid of my correcting

them; most admitted they were holding me back from making any progress. I think my PE teacher was simply jealous. I didn't mind being excused, even though I knew it contributed to the negative view most of the other students had of me.

I was very fond of Greg, however. I took a lot of flak to please him. Lately, he was making more of an effort to start something romantic between us. I didn't make it easy for him. I knew that a significant reason for the disapproval from my schoolmates resulted from what people viewed as my seeming asexuality. When it came to clothes, makeup, even my hairstyle, I was so indifferent that it even created a wider chasm between my mother and me. Any mother would want her daughter to be more like her, especially mine, who was so attractive and aware of every beauty product and technique. Underneath it all was her suspicion that I might just be gay. What confused her was that I had no interest in other girls, either.

"She'll get interested in those things when she's older," my father used to assure her, but even he was no longer reinforcing that idea.

I felt sorry for them both. Who wants to have a child you can't understand? It's natural to wonder what responsibility you bear and what you could have done or still could do to make a difference and get her to be "normal."

What would become of me, a girl so intelligent that ordinary measurements didn't do her justice? A girl who was always smarter than her teachers? A girl whose school administration threw up their hands and let her be and do whatever she wanted because they couldn't keep up? They eventually provided me with an adviser, Mr. Feldman, who did his best to structure some form of study, but he readily admitted that he was incapable of designing anything that would satisfy my needs. I was a wild card, a force unto myself. What college would have a program good enough? Where should I aim my efforts? Would I invent things, go into medicine, teach?

Honestly, I had no idea, either. Knowledge, information, problems in both math and

science, new languages, all were like mines from which I accumulated more and more facts, but I was like Midas, rich beyond any purpose. I could buy anything; therefore, I bought nothing.

What did I really have to offer anyone right now, especially when it came to a school social life?

Maybe that was why Greg's interest in me pricked my attention. Was it simply sexual? Was I some sort of challenge? Or could he actually l

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like me, someone who, to be absolutely honest, did not like herself, even though everyone who confronted me thought the exact opposite?

“So have you thought about the weekend?” Greg asked me now, turning completely so that his friends weren’t part of our conversation. “Saturday, I mean?”

“Not much,” I said.

“Well, tomorrow’s Friday. Maybe you can squeeze it in between Dante’s *Inferno* and Hamilton’s *Federalist Papers*.”

I gave him an impish smile. “James Madison and John Jay get credit, too.”

He held his smile a moment, then turned serious. “We’ll have a good time at La Jolla Beach, stay all day, make a campfire, listen to music, take walks by the surf, and have a picnic. You could tell me about the origin of life and explain how old a seashell is.”

I looked down, holding back on my own smile. A part of me wanted to just say yes, but that analytic mind of mine had to run it past the pros and cons. I was simply incapable of an impulsive decision. My yeses and nos were conclusions after thorough examinations of the facts, something that often annoyed my parents. Any other girl could easily give an answer when, say, her mother asked her to go shopping with her, but even at age four, I would come back with “When?” “Where?” “Why?”

“I’ll tell you tomorrow,” I said, without looking at him. If it were only Greg, it would be easier to decide, but his gang of buddies and their girlfriends would be there. I’d have to get along with more than just him, and I’d be the first to admit that my social

skills left a lot to be desired. Unlike most people, I was as honest about myself as I was about others.

“I’ll bring everything we need, Donna. You just have to bring yourself. No books,” he warned. “It’s a day off.”

A day off? What was a day off? I wondered. Was there ever a day when I wasn’t reading and doing research on one thing or another? Just recently, Mr. Feldman had acquired some graduate-level textbooks in behavioral science and advanced nuclear physics for me, and I had consumed them the following weekend. He told me he was impressed with how I could compartmentalize subject matter and organize my day. As many times as he could, he sat and listened to me explain what I had just learned or what questions I had to solve.

The bell rang, ending lunch hour. I hadn’t finished eating, but that didn’t concern me. I didn’t move with the ringing of bells. Greg lingered behind his buddies. I glanced at him and looked at my new math text, which explained Fourier analysis of the difficulties in reconstructing arbitrary functions as infinite combinations of elementary trigonometric functions.

“I can walk you to the library,” Greg said.

The school had dedicated a room at the rear of the library to me. It had a small window, a desk, two chairs, and some shelves. Years ago, the librarian would put a student in the room and close the door to discipline him or her for talking too loudly. Since that was not permitted anymore, it was a perfect place for me.

I closed the text and rose. “The way I walk, you might be late to class.”

“I’ll take the chance,” Greg said, widening his smile.

Why did he like me, really? I was one of the shorter girls in the junior class—short with diminutive, in my opinion almost childlike, features. After practically twisting my arm at least once a month, my mother washed and styled my light brown hair so that I had the least to do brushing it every morning. She knew that if I had more to do, I wouldn't do it. To paraphrase her, I'd look like some homeless person. She was always after me to "at least put on some lipstick once in a while."

"It wasn't so long ago when girls my age were forbidden to wear lipstick," I told her once.

"Don't give me a history of cosmetics lesson," she warned. "Just . . . look after yourself, Donna. You're a beautiful girl who happens to be . . ."

"Brain-heavy," I said.

She laughed. At least occasionally, she had a sense of humor about me. Sometimes, especially lately, I thought my father was a little afraid of me. No matter what comment he made about what was happening in the news, he always paused to look at me to see if I would agree or correct him. Silence was my best defense. I was afraid I already had lost his love. He concentrated more on Mickey. I told myself that was what men did. They favored their sons. However, almost the nanosecond I told myself that, I followed it with an imaginary ding-dong and thought, Rationalization, Donna Ramanez, the route out of a facetious argument.

"Come on," Greg urged. "Your future is calling." That was one of his favorite things to say to me.

"What future?" I muttered, and joined him.

Despite the intensity of my thinking, I was never unaware of my surroundings. No one could call me an absentminded professor. If anything, my status in school and the

image practically everyone had of me made me paranoid. Maybe that was because I didn't have to look far to see resentment. It was splattered like egg yolks over the faces of the girls in Greg's class. More than one of them obviously wanted his attention, and here I was, the one they probably thought the least attractive, capturing it.

"You know Mateo is really harmless," Greg said. "He's really very impressed by you."

"Save your breath."

"No, really. When you're not around, he's always asking me questions about you. He thinks you're going to be very famous someday."

"Well, then he's smarter than I am," I said.

We paused at the corner of the corridor. I was going in a different direction.

"He thinks I'm lucky," Greg said.

"Why?"

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“He thinks you like me. Is he right?” he asked anxiously.

Nothing in this world made me panic as much as having to express my feelings for someone else, even my parents and my brother. I had been dabbling in studies of human emotions. It was still very confusing to me, because there were so many contradictions. Strong, positive feelings for someone else could be a real paradox. There could be so much about that person that you didn’t like, and yet you could feel an attraction that would refuse to be defeated.

If I paused now to list what I thought were Greg’s weaknesses and mistakes, I’d be here for an hour. Top of the list was his tendency to give people the benefit of the doubt, as he had just expressed when it came to Mateo. He was too trusting, too eager to please and be pleased. The survivor in me wished he would be harder, more cynical. Years from now, his wife might wish that, too, I thought.

And yet it was exactly that softness, that sweetness, that drew me to him. In a world full of spiders weaving traps for everyone else, he was a butterfly. He was a respite, a harmonious pause in a world where everyone was shouting, pushing, and demanding. His beautiful black eyes with their flashes of green pleaded with me to take a breath and forget explaining the tide or what made clouds in the atmosphere and just enjoy the moment.

“Yes,” I said. “Mateo is finally right about something.”

He smiled. If he only knew how hard that was for me to say, I thought, he would smile like that all day.

Perhaps scared that my brain would retract the statement of my tongue, Greg lightly touched my hand and hurried off to class with a “See you later.”

The feeling of his touch lingered. I gazed after him for a few moments and then went to the library. The prospect of going to my special room to study math theories was suddenly distasteful. Would I go so far as to think it would be boring? This feeling was so rare that I couldn’t recall when I had last felt it.

The librarian, Mrs. Kasofsky, glanced at me when I entered and then looked down at her new shipment of library books. Perhaps nothing affected me as much these days as the way teachers looked or, more correctly, didn’t look at me. It was as if they were afraid I’d ask them a question that would expose something they didn’t know. Consequently, I was practically invisible.

No one else was in the library yet, so I walke

d through the silent space quickly, stepped into my cave, as I was wont to call it these days, and plopped into my chair. I tossed my books onto the desk and sat staring at the wall. Idiotically, every other student in this school was envious of me for having such freedom. If I wanted to, I could get up right now, walk out of the library, walk out of the building, and either go home or go to the mall. No one, not even the school’s security guard, would stop me or even ask me where I was going. After all, I might be off to do some special research.

But who would be with me? Who would laugh with me and enjoy the freedom? How much could I talk to myself? I could go visit my mother, but I’d have to stand there and watch her work and talk with her client more than she would with me.

I opened the textbook and began to read, but after only a minute or so, I closed it and got up, walked to the window, and looked out at the corner of the parking lot and a portion of the baseball field. A tenth-grade girls’ PE class was organizing for softball.

Normally, I wouldn't give them a second look, but for some reason, at this moment, I couldn't take my eyes off them. I could see some of them laughing.

My gaze went to the nearly cloudless late-spring sky. A chatter of facts about the atmosphere, the climate-change crisis, and entropic algorithms of weather systems clotted in my mind for a few moments, until I literally shook my head and forced myself to concentrate on simply observing the girls, the way they ran, the joy they exhibited when one of them made an error, and the PE teacher, Mrs. Grossman, waving her arms and shouting something to get them to be more serious.

It brought an unexpected smile to my face.

I did little else for almost the entire period and then looked at my watch and hurried out of my cave. Some of the students looked up from their reading or writing in their notebooks as I marched through the library with an intensity that probably surprised them.

Someone, a girl, said loudly enough for everyone to hear, "Looks like someone really has to poop," and all the students laughed.

Mrs. Kasofsky pounded her desk with a gavel similar to one a judge would have in a courtroom, and the library grew instantly silent, but when I opened the door and looked back, almost all of the students were laughing at me.

At least they noticed me, I thought, and continued down the hallway, turning at the corner and walking down another until I reached the door of what I knew was Greg's classroom. The bell rang, and students began streaming out. They barely took note of me. Greg came out talking with Camelia Lopez, one of the prettier girls in his class. She had shoulder-length raven-black hair and a figure that would put her in contention for Miss Teen USA in a heartbeat. Moreover, there was a mature beauty in her face, with her perfectly straight full lips and high cheekbones.

Greg laughed at something Camelia had said. She was so close to him that from the rear, they looked attached at the hip. I stepped farther back. Greg shifted the books under his arm and in doing so turned his head just enough to see me. He paused. Camelia saw that he was looking my way, but she didn't wait. She joined Paulina Guerra so quickly that one would think she couldn't be alone for even a second.

"Hey," Greg said, coming over. "What's happening?"

It wasn't often that he saw me during the school day other than during lunch hour or an occasional moment in the hallway. I looked toward Camelia, who was quickly disappearing around another turn in the hallway.

"Donna? Anything wrong?"

I looked at him. He could have asked her, I thought. They looked so perfect together. But he hadn't.

"Yes," I said.

"Yes?"

"I'll go to the beach with you Saturday," I blurted, and then I turned and rushed off as if I had just gotten away with stealing something valuable.

Had I made a mistake? I had made a decision impulsively, without doing my usual full analysis.

And in my life, that usually led to regret.

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A half dozen times that night, I started for the phone to call Greg and tell him I had changed my mind. If I went through with it, this would be my first real date, and I was more nervous about it than I had been about anything of late. When I was in tenth grade, to placate my mother more than anything else, I attended a school party. The mothers of some of the other students were clients of hers at the salon, so she knew about it. Actually, she knew more about it than I did.

The seniors were in charge of the decorations and the theme, and that year, someone had come up with the idea of doing “Old Hollywood.” They concentrated on the period when there were movie stars like Marilyn Monroe, Humphrey Bogart, James Dean, and Natalie Wood. You could choose whomever you wanted to be and dress in a way to suggest him or her. There were some wigs and older fashions available. Mr. Longo, the high school art teacher, had them in his classroom. A store in Gold Mountain that sold memorabilia rented out old movie posters to decorate the event.

Many of the senior high school students got into the spirit of the party, to the extent that they began to wear parts or all of their costumes that week. Some wore their wigs. My mother nagged me to dress like a movie star and try to have fun. She was persistent, almost desperate about it. I had no idea whom I would choose. What did attract me was doing the research on old films and stars. In the end, I gave in and selected Vivien Leigh, who had played Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone with the Wind*.

By the time I was finished reading about it, I could tell my parents every fact about the making of that movie, along with historical information about the Civil War. Once I had given in, my mother was more excited about my attending the party than I was and made sure to get me into the salon so she could do my hair just like Scarlett’s in the movie. She also went on a tear through used-dress stores in San Diego until she

located a black gown like the one Scarlet wore at the dance to raise money for the Confederate Army. She was supposed to be in mourning because her husband had been killed in the fighting, but she agreed to dance with Rhett Butler when he outbid everyone for a dance with her.

To my surprise, when I arrived at the school that night, a senior boy, Billy Benson, had dressed as Rhett Butler, the character played by Clark Gable. Since no other boy had done so, matching us quickly became a subject of amusement at the party.

Some of the girls made sure I could hear their comments. “If anyone can wipe that virginity off her face, it’s Billy Benson.” “Billy Benson will teach her something she could never get out of a textbook.” “By the time Billy’s finished with her, she’ll stutter for the rest of her life.”

I didn’t have to overhear their comments to retreat. Billy Benson was one of the boys I’d have least wanted to ask me to dance. He had been in trouble for a variety of offenses most of his high school life, ranging from vandalism to disrupting classes and getting into fights. He had been suspended at least three or four times, and from what I knew, he was on some sort of probation. He and some of the other boys had been outside during most of the party, probably smoking pot, if not something worse.

The moment he returned to the gym, a chant began, started by his friends but quickly picked up by nearly everyone else: “We want Rhett and Scarlett, Rhett and Scarlett.” I shrank farther back, hoping to disappear, but one of his friends seized my waist from behind and pushed me onto the dance floor. Billy was pushed, too, and we were standing there confronting each other. I couldn’t imagine being more embarrassed.

Obviously, he didn’t want to dance with me just as much as I didn’t want to dance with him, but to shut up the crowd that had gathered around us, he scooped me up and began a ridiculous imitation of a waltz, swinging me around. I was screaming, afraid I would be thrown and break an arm or a leg. The more he twirled me and the

more I screamed, the louder the students' laughter grew. I couldn't break out of his grasp. His fingers were pressing me to the bone.

That was when Greg Rosario first stepped into my life. He came out of nowhere and pulled me away from Billy, who, out of embarrassment, immediately began to threaten him. While they had an exchange of words, mostly derogatory about Mexicans, and drew the attention of our teacher chaperones, I slipped out of the gym and ran from the school.

I walked all the way home, which was a good three miles. My father and mother were surprised to see me and shocked at how disheveled I looked. I didn't explain anything. I simply went up to my room and, as quickly as I could, got Scarlett O'Hara's dress off me. My arms had black-and-blue marks where Billy had held me.

My mother came to my room and asked about the party, but I refused to talk about it, and she finally gave up and put the dress away in some carton in the garage. We would never talk about it again. We didn't have to talk. I knew she was very disappointed.

Greg tried to speak to me the next day, but I wouldn't come to the phone, and my mother made some excuse. She asked me about him, but I just shook my head. I wasn't embarrassed as much as I was angry at myself for attending the party in the first place and going along with the make-believe.

When Greg finally saw me in school and asked how I was, I gave him a quick "I'm fine." I didn't even thank him. I wasn't blaming him, but talking to him and thanking him for rescuing me kept the memory too alive.

It took me weeks to settle down. I took advantage of my isolation from the other students and avoided any confrontation with Billy or his friends. In time, no one cared anymore. It was then and only then that I became friendlier with Greg.

Whenever he did try to start a conversation, he was smart enough not to talk about the dance.

Now I was about to go on a date with him. Somehow I managed to avoid backing out of it and instead began to think about how I would dress. I knew it always annoyed my mother that clothes were never that important to me. Usually, she had to remind me that I needed to replace undergarments, socks, even shoes. Unlike most of the “normal” girls in school, I did not enjoy malls and department stores. Window-shopping made no sense to me

. When it was summer, they were showing fall fashions and when it was winter, they were showing clothes for the spring and summer. It all seemed to be a great waste of time.

Of course, I saw how much my mother loved her clothes. Being a hairstylist, she was cognizant of how clothes accented and contributed to a certain look, especially with colors. My hair was almost the same shade as hers, just a little darker. Both of us had hazel eyes with some specks of gold. I had a darker complexion but not as dark as my father's. Both my mother and I had what my father called the “Irish sniffer,” noses that turned up just enough to make us attractive, although I never thought of myself as such. Whenever the question arose in my mind, I smothered it. It was as if I didn't want to hear that I was attractive as much as anyone else would hate to hear she wasn't. I felt threatened by it because I had to live up to it. Pretty girls weren't wallflowers.

Tomorrow was promising to be a golden California day with plenty of sunshine and a warm ocean breeze. I was surprised at the panic I fell into when I began to look through what I had to wear. None of my shorts fit me anymore. None of my tops looked sensible for a beach experience, and I was sure they were out of style now anyway. Everything suddenly appeared very dull, too. So out of step in the way I dressed, I would surely attract more attention than I wanted. I didn't even have a

decent pair of sunglasses. Mine looked like they had once belonged to my father.

I plopped down on the floor and leaned against my bed. Whether I wanted to go with Greg or not, this was simply impossible. I didn't even have a new bathing suit, not that I expected we'd go swimming. The Pacific could be quite cold this time of the year. Surfers wore wet suits.

"What are you doing?" my mother asked from my doorway. "Something wrong?"

"I was asked to go on a picnic on the beach in La Jolla."

"Oh?"

"Greg Rosario asked me, and I said yes too quickly, I think."

"Why too quickly?"

"I don't have the right things to wear."

"Whose fault is that?" she said, as if she had been waiting for years to say it. Maybe she had. I couldn't blame her. She looked at her watch and took on that let's-get-down-to-business look she could flash so well. "Put on your shoes and come down. Mark's is still open in town. I know they have some nice things for someone your age."

I had always suspected that my mother, even when she went to buy something for herself or my brother, veered into the teen girl department and looked at the clothes she wished I wanted. I had no doubt she knew just what to buy quickly. Whenever she did my hair, she talked about buying something new for me. My lack of interest discouraged her, but I was never good at pretending to be someone I was not. If the Hollywood party had proved anything, it was that.

Without waiting for me to say yes, she started away. I slipped into my sneakers and went downstairs. My father and my brother were watching television.

“Keep your eye on the cash register,” my father joked to me. “She’ll put us in the poorhouse.”

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“If I had all I wanted to spend on her these last fifteen years, I could buy the store and then some,” my mother replied.

My father laughed and nodded. I caught the way they looked at each other when they thought I had looked away. They were both so happy.

I was like the prodigal daughter who had finally come home to her sexuality and femininity. I wanted to tell them not to get too excited about any of this. My only goal was to try to avoid unwanted attention.

Or was it more?

Go analyze yourself, Donna Ramanez, I told myself. Discover that you really want to please a boy, that despite your wonder-brain, you could finally have something of a normal relationship and explore your own romantic fantasies.

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All the way to the store, as if she could read my mind, my mother talked about her earliest dates, how she agonized over her hair and makeup and especially what to wear every time she was asked out. She transitioned easily to her school prom and the high school heartthrob she had captured. She didn't go into detail, but I had the suspicion that it was with him that she had lost her virginity. Of course, she talked about boyfriends after high school but wrote off every relationship as empty and shortsighted until she met my father.

My mother wasn't quite as bad as my father when it came to talking about herself

with me or expressing her opinions. However, she often paused, too, anticipating my rational disagreements, factually crushing her theories. But tonight I was just listening, listening and wondering if I would enjoy my life half as much as she seemed to be enjoying hers. Every one of her memories was like another jewel she kept on a charm bracelet. I didn't even have the bracelet.

To please her, I tried on far too many things at the store. After a while, even the saleslady looked exhausted, but in the end, my mother bought me three pairs of shorts, three halters, new sandals, socks, two new bathing suits, a beach bag, beach towels, sunscreen, far sexier panties, a new bra, two different pairs of very stylish sunglasses, and two bathing suit cover-ups.

When I asked why I needed so many of each, she smiled and said, "For the next time, Donna. You don't want to be wearing the same things all the time, do you?"

Next time? I wondered. I hadn't given a thought to a next time or many next times. This was a one-off, almost an experiment to me rather than a date. I had already convinced myself either that I wouldn't like it or that Greg wouldn't like being with me when he had to spend so much time alone with me.

But I said nothing. I helped carry my packages to the car, wondering what I would do now. How would I know which item of clothing was the right one for the first time? When I asked, my mother laughed.

"You're asking the wrong person. I doubt there's anything I do that drives your father more crazy than dressing for a special occasion or even simply going out to dinner. Ordinarily, I try on three or four different outfits, dresses, shoes."

"You do?"

Why wouldn't she know exactly what to wear for any particular evening? I was

totally unaware of what went on in my parents' bedroom. It struck me that I seemed more like a houseguest than a daughter.

“What difference does it make if any one of them would work?”

“Of course it makes a difference. It's all a matter of how you feel at the time, Donna. Sometimes one color appeals to you more than another at the moment.” She looked at me. “Now, don't explain it with some psychological information,” she warned. “Some things should remain a mystery, and at the top of that list is what pleases and displeases a woman.”

I nodded, but for me, it was like listening to someone speak another language. Some things should remain a mystery? Why? How did you know what things should and shouldn't? And why was some of this special only to women?

By the time we arrived home, I felt like I had been riding on a merry-go-round. Dazed, I started up to my room with my packages. My father pretended to be terrified of the bills, but I caught him and my mother smiling at each other, even holding hands, as if she had accomplished something close to sending a rocket to the moon. Surely they were putting too much hope into this, I feared. Right now, nothing seemed as threatening to me as disappointing them again.

It would be even worse than disappointing myself.

But I had no idea, no way of knowing how inadequate the word disappointing would be when it came to describing my day at the beach.

3

Greg always drove his father's five-year-old green pickup truck. His father didn't seem to care that his gardening machinery was locked in a cabinet behind the truck's

cab. Other boys might want their own cars, but Greg was proud of his father's entrepreneurial spirit as the owner of a company with more than twenty employees, and his father was planning on expanding into landscape design and patio construction. Greg liked driving the truck. In the past, most

of the conversations we had were one-sided, with him describing his family. He had two younger sisters, Sofia in fifth grade and Martina in fourth. As if he were warning me about it, he claimed his mother was surely going to have another child.

"Don't be surprised to hear my father wants a second son."

"Why?"

"He knows I want to do something with computer technology. A man like my father expects his son to take over his growing business. He drops hints like why else would he do it? It's everything for the family in my family," Greg said.

He waited to see if I would be critical of that, but what it did was put me into deeper thought about myself, my family, and what the future would be. If anything, Greg's family talk made me feel more inadequate. He wouldn't believe that. In his mind, I was a true super-girl. He would tell me many times that someday he'd be able to brag that he knew me. With so many of the other students in my school seeing me as freakish, I let him load on the compliments. I never contradicted him.

I simply said, "We'll see."

That morning of my first date, after modeling for myself before my full-length mirror, I chose the emerald-green one-piece bathing suit, the dark brown sandals, and the pinkish cover-up and tied the matching headband around my pinned-up hair. That was my mother's suggestion. I put a change of clothes in the beach bag, along with the sunscreen, my mobile phone, and two beach towels. Then I put on a pair of my

new sunglasses and gazed at myself in the mirror as if I were looking through a window at another girl, amazed at what I saw.

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Maybe I am pretty, I thought, then turned and hurried out to go down the stairs.

Mickey was waiting for me. “You’re going to the beach?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Mom says I can’t go because you’re going on a date.”

“She’s right. No one’s bringing younger brothers or sisters. There wouldn’t be anyone for you.”

“You don’t go on dates,” he said.

“So? There’s always a first time, Mickey.”

“My friends always asked me about you, why you don’t have a boyfriend.”

“Well, now you can tell them I do,” I said.

His eyes widened. “Took you long enough,” he said, and I laughed. “Have a good time,” he muttered, and returned to his room.

My bright little brother, I thought. At least he never feared being corrected by me. I knew he bragged about me more often than not. Now he would have something more to say. I suspected that my having a date pleased him almost as much as it pleased me, if not more.

I hurried down the stairs. Something told me Greg would be right on time. He'd think that was very important to me. I was right.

My parents were there to greet him, too. I could see they were pleased with his demeanor. He was mature and polite. My father spoke to him in Spanish, deliberately, I thought, to emphasize that Greg was taking on the responsibility of keeping me safe. My mother understood Spanish but didn't use it often.

After I got into the truck and we started away, Greg smiled with relief. Then he quickly said, "Tu madre es muy hermosa."

"You can say it in English."

He laughed. "Your father put me on the Spanish track."

"But you're right, my mom is very beautiful," I said. I didn't mean to sound unappreciative, but to me, it was an obvious fact. My mother was clearly photogenic. She had never had a bad photograph taken of her.

"So I can see why you're so pretty, too," he said.

I avoided reacting. Maybe what I was really doing was being modest, but the truth was that I was afraid of what being pretty meant. Would his friends think so, too? How should I react to that, especially in front of the other girls? What if I sounded arrogant to them? In my mind, I saw myself traversing through minefields. I would surely say the wrong thing, at least to them, and appearing stupid was just not in my DNA.

"Your parents ever take you to La Jolla Beach?"

"No. We went to beaches elsewhere when I was younger, much younger, but not for

years now.”

“When you go to college, the other girls won’t believe you’re from California. They think we live on the beach.”

“Somehow what the other girls will think of me doesn’t seem very important. I’m not sure about college yet. Our guidance counselor, Mrs. Pelham, thinks I could take the master’s exam in almost any subject now and get my degree.”

He nodded. “I bet you could. Any idea of what you want to do?”

“None,” I said. “Everything,” I added.

He smiled. “For today, just have a good time.”

I sat back. Why did that sound like the most difficult thing of all to do?

Greg’s friends were already at the part of the beach we were going to, as he said, stake out for ourselves. They had blankets spread and music going.

Mateo Flores, already down to his bathing suit, began to do salsa steps when he caught sight of me stepping out of Greg’s truck. Renata Solis leaned over to turn up the music. She was wearing quite an abbreviated bikini. Her family had moved here from Honduras a little more than two years ago.

“Hola!” Mateo shouted. “Come dance, Señorita Genius.”

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“Calm down, Mateo, or you’ll wear yourself out and fall asleep like last time and get eaten by bugs,” Greg warned him.

The others gathered around and laughed—Sandra Cisneros, Damian Rechy, Renata Solis, and Ernie Carty, all seniors like Greg and Mateo. Sandra stood up and began dancing with Mateo, leaning into him very closely. One of the misconceptions about Latinos was that dancing well was something we did naturally. My father liked to dance, and my mother was good, but I always felt awkward and out of step.

I knew I certainly couldn’t be as sexy as these two. They were shouting for us to join them.

Greg leaned over to whisper. “I think they were into the tequila early. Don’t worry. They’ll get sleepy. They always do.”

He carried our picnic basket and put it down a few feet from the others. I dropped my beach bag next to it and helped him spread out our blanket.

“We really need umbrellas, too,” I said, thinking of UV damage.

“You can cover yourself with sand, or Greg can cover you,” Damian said. “I can help.”

“Irish is bad for sun,” Mateo teased. “Not for us Latinos!” he cried. “Right, Señorita Genius?”

“Stop calling her that, Mateo,” Greg said sharply.

Mateo laughed and shrugged as he danced. “That’s what she is, compañero.”

“It’s all right,” I told Greg.

I took out my sunscreen and began applying it to my face. When I took off my cover-up, Greg offered to do my neck and shoulders.

“Don’t miss a spot,” Mateo warned him.

“You’re right about the umbrella,” Greg told me, thinking. “I have an idea. Relax for a minute.”

He turned and hurried back to his father’s truck.

“He’s leaving so soon?” Mateo asked me.

“Maybe you’re making too much noise, like static,” I said, and everyone went “OOOOOH.”

He laughed and continued to dance. Greg returned with a roll of canvas and two metal poles. We watched him dig the poles deep into the sand and then unroll the canvas, draping it over the poles, which expanded when he pulled them up, improvising a tent to cast shade over our blanket.

“That’s very clever,” Mateo said. “Señorita Genius is rubbing off on you.”

“Maybe she is,” Greg said. I moved under the canvas. He bunched up some sand so I’d have a pillow under the blanket and then opened his picnic basket. “Beer, Coke, water?”

“Water,” I said. “Alcohol dehydrates you, and the sun is already doing a good job of

that.”

Sandra and Renata moaned.

“Sometimes it’s bad to know too much,” Renata said.

Greg handed me some water and then reached in, thought a moment, and brought out another bottle of water. “I’ll build up some insurance first,” he said.

“She’ll turn you into a real gringo,” Sandra warned him. Before he could respond, she turned the music up louder, and she and Renata continued to dance with Mateo.

Because Greg and I closed our eyes and were half hidden from them, the others began conversations without us. I half listened, mostly intrigued with what the girls were saying. They talked about a new dance club they could get into, new clothes, shampoo, and skin creams, drifting into Spanish occasionally. The boys were arguing about the school’s chances to win the title in baseball this year. Once in a while, Mateo tossed a question at Greg, who responded with monosyllabic answers.

I felt his hand move to mine and take it while we lay there. He turned on his side so he could look down at me.

“My mother prepared cemitas for us. You know what they are?”

“Tortas,” I said. “Sandwiches. My grandmother would have them for us when we visited her. You should have bread covered with sesame seeds. Usually avocado, some meat, cheese, onions, papalo, and salsa.”

“What don’t you know?”

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“Tomorrow,” I said without hesitation.

He laughed. We both drank some water.

“Hey, come on, you two. Let’s get some exercise,” Damian said. He tossed a soccer ball out onto the beach.

Mateo pulled a knife at least seven or eight inches long out of his backpack and walked off at least twenty-five feet between two lines he drew in the sand. “I’ll take the girls,” he declared, returning and throwing his knife onto the blanket. “That way, it will be fair.”

“Oh, big shot,” Ernie said.

“I’m the only one who was on the school team.”

The girls rose and joined him.

Greg looked at me.

“I never played soccer,” I said.

“Just kick it to someone and try to get it over the line. We play a simple version.” He held on to my hand and stood, urging me up to my feet.

“C’mon, Señorita Genius,” Mateo called to me. “You can be our goalie.”

“Maybe she’ll stay on our side,” Greg said.

“No fair. She’ll outsmart us. First to ten wins, and the losers have to go into the water and swim for a good minute. Boys bare-ass.”

“No way,” Greg said.

“Why not? You did it last year,” Mateo reminded him. The others backed him up.

Greg turned to me. “I was a little drunk.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll play fifth column,” I said.

“What?”

“You’ll see,” I said, and crossed over to Mateo’s side. The girls were all giggling in anticipation. I looked at Greg. He smiled, remembering that a fifth column was a group within a country that was working for its enemies.

“You think I’m the one with less chance, so I get the ball first,” Mateo said.

“Go for it,” Greg said.

As soon as Mateo touched the ball with his foot, Greg and Damian rushed him, but Mateo was as good as he claimed and turned the ball away from them and drove right past them to kick it over the line before Ernie could get to it.

He laughed when he turned to us. “Thanks to me, you’ll see some choice bare ass, Señorita Genius.”

Greg looked very upset.

The next time Mateo touched the ball, Greg and Damian lay back. Mateo laughed and then turned and kicked the ball to Sandra. Greg and Damian rushed at her. She screamed and kicked to Renata, who happened to be very good, too. She drove the ball to Mateo, who kicked it just over Ernie's head and across the line again. All the girls except me cheered.

The next time Mateo kicked the ball, Greg managed to block it and drive it well to Damian, who went right past Renata. He kicked the ball too close to me, but I pretended to slip, and it went across the line.

Mateo stood there with his hands on his hips, watching, and then peered at me. He nodded. "Okay, Señorita Genius."

After that, once he got to the ball, he didn't pass it to anyone. After ten minutes, he had seven points, and Greg's side still had only one. Mateo called time out to talk strategy with us girls, but all he really wanted to do was tease me.

"Don't you want to see your boyfriend's ass more than mine?"

"I don't want to see anyone's," I replied.

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He laughed and went back at it, playing even harder and rougher, elbowing Damian in the stomach at one point to get past him and score his eighth and then ninth point.

Greg's team scored another that I really couldn't block, and then Mateo kicked the ball to Renata, who kicked it well back to him when he ran past Greg. He turned and, with a perfect kick, scored the tenth point. All the girls except me cheered.

"Pay up, boys!" Mateo shouted. He went to the blankets and popped open a beer.

I felt myself trembling.

Damian and Ernie looked at each other, laughed, and walked toward the water. I crossed over quickly toward our blanket. Greg, his head down but his face red with frustration and rage, walked toward me.

"Where you going, Greg?" Mateo called.

Greg paused and looked at him.

"We had a deal. You go in bare-ass."

"Yeah," Greg said, and smiled. "But you didn't say where or when."

He reached for me. "Let's go for a walk."

"That's bullshit!" Mateo screamed.

I took Greg's hand, and we started away.

"That was dumb," he said. "The whole thing is dumb."

"You said you did it, though."

"I guess I've grown up."

I tightened my grip on his hand, and we walked on, the others screaming insults at us.

Some clouds had moved in from the west, so the sun wasn't as intense.

"Still think Mateo's harmless?" I asked.

"Not when he drinks too much tequila. He'll sober up and calm down."

He paused and turned, so I did, too, and we could see Ernie and Damian run into the ocean bare-ass. The girls were screaming and laughing.

"I guess I'll have to pay up, too," Greg said.

"Don't be stupid."

"I'm not." He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted back to the girls and Mateo. "Hey!"

They looked our way. Greg slipped off his suit with his back to me and ran into the water. They screamed at us, Mateo waving his arms and crying that it didn't count. I slipped off my cover-up and walked to the edge of the water. Greg started toward me. I held out my dress and looked down. He rushed out and took it and began to dry himself off, his teeth chattering.

“That’s like swimming in a refrigerator,” he said. “Thanks.”

My heart was pounding. A warmth came over me that took my breath away for a moment. I think he sensed it.

He put his suit on quickly, looked back at the others, and reached for my hand. I saw the look of satisfaction on his face and smiled to myself. He had done this because of me, because I was here, because it was important to him that I think well of him. Maybe it made him feel better about himself. It certainly did that for me.

We continued our walk. The breeze felt good against my face. When I closed my eyes, I heard the sound of the sea and the terns. It was easy to imagine they were calling to us.

“Nothing gets you in shape better than walking and running on the beach,” Greg said.

“Mateo is very good at soccer.”

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“It was stupid to bet against him. His father was something of a star in Mexico. He played in the Azteca Stadium in Mexico City for the Pumas until he was about thirty, before he moved his family here.”

“What does he do now?”

“He has a small supermarket. Mateo hates working there, but his father makes him.”

“Are you really good friends?”

He shrugged. “Friends. I don’t know as I have really good friends. What do you think’s a good definition of a good friend?” he asked.

“I don’t know everything, Greg.”

“You know enough. So?”

I thought a moment. “Someone who thinks of you first and himself second.”

Greg smiled. “Yes, you do.”

“Do what?”

“Know everything,” he said, and continued us walking.

I was thinking that I was suddenly the happiest I had been for some time, maybe even my whole life. When we reached a place on the beach where there were some large

boulders, Greg led me around so we would be out of sight and kissed me before I could anticipate it. It was a long, soft kiss that sent a warm trembling through my body. I had tensed up when he began, but I felt myself relax to the point where I imagined I was floating. His lips moved over the side of my face, pausing to kiss my cheeks and my forehead and come down to my lips again. This time, I kissed him as deeply as he kissed me.

“Donna,” he whispered, as if my name were enough to fully express everything he felt about me. It had never sounded as melodic or satisfying. When I was much younger, I dreamed of changing my name to something more significant, something with deeper philosophical meaning. I thought I deserved it, needed it. At least I should have been named Athena after the goddess of wisdom.

I never embraced my name as happily and completely as I did at this moment. I wanted him to say it again and again.

Together, we seemed to sink to the sandy floor. His lips went to my neck and slowly moved down to the tops of my breasts. His fingers found the zipper of my suit and lowered it enough for the top to loosen so he could nudge it gently down and over my breasts, exposi

ng my nipples. He kissed them and moaned with delight. We shifted onto our sides and faced each other. He kissed the tip of my nose and smiled. Then we kissed again and pressed our bodies closer, as close as Mateo and the other girls were when they danced.

It was more difficult for him to stop than it was for me, but he managed it.

“Let’s not be gone too long,” he whispered. “Maybe we can go somewhere by ourselves tonight. What do you think?”

I didn't think about the answer this time. "Yes."

He zipped up my suit for me, and we stood, brushing ourselves off. He, still damp, had more to brush. I helped him, and we laughed. Then we started back, neither of us needing to say a word.

As we drew closer, we saw what Mateo had done.

And the rage coming from Greg's body competed with the heat of the sun.

4

Greg's basket had been turned over, all the contents spilled onto the sand. Mateo sat there on his blanket, watching us approach.

He was eating one of the sandwiches Greg's mother had made for us. He held it up and waved it before taking another bite.

"Delicioso, compañero," he called, and laughed. He drank from a small bottle of what looked like tequila.

Greg said nothing. He knelt down, put his basket upright, and began to pick up his bottles of soda, water, and beer, along with the napkins that hadn't blown away. His bag of chips had been opened and spilled onto the sand.

His rage and silence kept the others quiet, except for Mateo.

"You don't think it's funny? You cheated us, compañero. We didn't say only Señorita Genius got to see your bare ass. You lost fair and square. We decided you forfeited your lunch to the winner. That the right word, Señorita Genius, forfeited?"

“No. Steal is the right word,” I said, and the others all moaned.

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“Oh, boy. Not even mi padre calls me a thief, and he knows I take some beer and tequila,” Mateo said.

“That’s probably because he’s given up on you,” I said.

Mateo’s smile evaporated, as did the smiles on the others. Greg looked at me and smiled with pride.

“Maybe you really are too smart for yourself,” Mateo said.

“Maybe you should shut up,” Greg said, turning sharply on him.

For a moment, all anyone could hear were the sound of the waves and the screams of the terns. Then Greg closed the lid of his basket, and Mateo got to his feet.

“I changed my mind. Your mom’s food is only good for the birds.” Mateo tossed the sandwich toward the water, causing it to spill open and scatter on the sand.

Greg looked at it.

“Let’s just go, Greg,” I said.

He nodded. “I guess you were right again. I shouldn’t have pushed you to be friends with him.”

He began to take down our improvised tent.

“Where you going, compañero? You need a siesta already?”

“I’m not your compañero, Mateo,” Greg said, and completed rolling up the canvas.

I folded our blanket and put my damp cover-up in my beach bag.

“You can’t leave until you show these other girls your bare ass,” Mateo said. “That’s the deal.”

Greg lifted his basket and put the rolled canvas under his other arm. I picked up the poles. When we started away, Mateo stepped in front of us.

“Let ’em go,” Ernie called.

“Greg never went back on a deal until he started up with Señorita Genius,” Mateo said.

“I told you to stop calling her that,” Greg said. “Her name is Donna. Donna.”

“Yeah, well, thanks to you, she’s going to have a new name: Mexi-Ho,” Mateo said. He looked to the others for a laugh, just as Greg swung his picnic basket at him, catching him smack in the center of his chest. The blow dropped him on his butt.

For a moment, Mateo sat there stunned. Then, as we started away, he rose and reached out for Greg’s shoulder.

As Greg turned, Mateo swung his right hand, cupping the small bottle of tequila, and smashed it into Greg’s left temple so hard that the bottle shattered, a few pieces cutting into Greg’s cheek and left eye. Blood spurted even before his legs buckled, and he hit the ground, unconscious.

I screamed and fell to my knees beside Greg. No one else moved for a few moments. As quickly as I could, I opened my beach bag and took out one of my towels to pat the wounds. I had to be sure he had no fracture, so I kept the pressure light.

“Help me!” I screamed at the other boys.

Mateo, realizing what he had done, wobbled and backed away.

Ernie and Damian got up and hurried to us. Greg was barely conscious and obviously in pain. They looked at me for instructions.

“Pick him up!” I shouted. “And put him carefully in the rear of his truck. We have to get him to the hospital emergency room. Quickly!”

They looked at each other. Damian, who was bigger, scooped Greg up in his arms and carried him toward the truck. I followed. Then I looked at Ernie.

“Can you drive his truck?”

He nodded.

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“The key is still in the ignition,” I said. Ernie lowered the tailgate so Damian could lay Greg in the bed. I got in, too, and continued to apply my towel. Damian closed the tailgate and hurried around to the cab. Ernie had started the engine.

“Greg,” I said.

He didn’t answer. His head felt limp in my hands. I rolled my other towel and put it under his head. I kept the first towel on his temple and eye. It was soaking in blood. Ernie turned the truck and headed away. I looked back and saw the girls standing next to Mateo, all of them watching us drive off, looking stunned and frightened.

...

Two nursing assistants came out with a stretcher after I had run into the ER and methodically explained Greg’s condition. They moved him quickly into an examination room. Ernie and Damian stood beside me, both mumbling about how they couldn’t believe this and how quickly it had all happened. A nurse came out to speak with us. Ernie and Damian let me do all the talking. I was as short and precise as could be.

The nurse looked impressed and told us to wait. “The police will be here momentarily.”

“Police!” Damian repeated. He looked at Ernie and then at me.

“I don’t think you need an explanation for that,” the nurse said.

I dug out my mobile and called home. As soon as my father said “Hello,” I rattled off a description of what had happened and where we were. I wanted him to know the police would be taking statements at any moment.

“Just tell them what happened truthfully,” he advised. “We’ll be there as quickly as we can.”

Never in my life had my parents had to worry about anything I had done or anyone I had as a friend. Stories about other kids my age swirled about our home like a tornado that dared not touch down anywhere near us. My mother heard more than two earfuls at her salon weekly, and whenever she brought a story back and told it at dinner, my father usually said something like, “Well, we’ll never have to worry about Donna when it comes to that sort of thing.”

“Or Mickey, either,” my mother would add, reaching to pat him on the hand.

Mickey, a bit of a bookworm himself now, was oblivious to that talk. He had friends, all mostly like him, who were into intricate video games and science fiction.

But as nutty as it might sound, when my father talked about other kids in trouble and then complimented me, I thought he sounded wistful, as if he wished I was more like Huckleberry Finn. Getting into some kind of trouble, even if it was only being late to a class too often—something I couldn’t do, of course—would make me seem more “normal,” I guessed.

My father would hear others talk about their kids, but he would only listen and maybe smile when they told him he was lucky. I never cursed, never wanted to smoke, had no opportunity to drink too much alcohol, and knew what physical damage it could do anyway. I certainly avoided any form of drugs, and I didn’t drive yet, even though I could start, so I didn’t get cited for speeding or get parking tickets, much less dent one of the cars. I didn’t even play music too loudly in my room.

Yes, this was the first time I was involved in anything negative, and look at what it was: an incident requiring the police. My parents were stunned and looked lost when they arrived just after two patrolmen had begun speaking to Ernie, Damian, and me. Again, the boys let me do all the talking, nodding when the policemen looked at them for confirmation. I made sure to mention that Mateo had drunk too much tequila. We had to give them the names of the others. Everyone was a witness now. My parents spoke with the officers, and then Ernie and Damian went out to call their parents.

Greg's father and mother arrived shortly after. The moment I saw them, the concern on their faces, I felt my body crumbling inside. Tears came to my eyes. My mother looked at me and put her arm around me. The police waited until Greg's dad spoke with one of the nurses and then told them what they knew, gave them our testimony, which was ninety-nine percent mine. Greg's parents looked my way as they spoke.

Suddenly, I felt this was entirely my fault. All I would have had to do to prevent it was to have said no to Greg's invitation.

Shortly afterward, a doctor came out and spoke to Greg's parents. They followed him into the hallway that led to the examination rooms.

"I've got to know how he is, Mom," I said.

She nodded.

As the police were leaving, most likely to find Mateo, my father leaped to his feet and stopped them. They spoke with him briefly and then left. He returned slowly.

"They've called an eye surgeon, but it doesn't look good," he began. "It's going to be quite a while, Donna. We should go home. I'll find out everything later. I know the ER doctor."

When we rose to leave, Greg's parents came out. I looked at my mother and then broke away to approach them.

"I'm Donna Ramanez," I said. "Greg took me to the beach."

His father no

dded, but his mother just stared at me. Did she have trouble with English? I repeated it in Spanish.

"Greg was defending me when the other boy was insulting me and him. The boy who hit him was borracho. Greg didn't want to have a fight. He wanted us to leave, and the other boy stopped us."

His father nodded.

"Greg is the nicest boy in school," I said. I realized that complimenting their son when he was in such pain and trouble only sharpened their agony and anxiety. I told them I hoped it would all go well and then rejoined my parents.

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“You can’t blame yourself for this, Donna,” my mother said.

Despite how cluttered my mind was with facts and information, she was able to read it. There was nothing to study about it, no tests to measure it, no psychiatric report to research. It was clearly and simply part of what a mother was: connected to her child.

• • •

My father came to my room a little after nine P.M. I had refused to eat any dinner. My mother brought some toast and jelly with a glass of milk and left it for me, but I never touched it. All I did was shower and change and lie on my bed, drifting into short sleeps on and off. I sat up when I saw my father in the doorway.

“What?” I said. I didn’t want to go through any preliminary preparation for what he was going to say.

“I’m afraid he’s lost the eye, Donna. The piece that pierced it was too large and damaging. But he’ll be fine otherwise.”

“There is no otherwise after that,” I said.

“They’ve arrested that boy.”

“He’ll have an easier time living with what he’s done than Greg will have living with what has happened to him.”

I could see how much my cold facts and the way I could state them so clearly, firmly,

and almost without emotion bothered him.

But that's who I was and probably why I hated myself.

"I'm sorry," my father said. What else could he say? He left, retreating from the cold, hard, and bitter look in my eyes.

Of all the others at the beach with us, Renata was the only one who called me. I had the sense that she had seen worse things in her life in Honduras. There was something hard and terribly mature in her voice when she spoke, reliving the details before and after the fight.

"You shouldn't blame yourself for any of it," she said. "Mateo is a hothead. I wouldn't bet on his future."

"I'm sure you're right."

She was silent a moment and then added something that I didn't know yet would affect a major choice in my life.

"I want to warn you. Not everyone agrees with me. You'll probably hear others say 'Señorita Genius,' and not in a nice way."

"I don't care what they say. But thank you."

"Buena suerte, Donna," Renata said before hanging up.

It almost brought me my first laugh since the fight. Who would believe it? Me, Señorita Genius, needed one of those "normal" girls to wish me good luck? Me? I could be the next Albert Einstein.

On Sunday night, I told my parents that I didn't want to go to school on Monday. I could do what I did there in my own room, even in my closet. They both looked troubled, but neither offered any arguments.

I didn't go on Tuesday, either. I had no intention to go on Wednesday.

I didn't know it then, but my parents had been called to meet with Mrs. Pelham on Wednesday. My father had to take the morning off. Neither revealed anything until after dinner. They wanted me to speak with them in the living room. Mickey was sent to his room to do his homework. I imagined it was going to be a lecture about my not returning to school. I had decided I would go back the next morning. Maybe that would make the lecture shorter.

The coffee table had been cleared, and there was some sort of pamphlet opened and spread out on it. I glanced at it and sat on the sofa. My parents sat in the two matching chairs across from me, neither of them smiling.

"I'll go to school tomorrow," I said as soon as I sat.

"Maybe you won't," my father replied. "Or if you do, it will be to get more answers about this from Mrs. Pelham."

"Mrs. Pelham? Answers about what?"

"We met with her this morning," my father said. "She called me at the drugstore yesterday when you weren't in school. Of course, everyone knows what happened at the beach. We talked for a while, and then she suggested that your mother and I visit her this morning. She said she had a solution for you and that she was very excited about you. She's very fond of you," he added.

Suspicious, I leaned forward and picked up the brochure.

“Spindrift? It looks like some old mansion.”

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“Open it up,” my mother urged.

I did. There were pictures of what looked like a modern high-tech library, a computer room, and a chemistry laboratory that made our school’s look like some child’s playroom.

“Piñon Pine Grove? That’s in the Coachella Valley,” I said.

“Not that far away,” my father said. “It’s a very unique school.”

I nodded and read more of the description. They watched me and waited.

“It doesn’t sound like any ordinary school or college, for that matter.”

“You saw that there’s no so-called school year, semesters. It’s like something constantly going that you can jump on anytime,” my father said. “What you don’t see there is the criteria for acceptance.”

He reached into his inside jacket pocket and handed me a card that opened. There were no names, just numbers, and next to them were obviously IQ scores as well as the scores of other tests I had taken during the last few years. The scores were off the charts like mine.

“Those are past graduates and a few current attendees. It’s obviously privileged information,” he said.

I put the card down and looked at the brochure again.

“The school was started by a famous biochemist who himself had those sorts of scores,” my mother said.

“The point is, you’d be with boys and girls like yourself,” my father added.

“Seems odd to call them boys and girls,” my mother told him.

He smiled and nodded. “Young men and women, for sure. Some of the graduates of Spindrift work for NASA. Some of the other places are also privileged information, but I’m thinking government security positions, the military and government brain trusts, as well as corporate ones.”

I looked at the pictures again. “Seems walled in or something,” I said. “Why?”

“They’re very protective of their assets.”

“Assets?”

“He means their students. Mrs. Pelham used the word assets.”

“That sounds like the CIA,” I said.

“You work at your own pace, but there are teachers with doctorates, specialists, part-timers from high places, constantly challenging the students.”

I looked at the back of the brochure. “So there are dorms. I’d be leaving home.”

“This has to be your decision entirely,” my mother said. “But in light of what’s happened and your happiness . . . going to another school might be wise.”

I nodded. “I wouldn’t exactly refer to it as another school. I don’t imagine they have a

prom.”

“You make everything yourselves there, social life included,” my father said. “Of course, we’d visit you periodically.”

“Is it expensive?”

“There are some costs,” my father said. “But we’d have those costs when we sent you off to college anyway, and at Spindrift you’d earn any and all degrees you were seeking.”

“The work would be postgraduate; that’s why it’s more challenging,” my mother added, obviously parroting what Mrs. Pelham had told them.

“The place seems like one gigantic experiment.”

“I’m sure in

a way, it is. But it’s apparently quite successful.”

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“Did Mrs. Pelham describe any failures?” Before they could answer, I added, “Not that Spindrift would admit to any.”

“Probably true,” my mother said. “There are no guarantees. Somewhere in the description, it implies that.”

I nodded. “What do you two want?” I asked them, staring at the brochure.

“We want you to be happy and productive,” my father said.

“We want you to be satisfied with yourself,” my mother added.

“A big headache shipped off,” I said.

“You know that’s not true, Donna,” my mother said.

I looked up. “You said you’d visit me periodically, but neither of you mentioned my coming home for anything.”

“Of course you would,” my mother said quickly. “All the holidays.”

“We know how you are about making a decision,” my father said. “So go to school and see Mrs. Pelham tomorrow, and—”

“I don’t need to,” I said. “But I want to do something else tomorrow.”

“Sure. What?” my father asked.

“I want to visit Greg at the hospital.”

They looked at each other. My father smiled and nodded.

“I’ll take you,” my mother said, “and wait for you in the lobby.”

“Okay.” I rose, holding the brochure. “I want to tell Mickey about this first.”

“Good idea,” my father said.

Although she did nothing to indicate that she would, I suspected that as soon as I left the room, my mother would start to cry. I wouldn’t have minded seeing her do it.

Maybe nothing she had done recently would make me feel so good. I would know she really cared as much for me as any mother could care for her daughter, Señorita Genius or not.

5

Mickey wasn’t surprised to see me come into his room, even though it was usually the other way around. He thought I was his private Wikipedia. Whenever I explained things to him, whether it was a math problem or a science theory, he often told me I did a better job than his teachers did. They never explained it so clearly. I suspected that his teachers, most teachers, were often frustrated because students didn’t pay attention the first or even the second time, and they felt they were teaching in an echo chamber.

My brother wasn’t one who didn’t pay attention. I knew his secret ambition was to be as smart as I was. Many of his friends who knew about me anticipated that one day he would blossom into another me. When he first told me that, I told him I wished it would never happen. I could see he thought I wished that because I didn’t want

anyone else to be as important as I was or something. I did my best to assure him that wasn't the reason.

"Be yourself," I told him. "Don't try to be anyone else, or you'll never be happy, especially if you become me."

"Aren't you happy?" he had asked me only last year.

"I'm in the world between happy and unhappy," I said, which only confused him.

"That's only because you're a wizard," he said. "Wizards have no time to think about being happy. They have too much to do. Wizards control everything," he continued, and then went on to explain some video game of his that he really seemed to believe was true. I didn't discourage him. I envied him for his imagination, an imagination that didn't rely on facts. His was pure make-believe.

People were happier when they could make believe, I thought. They could find ways to avoid ugliness and failure, even if it was only for a short while. At least, it served as an oasis in a world where so much disaster and tragedy reigned, especially now with climate change. If you couldn't dip into make-believe, you could never really enjoy a good novel, play, or movie. Worst of all, you couldn't have a close relationship with anyone, because you could not ignore his or her weaknesses. Maybe you could never fall in love, perhaps, as in my case, because you couldn't prove it scientifically.

Now Mickey looked up from his math homework. I sat on his bed, and he turned around in his desk chair.

"I'm going to go to a different school."

"Where?"

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“It’s in Piñon Pine Grove.”

“Don’t tell me,” he said. I smiled as he turned around and quickly located it on his Google Maps app. “One hour and forty-eight minutes with current traffic. That’s still a long time to travel in the morning. You’ll have to get up very early.”

“I’m going to live there in a dorm.”

His brow crinkled. “Like college?”

“Yes, but it won’t be exactly like college.”

“Are you coming home on weekends?”

“Probably only occasionally.”

He thought a moment. “We can Skype and stuff?”

“Always,” I said.

He thought again. One way in which Mickey was like me. He pondered. “Is this because of what happened on the beach?”

“That was the catalyst, yes.”

“Catalyst. Don’t tell me.” He spun around again and checked on his computer. “I get it,” he said.

“This is the school,” I told him, and showed him the brochure.

“Can I go there someday?”

“Probably not.”

He nodded. “It’s only for wizards, huh?”

“Only wizards.”

“You want to go there? I mean, it looks great.”

“Yes.”

“What about Mom and Dad?”

“They want me to go, but I need you to do something after I leave.”

“What?” His imagination was running wild with the possibilities.

“I want you to spend more time with them, Mickey. Don’t lock yourself in your room with your games so much. Talk to them more. Before you know it, you’ll be off to college, and they’ll be alone, and you’ll be sorry you didn’t spend more time with them.”

“Are you?”

“Very much. Will you promise?”

“Sure,” he said. “Dad and I watch television together sometimes.”

“Don’t forget Mom.”

He studied me a moment. “You’re pretty sad.”

“I’m a little lost,” I said.

“Huh?”

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“Don’t worry. I’m off to find myself.”

He shook his head. “Wizard talk.”

“Exactly.” I rose and stood there for a moment. Then I leaned down and hugged him. The surprise on his face wasn’t something I’d forget soon.

“That was a wizard hug,” he called as I started out. “You gave me some of your powers.”

I turned to him with a smile perhaps brighter than I’d ever given him before. “I hope so,” I said.

• • •

I didn’t fall asleep for a long time, but when I did, I slept late. I wasn’t going to school anyway, so I still took my time dressing and fixing my hair. I put on lipstick, too. My mother was waiting for me in the kitchen, hovering over a second or third cup of coffee. I knew she had been agonizing over the decision to send me to Spindrift. To help her along, I acted happier than I had in days.

Actually, I didn’t have to act. The prospect of starting something new and as challenging as this seemed to give me new energy.

After I ate something, she and I left to go to the hospital.

“Daddy found out that Greg was in his own room, postop.”

She paused and then told me Mateo had been arrested and charged with assault. The district attorney had moved to have him tried as an adult. None of that seemed to matter anymore. The only thing that might was his suffering remorse.

Once we checked in and found exactly where Greg was, my mother sat in the lobby and opened a novel to read.

I had to go to the third floor. When I arrived at his room, he was lying against the raised portion of his bed. Half his head was bandaged, and his good eye was closed. I saw that his breakfast tray had not yet been picked up. From the looks of it, he had eaten little.

The sound of my pulling a chair closer to the bed woke him.

“I’m not going to ask you how you are,” I said when I sat.

He smiled, but it looked like it was a little painful to do so. “How are you?”

“Frightened, angry, sad, when I’m not numb.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“For what?”

“Bringing you into all that.”

“Most of it was fun, even the dumb soccer game. And I won’t forget our walk on the beach.”

“We’ll do it again, maybe.”

“Maybe. Yes,” I said.

“Why did you say maybe first?”

“We won’t have as much opportunity—”

“Because of my eye. I’ll be all right. I’ll wear a pirate patch and maybe someday get a new eye. That’s not such a dream. My doctor told me about things being done for eyes in my condition.”

“I believe that. I did some reading on it and will do more,” I said. “But that’s not the reason.”

“So?”

“I’m going to attend a different school, Greg. It’s a school for wizards like me,” I said, thinking of Mickey.

“What?”

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“It’s in Piñon Pine Grove, a special school for students cursed with too much intelligence.”

“You’re far from cursed, Donna.”

“We’ll see.”

“So . . . Piñon Pine Grove. That’s in the Coachella Valley.”

“A world away, really. I’ll let you know how it works. All I know is it’s so special it’s fenced in and guarded.”

“You’re kidding. Like a prison?”

“Maybe. I don’t know yet.”

He shook his head slightly. “You’ll meet some male genius and forget me.”

“Maybe.”

“What?”

I laughed. “No, I won’t. I mean, I’m sure I’ll meet some male wizard, but forgetting you is not an option. Maybe you’ll forget about me. I know those girls in our school. They’ll think you’re some kind of movie star now and woo you.”

“Woo?”

“Try to get you

to fall in love with them.”

“I’m not falling in love with anyone . . . else,” he said. “And don’t start quoting statistics about teenage romances or something.”

“Okay,” I said. It was in the back of my mind, but I smothered it.

He looked sad.

I reached for his hand and played with his fingers. “I never kissed anyone the way I kissed you. Nothing I know, no facts, nothing matters more than that. You get back on your feet, and as soon as I can, I’ll arrange for you to visit, or I’ll let you know when I’m coming home. I promise it won’t be long.”

“You once told me promises are houses built on foundations of fog.”

“I didn’t know I’d ever make a promise. There’s no fog.” I smiled, feeling more optimistic than I’d imagined I could at this moment.

He tightened his grip on my hand, and I rose from the chair and kissed him.

The nurse’s aide entered to get his tray. “He didn’t eat much,” she said.

“He will now. Won’t you, Greg?”

“Yes,” he said.

She smiled and left us. I sat with him for another half hour, holding his hand. His nurse came by to give him more pain medication and told me he was probably going

to fall asleep.

After she left, I stood. “My mother’s downstairs,” I said. “She’s probably read the same page in her book for a half hour.”

“When do you go to the new school?”

“Tomorrow, if not later today.”

“That fast?”

“It’s like a train. I have to catch a ride.”

“Huh?”

“My life feels like it just sped up, but don’t worry about me. Just get stronger. We’ll talk soon and make a plan for when you’re up and about again.”

“Not a fog promise?”

“No. It has a one hundred percent guarantee.” I kissed him again.

“You know,” he said as I started out. I stopped. “This eye doesn’t work, but it will always see you. I have no factual proof. Do you believe it?”

“Yes,” I said. “I believe it with my heart. My brain is jealous. It’s never been outsmarted.”

“Until now.”

“Until now,” I said, and left.

• • •

My mother didn’t ask me anything about my visit except how Greg was doing. I think she saw how close I was to bursting into tears. She was my mother, I thought. She should sense what was inside me, and more often than not, she did. I’d miss that.

I wasn’t going to leave her with anything dark and depressing. She worried too much about me. I told her Greg was healing and he was optimistic. That pleased her. She

could sense the hope in my voice. I even think I was smiling.

It wasn't quite noon.

"I'd like to leave this afternoon," I said.

"What? Why rush?"

"If I didn't, I might change my mind. Let's get Daddy to do what he has to do. You said they don't have semesters and it was quite unorthodox. Let's see if it is."

"Oh. Well, I'll call him."

"No. I'll call him," I said.

And I did. Then I packed what I wanted after my father called back to tell me they advised that I not bring all that much. Most everything was quite informal, and whatever else I needed could be brought by them later, or the school would help me acquire it. He made arrangements to leave early from work.

My father always spoke with great strength and assurance. He was used to directing people in how to take their medicines and firm about what they should avoid. But now I could hear the nervousness and a little uncertainty in his voice.

The one thing I agreed to wait for, of course, was for Mickey to get home from school so he could go with us. He was more excited than I was.

My parents were quite silent for most of the trip, both wondering if they had moved into this too quickly, I was sure.

All of us were surprised and impressed at the sight of the security booth as we

approached the school. My father told the guard our name but then had to show him his license so he could copy down the number. He then handed my father a key card.

“This is coded. Just insert it in the front door. Give the card to Dr. Marlowe.”

“Who’s Dr. Marlowe?” Mickey asked. “Is this a hospital, too?”

“No. She’s in charge of the school, like a principal or superintendent. She has a doctorate, so she’s called Dr. Marlowe,” my father explained.

We pulled into the parking lot, and my father carried my small suitcase for me as we approached the front door of what was a Queen Anne with some additions on both sides and, I imagined, in the rear as well. The key card unlocked the door, and we entered a lobby with very modern decor, cocoa-colored tile floors, rich walnut wood walls, and leather chairs and sofas. An elegant-looking woman with graying dark brown hair approached us quickly. I thought she looked about fifty. She wore a pair of well-worn jeans, a blue blouse, and sandals.

“Mr. and Mrs. Ramanez, welcome. I’m Dr. Jessie Marlowe,” she said, extending her hand to my parents. She smiled at me. “And a special welcome to you, Donna.”

I shook her hand.

She looked at Mickey. “Hi. You’re Mickey, right?”

“Yes,” Mickey said, impressed. So was I.

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“Let’s get Donna right to her room first, and then I’ll take you all on a tour of our facilities. How’s that?”

“Very good,” my father said. “Thank you. When do I—”

“We’ll handle all the details later. This way,” she said.

We walked up a stairway with a mahogany banister. Then she turned right and led us through one hallway to another. We stopped at a room on the right. The room was a bit of a shock, especially to my mother. It was Spartan. There was a double bed with a small side table, a dresser, a desk, and a mirror on the closet door. The closet was half the size of mine at home. Now I saw why they said not to bring much.

“Sorry I’m late,” we heard, and turned to see an African-American girl with a slim figure and hair cut very short. She had beautiful almond-shaped eyes.

“Ah. This is Corliss Simon, Donna. She’s volunteered to be your big sister during your orientation and was supposed to greet you with me.”

“Big sister is a stupid term,” she said sharply, not liking the subtle reprimand.

“Well, come up with something better. It’s the term they used when I first entered college,” Dr. Marlowe said.

“We’re a long way from then,” Corliss said.

I smiled. She was relentless, just like I could be.

“You want me to wait until you unpack or what?” she asked.

I glanced at my mother, whose eyes looked explosive. Then I laughed. “No. Let’s do the ‘or what,’?” I said.

Corliss smiled.

“I’ll show your family around,” Dr. Marlowe said. “Corliss will take you on her personal tour, I’m sure.”

“Is she a wizard, too?” Mickey asked.

“You’ll have to wait for your sister to decide and tell you,” Dr. Marlowe replied. “C’mon. I’ll show you some great things,” she added, and took his hand.

My parents looked at me. I nodded, and they started out. Then I stepped out to join Corliss.

“Welcome to your new life,” she said.

“Thanks. What brought you here?” I asked.

“Survival. You?”

“Survival,” I said.

She laughed. “You’re in the right place.”

“My brother thought it was a hospital.”

“Out of the mouths of babes,” she said.

I liked her instantly. We headed down the corridor in an opposite direction.

And for the first time in my life, I welcomed the mystery.

Welcome to Spindrift, the exclusive

academy for genius girls.

Corliss may be the smartest girl in school, but that doesn't mean she knows how to fit in.

Corliss

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* * *

Mastering high school is much easier than mastering her heart . . .

Bittersweet Dreams

* * *