



Donna and the Doctor (The Gable Sisters #4)

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Description: After being in four weddings in four years, Donna has a bad case of bridesmaid-itis, with no cure in sight. And the gorgeous Dr. Jack Gentry is only making her symptoms worse. Too bad he's already married—to the worst person she knows.

Donna's cute, and she knows it. But with three older sisters who look like young versions of Audrey Hepburn, Andie McDowell, and Isla Fisher—and have effortlessly slim figures to match—cute doesn't quite cut it. Why oh why is Donna the only Gable sister (so far) who takes after their stocky father instead of their slender mother?

Luckily, Donna's larger-than-life personality and her acting talent have always seen her through. But as she watches her beautiful sisters tie the knot, one by one, Donna can't help but wonder when her own leading man will finally take the stage.

To make matters worse, the only guy who has affected Donna's heart rate in years happens to be married to her professional nemesis, Trynn Gentry, who never misses an opportunity to put Donna in her place. There has to be something very wrong with anyone who would enter into a voluntary union with a devious diva like Trynn. So why does Donna's every interaction with Jack feel so very right?

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Page 1

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CHAPTER ONE

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Love was in the air—for everyone except Donna Mary Gable, the middle child, the loud one, the fun one, the blonde one, the curvy one.

When you come from a family of seven sisters, your family life consists of an endless stream of comparisons, and you tend to pick up a lot of labels.

Audrey, the oldest, was the sensible and responsible one. The interior designer. The tall, willowy one who looked uncannily like her namesake, Audrey Hepburn. The newlywed, recently married to a secret billionaire. But that's another story.

Betty, sister number two, was the Mother Teresa of the family. The Bohemian one. The world-traveling humanitarian with the wild mane of dark curls. The bride-to-be, who was mere moments from marrying the boy next door, whom she'd loved all her life.

Catharine, sister number three, was the universally acknowledged beauty of the family. The redhead. The '50s pin-up girl. The violinist. The homebody who was on the brink of getting engaged to a man who had sworn off marriage, until he fell under Cat's spell.

And smack dab in the middle of the Gable sisters was Donna, now standing on the back patio of her childhood home in yet another bridesmaid's dress, holding Frank Sinatra's leash rather than the arm of a handsome groomsman.

Even sister number five, the brainy, bookish Elizabeth, had a date of sorts. Or at least someone to walk her down the aisle. So what if he was the groom's pimply cousin?

And the youngest of the Gable sisters, twins Ginger and Grace, who were still growing into their labels, always had each other.

Donna surveyed the scene before her from the concealed back patio of her childhood home, and her heart perked up at how perfect everyone looked. She, Donna, had done this. She had styled everyone, from grandmothers-of-the-bride down to best dog.

Betty happened to care more about humanitarian causes than haute couture, so she left almost the entire wedding wardrobe to Donna, giving her a vague idea of colors and a budget and setting her loose. The one exception was her wedding dress, which Betty had kept secret from absolutely everyone except for their mom. Donna was dying to see it.

She untangled Frank's leash for the fifteenth time and bent down to adjust his bow tie. The family's half-blind dog was a year older than the twins and somehow still drawing breath. As much as she loved Frank, she would have preferred a companion who was a little taller. And less slobbery.

It wouldn't have been impossible to round up a date. But at age 20, Donna was far enough out of high school that she'd lost touch with her ready supply of no-hassle options. Most everyone in her old friend circle was either paired up or away at school, while Donna had opted to stick around home and attend a nearby community college.

Donna's jobs, unfortunately, provided few prospects for meet-cutes. Her part-time gig contributing to a fashion blog was loads of fun, but really quite solitary. And her grandparents' cafe, where Donna waited tables, mostly attracted older folks and young families, which was fine with Donna. She didn't like meeting guys while

wearing her work uniform anyway. Her bubble-gum pink poodle skirt, white button-up blouse, and high ponytail tied with a matching pink scarf were great for a '50s-themed joint that served both burgers and authentic Mexican food. They were not so great for attracting men who were within a decade of her own age.

She could have asked a friend from one of her theater classes, or a castmate from a recent production, to be her plus-one . But she didn't feel like bringing just a friend, a seat filler, a warm body. Most of her dating years had consisted of exactly those things. What she longed for was a true, soul-stirring, heart-pounding connection. Someone she couldn't get out of her head. Someone who set a swarm of butterflies swirling every time their eyes met.

If she couldn't have that, Old Blue Eyes would have to do.

Donna thought back to Audrey's wedding 18 months ago, a jaw-droppingly elegant affair. If you marry a billionaire, you just might have the means to fly the entire guest list to Italy and put them up in an historic villa overlooking the red rooftops of Florence.

But if you marry your lifelong crush, who has lived next door since you were in kindergarten, you might choose to say "I do" in front of the very treehouse the two of you built together as kids, where you spent many adolescent hours gazing over the fence and dreaming about him, where you shared your first kiss, where he surprised you with a proposal the previous May.

Today, the treehouse had been transformed, encircled by white twinkle lights and draped with white bunting. Betty and Gavin had considered getting married up in the treehouse itself, but the trap-door entrance and makeshift ladder (2x4s nailed to the face of the tree trunk) wouldn't be very wedding-dress friendly.

Peeking around the patio trellis, Donna could see the rows of rented white chairs that

faced the treehouse filling rapidly with guests. It was almost go-time.

Her Dad emerged through the sliding glass door, looking dashing in his tux, which stretched across his broad shoulders. His dark blond hair had been recently barbered, his reddish beard trimmed and tamed.

“I’m told the bride is ready,” he announced nervously, then he disappeared back into the house to collect her. Donna found it adorable that her big, tough dad was jittery about walking his second daughter down the aisle. She knew how he despised being in any kind of spotlight—a trait Donna did not inherit.

Her mom, Julie, slipped through the door, a signal that her work prepping and primping the bride was done. She hugged everyone on the patio, already dabbing at her eyes with a tissue.

“How does she look?” Donna asked.

“Oh, like an angel,” her mom replied, squeezing Donna’s hand before heading across the lawn to take her place on the front row, next to the grandparents. Donna caught Gavin’s eye, who stood fidgeting next to Reverend Roberts. She gave them both the thumbs up, and the Reverend stepped forward to say a few words to the guests, which Donna couldn’t hear. Then the processional music began.

“Everyone ready?” Donna asked the group assembled behind her: Audrey and her husband, Ty; Catharine and her boyfriend, Liam; Elizabeth and Joshua (the cousin); and Ginger and Grace. They quickly arranged themselves into the right order.

Looking them over, Donna felt certain she had captured Betty’s aesthetic. She’d selected a different solid for each member of the wedding party, creating a harmonious bouquet of color perfect for an April wedding. Donna alone had been allowed a sneak-peek of the plans for the bridal bouquet and the flower-crown being

woven into Betty's signature dark curls, so she had a color palette to pull from.

Each dress Donna chose had a vintage vibe she knew Betty would love, despite them all being practically straight off the runway. Even though Donna had gotten them all at no cost (perks of working for a fashion blogger), she knew Betty would be horrified at the price tags on each of the dresses. Betty was the type of person who calculated the value of things in terms of how many meals for the homeless they could buy. So Donna studiously avoided the topic. If it became an issue, she'd suggest they donate the dresses to a local charity that collected prom attire for disadvantaged teens. Problem solved!

It did please Betty immensely to know that Donna had spent hours scouring thrift shops to find the perfect heirloom jewelry to complete each look. A pair of earrings or a draped necklace here, a bangle bracelet or antique ring there. Perfection.

As the music floated through the trees—some obscure indie tune that only Betty and Gavin knew—the twins started toward the grassy aisle between the chairs. Ginger wore cotton-candy pink that set off her straight, strawberry-blonde hair. Grace glowed beside her in a muted shade of mauve called “cactus flower,” her soft brown curls loose and bouncy. They were both cute as a button, but as different from each other as they could be.

Elizabeth and Joshua followed. Her barely aqua dress brought out her blue eyes, hidden as they were behind her signature eyeglasses. Her glossy dark hair fell straight past her shoulders, held back by a delicate pearl headband. Then Donna stepped forward, escorting Frank. His coral bowtie matched her dress. Frank behaved as well as could be expected on the way down the aisle, pausing only once to vigorously sniff one woman's purse. Did she have peanut butter in there, or something? As chuckles rippled through the guests, Donna lured him gently away and took her place next to Elizabeth.

Then she watched as Catharine glided in on the arm of her newly reconciled boyfriend, Liam. The two of them couldn't help but turn heads wherever they went, she with her hourglass figure, and he with his Hollywood jaw. It was no different today. And Donna quietly took credit for the subdued apple green dress that complemented Cat's auburn locks perfectly.

Last came Audrey, in a very 1960s butter yellow, looking more like her namesake than ever. She beamed up at her fabulously wealthy but unusually down-to-earth husband, who was wearing actual, full-coverage shoes for once. Donna had rarely seen her brother-in-law in anything other than flip-flops.

The mothers of both the bride and groom wept openly on the front row, one in lavender and the other in plum. And the grandmothers all wore different floral prints, personally selected by Donna to complement the overall look. The group wedding pictures were going to be amazing.

As for Donna, she knew she looked her absolute best. One side of her sun-kissed hair was pinned back with a comb. The rest tumbled over her shoulders and halfway down her back. Her makeup was impeccable, with just a touch of shimmer around her bright blue eyes. And she knew her slight, closed-mouth smile was showing off her very best feature—her dimples. At least, that was the feature that drew the most comments from other people, by far.

She also knew that even at her best, she was all but invisible next to Cat, despite being bigger in every way—including in the personality department.

Sure, Donna was only an inch taller than Cat, but she still felt like a behemoth next to her delicate form. She felt like a seagull standing next to a dove. Like an ostrich next to a swan. Like Barney Rubble next to Marilyn Monroe.

Where Cat's waist curved in to create a natural, hourglass silhouette, Donna's

threatened to curve in the other direction, despite all of her best efforts. She would no longer consider herself chubby, as she'd always thought as a little girl and adolescent, but she was still the least thin of the sisters, taking more after their stocky dad than their slender mom.

But all of that was driven from Donna's mind when the music changed and Betty emerged from around the patio trellis, on the arm of their father.

Donna all but gasped. The dress was so very Betty. 1970s Bohemian. True vintage. Her bare shoulders were encircled by a sheer ruffle, trimmed with understated lace. Beneath the ruffle, the dress gathered in at her slender waist then fell in tiers to the floor—each encircled by a band of floral lace. Fuchsia ballet flats peeked beneath the dress, which floated around her as she proceeded down the aisle. Her wild brown curls were piled on her head in a cascading updo, encircled by a crown of multi-colored flowers. Her lightly freckled cheeks were flushed, excitement shining in her mesmerizing green eyes. She was a vision.

Donna's favorite thing to do at weddings was to keep her eyes on the groom, to catch his expression when he first glimpsed his bride. And the normally reserved Gavin had his feelings written all over his face. The man was smitten. He was in deep smit. It melted Donna's heart.

But Betty's adoring glance up at their Dad was what turned Donna's heart into a gooey mess. Betty's hand was tucked in the crook of his arm. His blue eyes glistened with tears. So close was their bond that it often slipped Donna's mind that Brian Gable was technically Betty's adoptive dad. He was the only father she remembered, though. And from the very beginning, he treated both her and Audrey like they were his own.

Donna admittedly had a flair for the dramatic, but she just knew that Betty and Audrey's biological dad had to be looking down on them right now. If there indeed

was a heaven, and Donna couldn't conceive of believing otherwise, then there had to be a "hall pass" system that allowed departed angels to visit earth during their loved ones' most important moments. Donna was certain Joe Walter Schmidt would be proud of his incredible little girl—and overflowing with gratitude for the kind man who stepped in for his daughters when he couldn't be there himself.

Donna had to choke back the sobs that threatened to erupt from her chest. She relied on her drama training to regain control of her emotions and redirect them to the present moment, when Betty took the hands of her beloved and they promised to love and serve, treasure and cherish one another, all the days of their lives.

"What's your middle name again?" Lavinia asked at the reception, while they sat at a white linen-draped table munching on veggie sticks. Donna was always on her best eating behavior in the presence of her part-time boss, one of the first fashion bloggers to make over a million dollars a year in affiliate sales alone. (Donna was one of few people to be privy to factoids like this. Lavinia was fiercely private, unlike her good-natured brother, Ty, whom Lavinia had only recently forgiven for marrying "beneath him" when he chose Audrey as his bride.)

"Mary," Donna replied. "After Donna Reed's character in *It's a Wonderful Life*."

"That's right," Lavinia said. "I knew it was a really...classic name like that. I kept thinking Anne or Jane, though."

Donna suspected Lavinia had been about to say something else—"boring" or "old-fashioned" maybe—before substituting a more complementary adjective.

Donna dipped another piece of broccoli in the dill-based dressing prepared by friends of Cat's from culinary school. Betty had tried to talk Cat into doing the catering herself, but Cat had recently learned the art of saying no, not wanting to be too stressed out to enjoy her sister's big day.

While Donna and Lavinia chatted about ideas for how to feature the wedding on the blog, her boyfriend, Mason, quietly downed an impressive amount of food, while Lavinia stole little bites from his plate.

To Donna's surprise, some of those bites even contained carbs! Donna noted Lavinia's slightly fuller cheeks and less-gaunt figure with silent appreciation. She'd been much too thin before. Whether due to love or carbohydrates, Lavinia looked healthier than Donna had ever seen her. Maybe, Donna thought, the reason Lavinia had been so unpleasant to Audrey and Catharine during their early acquaintance was because the woman was perpetually hungry.

But Donna would wager that Mason himself was the biggest driver of Lavinia's transformation—both inside and out. Sometimes you have to be loved for who you really are, at your core, before you can believe you're lovable. Before you can start behaving like other people are inherently lovable too.

Donna knew Lavinia had a deeply ingrained streak of snobbishness that would probably never go away, but she had opened up significantly. And finally, a year and a half after her brother's wedding to Donna's sister, Lavinia had warmed up to the large, chaotic, middle-class family in California that her brother had joined. And Donna prided herself on being one of the first to build that bridge. Lavinia and Ty's wealthy, WASPy, Bostonian parents hadn't come around yet, but that was their loss.

Eventually, Lavinia talked Mason into dancing with her. In their absence, Donna snagged something more substantial to munch on—several triangle-shaped finger sandwiches, which turned out to have peanut butter and grape jelly inside. It was an interesting choice, but Donna thought it was great that Betty and Gavin never let anyone else's expectations define them—a trait which could account for the half-dozen mimes that were circulating among the guests. Donna didn't exactly get why they were included, apart from the fact that it was some kind of inside joke between them.

At one point, Donna suggested having a mime perform the actual ceremony, but Betty and Gavin weren't quite that committed to the bit.

While Betty and Gavin had put together a playlist of their favorite songs for background music and general dancing, they asked their favorite musicians to perform live during the father-daughter dance and their first dance as a married couple.

While Cat tuned her violin, Liam took his place at the electric piano they had rented for the occasion, which sat in a corner of the dance floor.

Donna in particular had been shocked to discover that on top of his almost otherworldly good looks, Liam also played the piano. Swoon! If Cat hadn't snatched him up, Donna might have been tempted. Not that she stood a chance, being a good 10 years younger, and not exactly his physical type.

Donna vaguely recognized the melody ringing out from Cat's violin, accompanied flawlessly by Liam. Dad took Betty in his arms, tears once again gathering in the corners of his eyes, while Gavin danced with his mother.

The photographer Lavinia had hired circled around them, snapping away. This was Lavinia's gift to the happy couple—a world-class wedding photographer to document the day, with the agreement that she'd be able to include some of the photos on her blog, with Betty and Gavin's stamp of approval first.

As they danced, and switched partners, and invited other couples to join them, Donna felt another pang of loneliness. She quickly brushed it away and put on her usual cheerful face. She smiled at Ginger and Grace dancing together, taking turns pretending to be the man. She beamed at Abba and Papa Walt, the parents of Audrey and Betty's late father, dancing in each other's arms. ("Abba" came from baby Audrey's mispronunciation of "Abuela.") Theirs was a relationship to aspire to. They

treated all of the Gable girls like their very own granddaughters, despite only being blood related to the first two.

Watching them, Donna reminded herself for the millionth time that Abba was not rail thin. Never really had been. And she still found lasting love. Maybe there was hope for Donna yet.

Donna knew she wasn't a hideous troll. In fact, she was quite cute. Not beautiful, but definitely, objectively cute. The kind of girl usually cast as the sidekick rather than the lead. The irony was not lost on Donna that, looks-wise, she was the lone "best friend" in a family of leading ladies, yet she was the one with the acting chops.

Donna joined in the applause as the song ended. Gavin reclaimed his bride, and Cat and Liam started into the next song.

Donna returned to her train of thought. She was certain that, if she hadn't been next in line after Cat, she wouldn't spend half as much time thinking about looks as she did. But it wasn't easy living in the shadow of a tawny-haired goddess.

Not that things had always been rosy for Cat. She had some decidedly gawky years, with untamable orange-tinged hair and protruding teeth, pre-braces. But she had transformed from "ugly duckling" to ravishing swan just when Donna reached the peak of her own awkwardness and insecurity. She couldn't count the number of times she heard, "Wait, you're telling me that Cat Gable is your sister?" with undisguised shock in their voices, followed by something like, "Wow, that must be hard."

Well, it wouldn't be hard, if people could keep their mouths shut and stop pointing out just how giant the attractiveness gap between them was.

To add insult to injury, Donna took after their Dad's side of the family more than anyone else—even though everyone from Cat on down came from the exact same

gene pool.

Audrey and Betty were effortlessly slim like their mother. But given that they were 10 and 8 years older than Donna, respectively, and they had a different father, she didn't take their attractiveness quite as personally.

Donna knew it wasn't fair to call any of their thinness "effortless." Their mother was an avid runner, and Audrey, Betty, and Cat were all active and made reasonable attempts to eat a balanced diet. But Donna put more effort in than all of them put together, with less visible results.

At least she had Elizabeth, who wasn't exactly a natural twig either.

Inspired by the Lord of the Rings trilogy, Elizabeth liked to call the two halves of their extended family "the Elves" and "the Dwarves." She put herself and Donna in the "Dwarf" category, rueing the fact that all of their other sisters were more Elvish (acknowledging that it could be too soon to tell for the twins). It's not that Donna and Elizabeth were short—a la Gimli or Thorin—they were just a bit more...substantial. Solid. You know, the words every girl loves to hear.

Despite it all, Donna prided herself on dressing strategically. She had shapely shoulders and lovely legs, and her bust attracted plenty of attention. And over the years, she'd become an expert at concealing basically everything between mid-thigh and upper ribcage. She considered one-piece, shape-wear bathing suits the best invention since velcro. And she always, always splurged for an adorable cover-up.

For formal occasions, empire-waist and A-line styles suited her best. Today, she chose a high-neck, bare-shoulder, pleated mini dress in a gossamer-like fabric that floated to mid thigh. She knew she looked fresh and young and vibrant. Lavinia even said so, and Lavinia never gave an insincere compliment. She barely even gave sincere ones.

If only there was a man around to appreciate it. But alas, she was surrounded by relatives and boyfriends of relatives. And all the friends of the groom were either married, much too old (Gavin was 30!), or too serious (all those architects!) for Donna's tastes.

CHAPTER TWO

“I’M SO GLAD my brother married into your family,” Lavinia said on the phone the next month, as she and Donna looked through the digital photo proofs from the wedding in a shared online folder. Donna sat cross-legged on her bed, her laptop resting on her actual lap, while Lavinia’s was balanced on a treadmill desk in her high-rise Boston apartment overlooking Fenway Park.

“Never thought I’d hear you say that,” Donna joked. She wasn’t directly involved in the early drama between Lavinia and her older sisters, particularly Audrey and Cat, but she knew things had gotten off to a rocky start.

“These photos are a content goldmine,” Lavinia said, brushing past Donna’s comment. “And to think there will be five more weddings to come! Let’s see if we can get one of your sisters married every year for the next 5 years. That would really help the blog’s bottom line.”

“Looks like your wish will be coming true next year at least,” Donna said.

“Have you heard anything?” Lavinia asked breathlessly.

“Nothing from Cat,” Donna said. And she should know, as they were currently roommates in the apartment above Abba and Papa Walt’s detached garage. “Any hints from Liam?”

“Not directly,” Lavinia said. “But a little birdie tells me he was spotted ring shopping last month.”

“A little birdie known as Veronica Westerbrook?”

“Naturally,” Lavinia said. “Mom’s intimately acquainted with all the major jewelers in Boston. And she’s in a book club with Liam’s mother. Not that they read the books. They just get together to gossip, show off their houses, and drink.”

“My kind of book club,” Donna laughed.

“You probably see Liam more than I do these days, though,” Lavinia said. “I don’t know why he doesn’t just move to California officially.”

“That’s one of the problems, actually,” Donna said. “Of all of us, Cat has always been the biggest homebody. She figures since Liam isn’t very close to his family, he should just move here to be closer to hers.”

“But Liam’s career is in Boston,” Lavinia said.

“Hence the conundrum,” Donna said. “But Cat seems to think he could do that work anywhere.”

“Oh, I’m sure they’ll figure it out,” Lavinia said. “Ty had no trouble relocating, after all. And he doesn’t seem to be overly suffocated by the lot of you.”

Donna could hear the begrudging affection in Lavinia’s voice. Not too long ago, those very same words coming from Lavinia’s mouth would have had a bitter edge.

“We try to give him space when he needs it,” Donna laughed. “We’re overwhelming, I get it.”

“But at least you’re photogenic,” Lavinia said. “Did you see the one of all seven of you under the treehouse?”

“That’s my favorite!” Donna gushed. It was an outtake as the photographer was trying to get the sisters posed for a formal shot. Audrey and Betty were laughing into each others’ eyes. Donna stood in semi-profile, reaching up to fix Betty’s hair. Elizabeth had an arm around Cat, who gazed directly at the camera. And the twins were hamming it up, pretending to strike their best model poses, with hands on hips and pursed lips. Frank Sinatra in his bowtie sat just barely in the foreground, perfectly posed, mouth open in a panting smile, as though he were the star of the photo shoot, and the Gable sisters were his props. (Which was also how he lived his whole life, to be honest.)

Donna’s second favorite photo from the day was of Gavin and Betty embracing in the tree house, with the six remaining sisters holding hands in a circle around the tree trunk, looking up at them. The photo was zoomed out to capture the entire tree, with the sunset peeking through the leaves and the twinkle lights aglow. You couldn’t see any individual person in the photo very well, but the overall effect was magical.

“I’m serious about this one wedding a year thing,” Lavinia said, but her light tone belied her words. “If Cat and Liam have next year covered, and I think they do, that means you’re up in 2010. And how old will Elizabeth be in 2011?”

“She’ll be 20. So that’ll be a no,” Donna laughed. “And you can forget about Ginger or Grace for 2012. They’re graduating from high school that summer.”

“Fine, fine,” Lavinia said. “But let’s talk about you. Would you prefer a summer or fall wedding in 2010? Or perhaps winter, to give you more time?”

“Hold up, hold up,” Donna said. “We’re forgetting about one important person here.”

“Who?”

“YOU, dummy,” Donna laughed. “And you actually have a boyfriend. Why can’t you

be the one to get married in 2010?”

“Hmm,” Lavinia said, her voice taking on a warm, honey-like tone—which tended to happen any time Mason was mentioned. “That might not be a bad idea. I’ll see if I can manage 2010. You just plan on 2011 for me, would you?”

“I’ll get right on that,” Donna laughed. She wondered if Lavinia had forgotten that Donna was a whole decade younger than she was. She didn’t need to be in any hurry. Least not for the purposes of blog content.

The family trend so far was to wait to get married until after one’s brain had fully developed—Audrey at 28 1/2 and Betty one month shy of her 28 th birthday. Donna intended to follow suit.

Besides, it was hard to imagine finding her forever someone in just 3 short years. She’d still only be 23. Which, she realized, was Cat’s exact age right now! And she would probably be heading down the aisle within the next year.

Somehow, 23 didn’t seem too young for Cat, though. She’d always been an old soul. Mature beyond her years. Quiet and careful. Disciplined and meticulous. In other words, Donna’s polar opposite.

Donna hopped off her bed and stepped over a pair of shoes, relieved that Cat couldn’t say anything about it, now that she had her very own room. With a door that could be shut to hide the clutter within.

She headed to the kitchen to see what delectable leftovers Cat had left in the refrigerator, encountering three sticky notes written in Cat’s impeccable penmanship on the way.

On top of a towel protruding ever so slightly into the hallway from the bathroom

floor, a pink note read, “Help, I’ve fallen and I can’t get up!” Donna laughed and obeyed the note, only to discover a green note stuck to the bathroom faucet: “Clean me, Seymour!” So Donna rinsed this morning’s crusty toothpaste spit out of the sink, appreciating the *Little Shop of Horrors* reference. Cat certainly knew her audience.

In the kitchen, a blue note reading “Disgrossting!” was stuck to the top of Donna’s lunch container from the previous day, which hadn’t been emptied of the remaining bits of lettuce and salad dressing. Rather than subject herself to the foul smell that awaited her, Donna threw the whole thing away. Problem solved.

Donna really was trying to clean up her act, even though it felt as unnatural to her as speaking a foreign language. And Cat was doing her best to absorb the concept that there was more to life than crumb-free countertops. Living together was an exercise in patience for them both.

Nobody expected Donna’s and Cat’s living arrangement to work out. They’d shared a bedroom for a year or two in their teens—a situation that their mother remedied as soon as possible.

Even back then, Cat kept her half of the room tidy. She hung framed artwork of sheet music overlaid with rose petals above her headboard. She carefully made her bed each morning, and stacked her decorative pillows neatly on the floor each night, artfully returning them to the bed each morning.

Donna, meanwhile, put the “throw” into throw pillows. They spent more time strewn about the room than adorning her bed. Her side was an explosion of color and chaos, with a perpetually rumpled bed and clothing piled on the floor. She used tape and sticky tack to cover her walls with posters, theater playbills, and photos taken at school dances.

At one point, the sisters ran a line of blue painter’s tape down the center of the room.

Any objects that crossed over the line became the property of the other person. It's not hard to guess which sister was more prone to losing objects and which tended to collect them.

But now that they were adults sharing "The Launchpad"—Donna's nickname for the apartment at Abba and Papa Walt's house—no tape was needed. Just the occasional passive-aggressive sticky note to preserve sisterly harmony.

It also helped that Donna was rarely there, busy as she was with two jobs, community college classes, and evening theater. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she was home in the evening and Cat wasn't.

Donna found some leftover wonton soup and popped it in the microwave for dinner, tapping her neon-green fingernails on the cobalt blue countertop tiles. The place looked roughly the same as it had when Julie lived here with her two tiny daughters, getting her bearings after the tragic accident that killed her first husband. Almost more than her own parents, Abba and Papa Walt had been Julie's primary lifeline at the time. And they'd gone on to offer the living quarters to any of their grandchildren—biological or otherwise—who needed a place to stay while they figured out who they were and what they wanted to do with their lives.

This was where Audrey and then Betty spent their first few years out of high school, followed by Betty and Cat, and now Cat and Donna.

Finished with her soup, Donna sprawled across the sofa in the dark, facing down a rare evening alone, with no rehearsal to go to and no roommate to talk to. Cat usually spent her mornings baking at a gourmet cupcake shop, her afternoons teaching private violin lessons, and her evenings padding around the apartment in cozy socks, doing small catering jobs for family and friends, organizing closets and drawers, and cleaning for fun. For fun! Donna couldn't wrap her head around it.

But tonight, Liam was in town, and Cat had dragged him to WonderLand again. Donna used to be puzzled that her refined, classic, beautiful, old-soul sister was so drawn to Southern California's favorite amusement park. Doubly puzzled that she'd roped Liam into her obsession. But Liam was the one who'd helped Donna make sense of it.

"So you know Cat, she loves nothing more than fulfilling expectations, right?" Liam had said. "You know how she doesn't know what to do with herself if she's not doing something for someone or checking something off a list?"

"For sure," Donna said.

"Well at WonderLand, fun is the expectation. She can just walk through those gates, and she knows what the job is. Have fun, let go, be silly. Cat at WonderLand might just be my favorite Cat of all."

"Meanwhile I am a walking, talking amusement park all on my own," Donna mused, "which is why you'll rarely find me at the alleged 'happiest place in the world.'"

"There might actually be something to that," Liam said.

"Also, I'm afraid of flying monkeys."

"As you should be," Liam said, rubbing the spot above his ear where he'd been concussed by a Wizard of Oz-themed ride while defending Cat from a saxophone-playing stalker.

Amused at the absurdity of the memory, Donna propped her aching feet, encased in one fuzzy polka-dot sock and one striped, on a pile of pillows at the end of the couch. Dancing in character shoes all week had taken its toll. She was a Hot Box Girl in a local production of Guys and Dolls . Opening night was next week, and she'd been

driving Cat crazy for weeks with her faux New York accent. She even used the accent at the diner. More than one customer asked what part of Brooklyn she was from, which pleased her to no end.

Her accent was even better than the actress playing Miss Adelaide, one of the female leads. Everyone said so. Donna would have killed to play Miss Adelaide, but she didn't have a stand-out solo voice like Trynn Gentry's. Nobody could compete with Trynn, and Trynn knew it.

When a key finally rattled in the doorknob, Donna had become one with the sofa. She couldn't be bothered to get up and let Cat in. The rattling paused and Donna heard muffled voices and laughter on the landing. Cat and Liam were taking their sweet time parting, as they always did. That narrow landing at the top of the stairs had seen more action than the inside of the apartment. Good thing it was on the opposite side of the garage, so it couldn't be seen from the main house.

When Liam visited, he slept in one of Abba and Walt's spare rooms, out of respect for their traditional views. At first, Liam had insisted on staying at a hotel, but he proved to be no match for Abba's powers of persuasion. And, having bonded with Papa Walt over a shared love of classic cars, it had long ceased to be awkward.

Eventually, Cat slipped in and shut the door behind her, leaning against it with a dreamy look on her face, her hands clasped over her heart. She clearly hadn't spotted Donna yet, lurking there beneath the window. Donna was just about to speak when she noticed Cat stretch her hand in front of her, fingers splayed. Her left hand. She angled it this way and that, trying to catch a few rays from the streetlights shining in through the window.

Forgetting about her feet, Donna shot up from the couch with a squeal, startling Cat half to death.

“He did it! He did it! He popped the question!” Donna yelled, jumping up and down. Then she grabbed Cat’s hands and started dancing her around the room and singing. “He liked it so he went and put a ring on it! He liked it so he went and put a ring on it, oh-oh-OH-oh-oh-OH!”

She heard Liam chuckling as he descended the stairs outside her window. Cat’s initially startled face broke into a wide, infectious smile.

“You always give the best reactions,” Cat laughed, breathless, leaning into Donna’s fierce hug. “I’m glad you’re the first to know.”

“I’m the first to know?” Donna yelled. “Take that Audrey, take that Betty, take that Mom and Dad.” She punched the air in front of her as if she was knocking them out one by one.

“But you don’t get to steal my thunder,” Cat warned. “You have to let me tell everyone myself. I know it will practically kill you. But mum’s the word.”

Donna groaned.

“Okay, okay, but be quick about it,” she said. “I can’t keep this in for long. What brought him around, besides being over the moon in love with you, of course.”

“I think it was Betty’s wedding,” Cat said. “Love being in the air, and all that.”

“Can you get married next year?” Donna asked. “It would really mean so much to Lavinia.”

Cat laughed.

“Not sure we can wait that long,” Cat said. “We’re thinking October.”

“Well Lavinia will have to deal,” Donna said. “I’m so excited for you! And I have 5,000 questions for you, but I will save them. Do I get to help with the dresses?”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” Cat said.

Donna squealed again.

CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS OPENING night of *Guys and Dolls*, and Donna loved the looks she got driving around town in her wig cap and stage makeup. Double-takes, surprised faces, visible laughter, confused scowls. She pulled into the back parking lot of Majestic Theater, driving Kermit, the well-loved green hatchback her parents allowed her to use until she got her own car—or until the next sister in line needed it, whichever came first.

She parked between Trynn Gentry's lavender Mini Cooper, with its "DRAMAQN" license plates, which Donna found comically accurate, and Nick Baker's sporty black coupe. Nick was playing Nathan Detroit, the love interest of Trynn's character, Adelaide. He was also Donna's current crush. She suspected the feeling was mutual, but she had an iron-clad rule against backstage romances—until approximately 30 seconds after curtain call on closing night. She'd seen it end badly too many times. But that didn't mean she couldn't enjoy the slow burn of temporarily forbidden romance, the stolen glances during rehearsals (and even performances), and the rush of exhilaration when she and her crush were finally free to date. So what if all of her previous intra-cast relationships had fizzled out within weeks of the play ending? That didn't mean this one would.

Rushing inside to finish getting ready, Donna heard Trynn's vocal warm-ups ringing out easily above the fray. The girl had pipes. And she somehow managed to exercise them even while having her make-up done in front of a full-length, lighted mirror she had brought from home.

Given the semi-professional status of the theater, most of the cast members did their

own makeup before arriving backstage. But not Trynn. She brought Renaldo, whom she introduced as an old high school friend and “makeup artist to the stars,” to paint her beautiful face in full view of the cast. Several of the other Hot Box Girls were gathered around, watching the master work.

Basking in the attention, Trynn closed her eyes and lifted her chin while Renaldo misted her with setting spray, then she smiled at her reflection in the mirror.

Donna skirted around the group to slip into her first costume, a pink gingham mini dress with puffed sleeves and ruffled bloomers. Trynn sauntered over in her silk robe. She’d been making the rounds, personally addressing each member of the cast, as though it were her royal duty.

“Donna, isn’t it?” Trynn said. “I have to tell you that I love your confidence in that costume.”

“This one’s my favorite,” Donna said, choosing not to respond to the backhanded compliment. And she found Trynn’s comment odd, since this was the least revealing of her four costume changes.

“And your makeup looks great,” Trynn said. “Did you do it yourself?”

“Always,” Donna replied,

“I wish I had the time,” Trynn sighed, expertly turning the subject back to herself. “Luckily, Renaldo always comes to my rescue. Did you know he toured with J.Lo last year?”

“Yes, I think I heard that,” Donna replied, heroically refraining from rolling her eyes. She had a feeling Trynn was angling for praise, so she didn’t offer any.

Turning to the nearby mirror, Trynn checked her lipstick while Donna worked on securing her bubble-gum pink wig.

“So, who’s coming to see you tonight?” Trynn asked.

“Nobody,” Donna said. “I never let anyone come on opening night.” She didn’t feel the need to mention that her family would comprise roughly half of the audience at tomorrow night’s show.

“How sad!” Trynn said. “My parents are already here, saving a seat for Jack. Middle of the second row. He’s coming right from a study group. I hope he’s not late! Big test tomorrow. He’s in med school, you know.”

“Uh huh,” Donna said. Of course she knew. Who didn’t? When she wasn’t talking about herself, Trynn’s favorite topic of conversation was her newlywed husband, the future doctor.

“It’s so hard,” Trynn said. “We never see each other. Can you believe he almost suggested missing opening night, just because of a silly old test tomorrow?”

That sounded just fine to Donna. She preferred having the show all to herself for one night, a chance to work out the kinks and build her confidence before there was anyone she really cared about in the audience.

“Good thing he’s such a hottie,” Trynn said. “Makes it easy to forgive him for how much he neglects me. I’ll bring him backstage and introduce him to everyone after the show.”

“Looking forward to it,” Donna said, and she actually meant it. She was curious about the kind of man who would voluntarily entangle himself with Trynn Gentry for life. Donna was not unaccustomed to diva personalities, but Trynn took things to a

new level, especially for a small, local theater.

Just then, Nick passed behind Trynn in his purple plaid zoot suit and fake mustache. He bowed mockingly low to his leading lady, and when Trynn spun around, he pretended to be tying his shoe. Donna bit her lip to keep from laughing.

“I see you there, Nathan Detroit,” Trynn said in her character’s nasally, high-pitched, New York baby voice and flounced off.

Nick grinned at Donna while she pinned on her wig. He had a wide, infectious smile that reminded her of a young Taye Diggs, but with a full head of hair.

“I still think you’d have made a great Adelaide,” he said, for the dozenth time.

“But there’s such great dramatic tension between you two,” she teased, catching his dark eyes in the mirror.

“She is fun to fight with,” he acknowledged. “But I think I’d have more fun with you in the finale.”

“Oh, Nathan,” Donna said in an accent of her own, batting her eyelashes at him. He’d been referring to the wedding scene, where Nathan and Adelaide share a quick kiss. Donna had to admit she wouldn’t mind that either.

“Break a leg, Donna,” he said, reaching up to tame a stray curl from her wig.

“You too,” Donna said warmly, wondering if the butterflies in her stomach were coming from the upcoming performance or from flirting with Nick.

Opening night went off with only a few hitches. Donna’s hat fell off during “Bushel and a Peck,” Nicely Nicely’s microphone kept cutting out, and Trynn was half-a-beat

late for “Take Back Your Mink.” She’d been texting her mother backstage to wake up Jack, afraid he would miss her best solo.

It was a wonder Trynn got through the performance at all, given how focused she was on the center of the second row. Her obsessive attention drew Donna’s eyes more than a few times to the slumped man sitting next to a petite brunette—the spitting image of Trynn in 25 years—and her silver-haired companion, who must be Trynn’s father.

So this was the soon-to-be Doctor Gentry. He didn’t look so hot from this angle. The man couldn’t even sit up straight for the opening night of his newlywed wife’s play? Donna involuntarily made eye contact with him once or twice, a jarring experience, since she typically looks no lower than the audience’s foreheads. And of course, she happened to be wiggling suggestively one of the times, which did nothing to ease his furrowed brow as it traveled from one Hot Box Girl to another. Was he bored? Sizing them up? Comparing them to his precious wife? Donna bristled at his nerve.

Majestic Theater had a long-standing tradition of hosting a cast meet-and-greet in the lobby after curtain call. At least half of the actors, especially the leads, were expected to mingle in the lobby for a few minutes in full costume, so the audience could get autographs on their playbills and pictures with their favorites. It was always complete chaos.

Trynn pranced through the crowd, towing her reluctant husband by the hand. Donna thought the two of them were the living embodiment of “opposites attract.” While Trynn’s demeanor was charismatic and engaging, his was aloof, almost standoffish. She had a petite and pixie-like frame, with raven-black hair (under her blonde Adelaide wig) and flashing green eyes, whereas he was tall and angular, with a strong jaw, reddish-brown hair and eyes so tired they seemed almost dazed.

The Hot Box Girls were a particular attraction, especially for certain men who wanted

their picture taken standing in the middle of a crowd of glittering showgirls. Donna couldn't blame them. The final costume was a stunner: a silver bustier-style top with short shorts, a giant bow tied like a bustle at the back, fishnet stockings, and feather boas the same shade of baby pink as their wigs.

Trynn pulled her husband over, cutting in front of the line of waiting fans.

"Everyone, this is Jack," Trynn announced, her manicured fingers gripping his lower bicep. "He adored the show, except when he fell asleep right before my solo, but he's so cute that I think I'll forgive him."

The girls laughed dutifully as Jack smiled down at his wife, the warmth not quite reaching his eyes. He either thought himself above this kind of thing, or he didn't like being put in the spotlight, Donna couldn't tell which. If it was the latter, they'd be a perfect match, since Trynn never left room in her spotlight for anyone else.

"I need a picture of me and my real love interest, with my awesome backup dancers," Trynn announced, waving her mother forward, who had a camera around her neck.

Trynn positioned Jack in the middle of the girls.

"I know!" Trynn said. "Jack, pick me up, and then I want all of you girls looking at Jack like you're jealous."

Donna was always game for a fun staged photo, but Jack didn't seem particularly into this idea. She heard his reluctant sigh, even if Trynn didn't. The theater photographer scurried over when he saw the set up.

"Oh, I love this," he said. "A regular audience member surrounded by all the beauties in the cast. This could be good for publicity. Can I get a few like this too?"

Trynn's mom stepped out of the way, and he arranged and rearranged them.

"Thank you for being a good sport, sir," the photographer said to Jack, who silently nodded. Donna caught another sigh, but he seemed to be resigned to his fate. "Could I get one with you looking directly at the camera, sir, with two of the girls kissing you on the cheek? How about you and...you."

He pointed at Donna and Monica.

Trynn visibly pouted then interjected.

"Can't I be in this one? He's my husband."

"Oh, of course! I didn't realize that," the photographer said, waving Monica away. "You're a bit too tall, sir, so I'll need you to crouch down. That's great."

Trynn was several inches shorter than Donna, so Jack crouched low enough for both of them to reach. Donna placed a hand on his shoulder and leaned toward his angular jaw, pursing her bright-red lips millimeters from his stubbly cheek. He smelled good. Like fresh linen and spearmint.

"Okay, Pinkie, I need you to actually kiss him," the photographer said from behind the camera.

Donna closed the gap—and felt a static shock zap her lips at the moment of contact.

"Ouch!" Donna said, laughing.

Jack rubbed his cheek, turning toward Donna with a wry smile. Now Donna could see some of the appeal. He had the kind of eyes you could drown in—clear, blue, and bottomless.

“Careful,” he said, glancing down at her mouth. “That’s a dangerous weapon you’ve got there.”

For once in her life, Donna was speechless.

Trynn made a demand on Jack’s attention, so he turned back to her.

The photographer was delighted at the lipstick smudges they left behind.

“Okay, now I want both of you to pull on his arms, like you’re fighting over him,” he said.

Donna obliged, feeling pretty certain that if this was a test of strength, she’d overpower Trynn easily.

Jack finally relaxed and started playing along.

“Thank you sir,” the photographer said. “These are gold. Could I get you to sign a release?”

“Of course he will,” Trynn answered for him.

Then Trynn pulled Jack away, and the next man in line stepped up to take a picture with the showgirls, in hopes of making his wife or girlfriend jealous.

Donna smiled for picture after picture, looking forward to the moment she could slip away in search of Nick. Just to congratulate him on his performance, of course. Definitely not to set the wheels in motion for their first date. She’d never let such things sully the sanctity of the production.

Their second performance went much smoother. Trynn seemed more at ease,

probably because Jack was conspicuously absent from the second row, where Trynn's adoring parents sat in their same center seats. Unbeknownst to Trynn, her mom and dad were surrounded on all sides by Donna's multitudinous relatives. Trynn clearly mistook the Gable family's over-the-top cheering to be in her own honor, since Donna was never in any scene that didn't also include Trynn. Donna didn't bother to correct her impression.

At the post-show meet and greet, Cat was the first to race up to Donna, with Grace and Ginger in tow. Trynn glanced over and did a double-take.

"Catharine! How did you even know I was in this show? How nice of you to come backstage."

"Hi Trinity," Cat said with her characteristic warmth. "I actually didn't. Donna's my sister."

"You two know each other?" Donna blurted.

Trynn looked Donna up and down, then did the same to Cat, and her thoughts were written all over her face. Donna caught a flash of pity behind her smile.

"Trinity and I took violin from the same teacher in high school," Cat explained, while Grace and Ginger dared each other to go talk to Sky Masterson, who was played by an actor they recognized from an Old Navy commercial.

"Actually it's Trynn now. Trynn Gentry," she said, flashing her left hand at Cat, which she must have forgotten was still adorned with the fake wedding ring Nathan Detroit gave her in the finale. Then she noticed Cat's ring, and her eyebrows shot up. "Oh, you got married too!"

"Just engaged," Cat said, a dreamy gleam in her eye.

“Enjoy it while it lasts,” Trynn said. “The minute you get married, they forget you exist. Unless you’re lucky enough to have a husband who’s not in medical school.”

“I’ll count myself lucky then,” Cat said. “Congrats to you, though. How long have you been married?”

“Just since July,” Trynn said. “In hindsight, maybe we should have waited until he graduated. But you know how it goes when you’re in love.”

Cat did know.

Donna only wished she did.

“So,” Trynn said. “Tell me about your guy.”

“He’s like, impossibly good looking,” Donna jumped in, knowing Cat was too modest to brag. And she felt like showing Trynn up, just a little, since Liam was objectively more attractive—and probably more alert—than her sleepy spouse. “You should see these two together. They’re almost too beautiful to look at.”

“Stop it,” Cat swatted at Donna’s arm.

Trynn shot Donna another look of pity. This time, Donna actually rolled her eyes, but Trynn had already turned back to Cat.

“Does he act or model?” Trynn asked. “My agent is looking to sign more men. She keeps bugging me to ask Jack, but he says no way.”

“Liam would never,” Cat said.

“But his brother does,” Donna interjected, and Cat gave her an exasperated look.

“So, how did you two meet?” Trynn asked.

“At our sister’s wedding. Liam is a childhood friend of our brother-in-law,” Cat said.

“We have two brothers-in-law now,” Donna reminded her.

“Oh, yeah,” Cat said. “I’m talking about our O.G. brother-in-law. Audrey’s husband, Ty.”

“He’s a billionaire,” Donna blurted, before she could stop herself. Listening to months of Trynn’s bragging about Dr. McDreamy had warped Donna’s sense of decorum.

“Your fiancé’s a billionaire?” Trynn said, her eyes practically bugging out of her head.

“No,” Cat said, elbowing Donna. “She means Audrey’s husband. But he doesn’t like anyone to know that.”

“Why not?” Trynn asked. “Does he ever invest in film projects?”

“That’s why,” Donna muttered under her breath, then said more loudly, “You’re right, Cat. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

But there was no going back now. Trynn had dollar signs in her eyes. And Donna was afraid she might have a new best friend.

“I still can’t believe Cat is your sister!” Trynn said as they were getting ready for their next performance. “How did I never make this connection before? Besides the fact that you look nothing alike. That must be hard, though, right? Having a sister who looks like that ?”

“Nah, I’m used to it,” Donna said, ignoring the slight pang she always felt when people were this incredulous that she could possibly be related to such a gorgeous creature. “Besides, I got all of the personality in the family.”

“It’s a good thing she doesn’t sing too, or I’d really have to hate her,” Trynn said, responding to her own thoughts instead of anything Donna said.

“Cat is a hard person to hate,” Donna said. “She’s too nice.”

“You would know,” Trynn said. “The sibling rivalry must be intense in your house, though.”

“Honestly, it’s not bad,” Donna said. At least not on her part. Audrey and Betty were enough older, 10 and 8 years respectively, that they seemed more like benevolent aunts than big sisters. And not only was Cat genuinely nice, even to her siblings, she was also three years older than Donna. They hadn’t attended the same school since Cat was in sixth grade and Donna was in third. Maybe Elizabeth and the twins were plagued by sisterly rivalry. She’d never thought to ask.

“So, tell me about Lavinia Westbrook,” Trynn said. “Isn’t she related to your brother-in-law? Have you met her?”

“Of course,” Donna said. “I was just talking to her on my way over here.”

“Shut up!” Trynn said, shoving Donna entirely too hard. “I got so many ideas for my wedding from her blog. I would have flown us all to Italy if we weren’t just poor students.”

“Do you mean the Florence wedding?”

“You read about it too?”

“I was in it. That was Audrey’s wedding to Ty.”

“What the what? You have been holding out on me, girl!”

Donna jumped out of the way before Trynn could shove her again.

“Tell me everything,” Trynn said

“I mean it’s not a secret. When’s the last time you read Lavinia’s blog?”

“Oh gosh, it’s been months.”

“So you probably haven’t seen my guest posts.”

“Wait, you’re the West Coast Wednesdays girl? I knew you looked familiar the first time I saw you! I just thought it was from past auditions or something.”

Trynn scrutinized Donna anew, from head to toe.

“You do know how to dress,” Trynn said. “I’ll give you that.”

“Uh, thanks,” Donna said, not mistaking her underlying meaning. In other words, at least Donna could put an outfit together, to compensate for her other inadequacies.

Donna was the exact same person she had been before Trynn sussed out her connections, back when Donna was seen as one of many expendable “back-up dancers.” She had done nothing to earn this new sense of respect now coming from Trynn, which was mixed with a hefty dose of jealousy. Donna was not accustomed to being envied by the likes of Trynn, and she wasn’t any happier about it than Trynn appeared to be.

Donna's slow-simmering flirtation with Nick, aka Nathan Detroit, lasted all of four dates in a span of 14 days following the cast party. They found they had nothing in common beyond their shared love of the stage. And try as she might, Donna couldn't overlook Nick's horrid fashion sense. The man wore gym clothes at all times. She had assumed the sweats and t-shirts were for comfort during long rehearsals. But no. This was his everyday attire. Donna needed reasons to wear her Balenciaga and Valentino samples, while Nick was perpetually dressed for frisbee golf.

The final nail in the coffin was when she couldn't talk him into being part of a live studio audience for American Idol , one of her favorite guilty pleasures. It seemed he wasn't interested in any performances where he wasn't in the spotlight.

Thus, they parted ways amiably, and Donna endured some good-natured ribbing from her family about another cast-mate romance gone wrong. Which would have been fine, if the extended Gable family weren't in the midst of planning their second wedding this year—the third within the last two years. On top of that, Donna had attended two weddings for cousins, one on each side, and one elopement in Las Vegas for a high school friend in the last few months. The planning itself wasn't the problem—especially when Donna was called upon to help dress the wedding party. It was the loneliness and the perpetual limbo.

She'd spent more than a few evenings as the only singleton in the room, with Audrey and Ty, Betty and Gavin, and Cat and Liam in their individual love cocoons. She noticed the little things. A hand on the small of a back. A refilled drink without having to be asked. A casual kiss on the temple. Fingers unconsciously reaching out and intertwining. Eyes locking and sparking secret smiles. Feelings of contentment and wholeness that radiated from their very beings.

Sometimes they'd all go on group dates, and Donna would bring a friend or someone she was interested in, and the comparison alone was all it took to kill it stone dead. It was like bringing a glow stick to a bonfire and then trying to maintain interest in the

glow stick.

Donna tried to be fair. Maybe each of her sisters' relationships had started out like glow sticks, and she just needed to be patient and put in the time and energy to grow the flame. But when she ran that theory past her sisters, they each shook their heads one by one. Audrey had felt an intense connection from her very first meeting with Ty. She said even their foreheads had chemistry. Betty had been nurturing a secret bonfire for Gavin since childhood; she'd just been really good at hiding it. And Cat's feelings for Liam started out as white-hot hatred. The intensity never diminished, it just gradually changed its nature, transforming into infatuation. And then admiration. And then devotion.

Donna had a front-row seat to this one, thanks to their shared apartment. And while she'd always liked Liam, he was growing on her more and more as the weeks went by. He was serious and cynical by nature, but Cat brought out his earnest side—and even a touch of silliness—which was sweet to see. And he had a dry sense of humor that had Donna frequently in stitches. He would make a worthy brother-in-law. If his only brother were more like him, she might have requested a setup, except for the inconvenient fact of him being entirely too beautiful—and Lavinia's ex, to boot.

CHAPTER FOUR

BY THE TIME Cat and Liam's wedding rolled around in October, Donna had started her third year of college, having transferred to the University of California: Irvine, as a drama major. She chose the generalist track that broadly covered all aspects of stage production, rather than focusing deeply on just musical theater, or acting, or design, or directing. For the university's fall production of *Into the Woods*, she joined the costuming team, which she found nearly as fun and fulfilling as being on stage.

She'd struck up a flirtation with a talented set designer, Danno Tanaka, which didn't fall under her prohibition of dating a fellow actor during a production's run. If things went south, there was no risk of affecting the audience's experience of the play. She wasn't sure she was a good enough actor to hide a broken heart or injured pride live on stage, but she knew she was capable of masking such feelings behind the scenes.

Danno, in fact, would be her date to Cat and Liam's wedding, to be held—to everyone and no one's surprise—at the happiest place in the world, Wonderland. Even with the substantial discount they received because of Liam's lifetime season ticket holder status, bestowed as a result of the flying monkeys incident, the cost almost rivaled Audrey and Ty's destination wedding to Florence. But Liam had a wealthy and guilt-ridden absentee father who was grateful to pay for the whole thing, as long as he'd be allowed to attend, and include some of his most important political connections on the guest list. Probably to create the impression that he was a dutiful and involved father. But whatever his motivations, he was even willing to remain firmly on the sidelines, not even expecting to be included in any wedding party pictures. After much cajoling from Cat about mending fences and moving forward without regret, Liam relented.

Donna expected explosions of color and at least a little bit of theme-park tackiness to leak into the event, so she was surprised at the elegance of the venue. Cat and Liam would exchange vows in front of a white gazebo nestled in the foliage a few steps up from a sunken, circular, stone courtyard, surrounded by lush gardens and towering trees. Rows of white Chiavari chairs were arranged on either side of an aisle carpeted with pink rose petals, leading to a pink-and-white floral garland arch adorning the front of the gazebo. The adjacent WonderLand Resort Hotel offered privacy, blocking the sights, smells, and sounds of the perpetually crowded amusement park on the other side.

Cat invited all of her sisters to join her in the bride's room to get ready together. Cat wore her red locks half up, with pearls woven into the back, the rest curling loosely down her back. With her hair and makeup done early, she was bending over Grace to help her with her eye makeup—which she'd just started experimenting with, and which Ginger still refused. It was such a precious scene that Donna pulled out her phone to snap a pic. Only Cat would be helping other people get ready on her own wedding day.

“Why aren't you nervous?” Donna demanded. “You seem totally calm.”

“Oh, I've got some butterflies,” Cat said, her deep brown eyes shining. “But mostly, I'm just ready.”

“You've been ready since you were 8. But at least your wedding dress isn't made out of toilet paper.”

They shared a private laugh about the elaborate weddings Cat used to stage with her Barbies, making dresses out of tissues and scotch tape. Donna was always forced to play the groom—a Western Ken doll with painted brown hair and black, faux-leather pants that were a nightmare to pull on over his flat feet. Donna was amused to realize that Cat's real-life groom didn't look entirely unlike that old Ken doll (but hopefully

wouldn't be wearing a neckerchief).

Chuckling to herself, Donna turned to the mirror to adjust her barely pink, tea-length dress with its sweetheart neckline, ruched bodice, and flutter sleeves. Her sisters all wore versions of the same dress, but without the mid-thigh slit for the tweens. Donna took a moment to celebrate this rare, magical design that actually looked better on Donna and Elizabeth than it did on the straighter-figured sisters. Not that Elizabeth would notice, as she was curled in a corner, reading *Pride* perhaps the crowd intimidated him.

Donna followed on the arm of the groom's model-esque brother, wondering if this elevated her status in her date's eyes, or if she suffered by comparison. As cute as Donna knew she was, Nolan McBride was literally prettier, in a way that didn't detract from his masculinity. Beautiful men were never Donna's type, but she could see why Lavinia had once found him irresistible.

Donna took her place next to Elizabeth, scanning down the grandparents' row to where Danno sat so she could give him a wink. He smiled adorably back. Once Audrey and Ty and Betty and Gavin were in position, on either side of Reverend Roberts, the harpist reached the most sweeping and dramatic portion of the piece. Right on cue, two white horses clip-clopped down the narrow, cobblestone lane leading from the resort, pulling an open coach beneath a canopy of trees, stopping at the edge of the courtyard. As the guests rose to their feet, a liveried footman assisted Cat from the carriage and handed her off to her father with a formal bow.

Cat practically glowed from head to toe as she glided through the scattered rose petals toward her groom, and Donna glanced back at Liam's face. His eyes welled up, and he didn't bother wiping the tears away, seemingly oblivious to anything but the vision in white before him. Cat walked with gentle serenity, beaming broadly and unselfconsciously at her waiting groom.

They exchanged vows. Liam's voice was firm and resolute, despite his years of hesitation about the point of marriage and his more recent cold feet. Cat had won him over, fully and completely. As Liam dipped Cat to seal their union with a kiss, and the guests applauded, Donna caught Lavinia's eye in the audience. They shared a satisfied smile, like the two matchmakers they were, pushing the couple together from opposite sides of the country.

Dinner and toasts in the resort ballroom were followed by a reception back in the courtyard, which had been cleared of chairs and set up for dancing. A temporary dance floor covered the cobblestones, with appetizer buffet spreads and cocktail tables set up around the edges of the space like two parentheses. Cat and Liam greeted well-wishers in the gazebo, near an exquisite, multi-tiered cake Cat had baked and decorated herself.

Donna had long since kicked off her shoes, taking to the dance floor with Danno as often as he was willing, but he wasn't proving to be as fun and spontaneous as she had hoped. So she lured both of her brothers-in-law, two of her grandpas, and even Nolan out to satisfy her itch to move and groove.

"So Donna and Danno, huh?" teased Ty as she tried to teach him a few swing moves she'd perfected in a recent dance class at school. "It has a nice ring to it."

"Oh, yikes," Donna said. "That's the first time I've heard our names said together. This definitely isn't going to work out."

"Sorry, kid," Ty said, referring both to the topic of conversation and his inability to keep up with her complex moves.

"Eh, you're hopeless," Donna said. "Maybe Gavin will do better."

"Ouch," Ty said. "I thought I was first in your heart."

“I don’t know,” Donna said. “There are three of you in the race now. You’ve got your work cut out for you if you want to maintain the lead.”

“Perhaps a bit of sabotage is in order,” Ty said with a devilish gleam.

“Oh, hi Donna,” crowed a voice in Donna’s ear. A voice she hadn’t been overly eager to hear again.

“Trynn, hello!” Donna said, spinning around to greet her. For a moment, she was confused about why Trynn would be here, of all places. And then she remembered Trynn’s old connection to Cat, through their violin teacher. But had Cat really invited her? Donna had helped address envelopes, and she was pretty sure Trynn’s name would have jumped out at her, if it had been on the list.

“You remember my husband, Dr. Gentry?” Trynn said.

“I don’t think we’ve met,” he said, extending a hand, clearly not recognizing her without the feather boa and pink wig. Or perhaps her kiss on his cheek hadn’t been as shocking to him as it was to Donna.

“Hello Doctor,” Donna said mock-seriously, meeting his eyes as she firmly gripped his palm.

“Jack is fine,” he said uncomfortably.

“He sure is,” Trynn crowed.

“I have to agree,” teased Ty, reaching to shake his hand too. “Ty Westbrook. Brother-in-law of the bride.”

“He’s the shoe magnate I was telling you about,” Trynn stage-whispered to Jack.

Donna and Ty exchanged an amused smile at the word “magnate.”

“Donna was one of my Hot Box Girls in Guys and Dolls ,” Trynn explained to Jack, and Donna resented the implied ownership.

“Guilty,” Donna said in her best Brooklyn-ese.

“So I guess that thing with Nick didn’t work out?” Trynn said, pretending to look around for him, as if she didn’t already know the scoop from their theater circles.

“Oh that was over before it began,” Donna said.

“Is that why you’re dancing with your brother-in-law?” Trynn asked, as if there was something wrong with that.

“I have a date here somewhere,” Donna said, looking around. “He’s probably getting something to eat. He’s not much of a dancer.”

“Seems to be your curse tonight,” Ty said. “I can waltz, but I’m pretty hopeless otherwise.”

“You know,” Trynn said meaningfully. “Jack is an excellent dancer. We were on the same social dance team in college.”

Nobody seemed to catch the hint. So Trynn finally spelled it out.

“Jack, honey, why don’t you give poor Ty a break and take my old friend Donna for a spin?” she said, pulling Ty into conversation before anyone had a chance to respond.

So Donna and Jack were left staring awkwardly at each other.

“Do you swing?” Donna asked.

Jack raised his eyebrows.

Donna’s burst of laughter caught him off guard. She couldn’t blame him. She’d been known to startle her own self with the volume of her cackle.

“I’m talking about swing dancing, ” she said, but the hint of a smile tugging at the edge of his mouth suggested he’d known what she meant. “I was just trying to teach my hopeless brother-in-law.”

“East Coast or West Coast?” he asked.

“You choose,” she said.

Without a word, he led her out in the push-pull tension of West Coast Swing, which was honestly the only choice for the song. They fell into an easy, fun rhythm, and Donna noticed they were drawing attention, including from the photographer Lavinia had once again hired as her wedding gift to the couple (with strings attached, of course).

Jack was loads better than anyone she’d been partnered up with in class, even though he was clearly distracted, casting frequent glances in Trynn’s direction.

Oh, the jealous type.

“Don’t worry about Ty,” Donna said. “He’s harmless.”

“I’m not,” Jack said.

“You’re not harmless, or you’re not worried about Ty?” she laughed.

Jack considered the question.

“Yes,” Jack finally said, a corner of his mouth turning up

“Yes you’re not worried about Ty and Trynn, or yes you are ?”

“Yes, I’m not worried,” Jack said. “And no, I’m not not harmless.”

“Isn’t that a double negative?” Donna asked.

“Maybe even a triple,” Jack said, grinning. “You have dimples.”

“I do,” she said, grinning and turning her face side to side to show them off.

His attention was drawn back to his wife, and a crease furrowed his brow. He seemed to shake it off just as the song wound down, and he dipped Donna spontaneously.

“Trynn wasn’t exaggerating,” Donna said. “You know what you’re doing.”

“It’s been a while,” Jack said.

“I admit I didn’t think you’d be the dancing type,” Donna said, catching her breath.

Jack looked at her quizzically, clearly wondering when she’d had the opportunity to think about him at all.

“Oh, um, Trynn gave a certain...very serious impression about you,” Donna said.

Understanding dawned in Jack’s eyes.

“Ah yes, you no doubt have heard plenty about me during all those rehearsals,” Jack

said.

“Well, I think I knew the date of every one of your big exams, if that’s what you mean,” Donna laughed.

“I’m sure you did,” Jack said, a tired look in his eyes just remembering it. “That last semester was brutal.”

“Well at least you’re done now, Doctor,” Donna said.

He laughed.

“Not yet,” he said. “Residency is even worse.”

Donna wondered how Trynn Gentry was going to handle that. But she didn’t wonder for very long, because she had some dancing and some mingling and some car decorating to do. And those condom balloons weren’t going to blow up themselves.

As if two family weddings in one year weren’t enough, Donna was in several more wedding parties the following February, including on the night of her 21st birthday. But this time, it was her turn to wear the white dress and veil.

The dress was a bit old-fashioned for her taste, but she didn’t have much say in the matter. She also didn’t get to pick her own groom. But out of the seven available options, Mychal was the one she would have chosen anyway, despite him being 2 years behind her in school.

She had to admit she quite enjoyed having someone to kiss every night, even if it was a stage kiss to a fictional groom in a university production of *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. During rehearsals, she and Mychal had decided to make their kiss as authentic as possible. None of this thumb-over-the-mouth stuff. After all, their

characters, Dorcas and Benjamin, were supposed to be the most passionate of all of the couples, and neither of them had a real-life boyfriend or girlfriend to object. The director suggested they really play it up for comic effect, with Donna/Dorcas being the obvious aggressor. So every night, she applied extra layers of bright red lipstick just before the final scene. Then she enthusiastically smeared it all over Mychal/Benjamin's mouth, ensuring the evidence could be seen from the back row when he finally came up for air.

As much fun as she had snogging the strapping young lad, she had no plans to pursue him—or anyone else in the cast—after the play ended. Mychal was wonderful onstage, and he could not have been a more willing stage-kissing partner. But his daily reports of fraternity-house antics suggested he was somewhat lacking in maturity off stage.

For a while, she'd had her eye on Adam, who was a senior and the male lead, but he quite clearly had a crush on the director. Things with Danno had long since petered out, but they'd remained friends, which Donna was grateful for every time she ran into him backstage. They were good enough friends that Danno organized an unauthorized behind-the-scenes champagne toast for Donna's birthday—for select cast members only—to celebrate her new status as a legal drinker. (Which mattered less to her than it did to him.)

At the moment, she had no other romantic prospects. She'd already decided that if the situation didn't improve in the next year, she'd drag Danno to yet another wedding—this time in Boston. Lavinia had gotten engaged to her hunky boyfriend the week before the play opened, which threw the entire blog content calendar into disarray and gave Donna a much-needed break from her blogging duties. Now she had all the time in the world to focus on her nightly nuptials to Mychal/Benjamin, her other coursework, and her pathetic love life.

Donna was thrilled for Lavinia, but the weddings and engagements happening left

and right were making her increasingly aware of her singleton status. There was even a baby announcement! Audrey and Ty dropped the news on Christmas Day, bringing a glow of anticipation to Cat's eyes and draining Liam's face of all color, while Betty and Gavin eyed each other thoughtfully.

Donna could always be counted on to squeal the loudest, hug the tightest, and jump the highest for joy. And she did. But as the three newlywed couples fell into conversation about houses and nurseries and numbers of future children, Donna fell unusually quiet. Her sisters suddenly sounded so adult to her 21-year-old ears. Like they'd boarded a cruise to the future and left her waving from the shore.

Audrey tried drawing her into the conversation once or twice, but Donna ended up drifting toward the kids' end of the table, where the twins were bartering their Christmas presents and Elizabeth sat leafing through the Jane Austen box set from Grandma Caro.

Forever caught in the middle, Donna had spent her whole life floating between the big sisters and the little sisters. At some point when she wasn't looking, Audrey, Betty, and Cat had started having conversations about 401ks and cleaning supplies, while the youngest three were still consumed with acne and first crushes. The bigs all had houses. The littles all had bedrooms. And Donna lived in an apartment over a garage, by herself.

She'd often wondered if going away to college would have helped fill the void. Living on campus somewhere would have forced her to connect with roommates and classmates on a more intimate basis. But as it was, she lived too far away to really feel like a part of things, a situation that was unlikely to change with just two and a half semesters left before graduation.

She couldn't believe she'd be joining the "real world" in a little over a year. To become what? Another classic California cliché: a waitress/actress desperately

hoping for her big break?

Trynn Gentry had gotten hers. She'd landed a supporting role in a new sitcom about a high school drama club, which was called (predictably) Drama Club . She'd get to sing, dance, and act on the stage—and be on television too. Truly, the best of both worlds.

Donna personally preferred the stage to the screen, so she didn't begrudge Trynn her success. What she did envy was the forward motion, the progress, the lack of limbo. The fact that Trynn knew exactly what she wanted and went after it.

But at least Donna had someone to kiss. For now.

CHAPTER FIVE

“DONNA, YOU KNOW Trynn Gentry, don’t you?” asked one of her professors after class one day that spring.

“I was one of her Hot Box Girls,” Donna said. “Last year at Majestic.”

“I thought I remembered you saying something like that. Are you still in touch?”

“She came to my sister’s wedding and forced me to dance with her doctor husband so she could try to get funding from my billionaire brother-in-law for one of her vanity projects,” is what she wanted to say.

But instead, she said: “Somewhat.”

“Great! We’re trying to assemble a panel of local actors for Career Week who have made the transition from stage to screen. Given the success of Drama Club , I think she’d really draw a crowd. Would you be willing to invite her?”

“Mm-hm,” Donna almost choked. Trynn’s sitcom had really taken off, and Donna was seeing her face everywhere: on billboards, in magazines, on television commercials. The last thing she wanted to do was see her face in her classroom. One small consolation was that Trynn only had a supporting role, and Donna knew it was driving her crazy to be on the edges of the cast photos rather than front and center.

Donna didn’t have Trynn’s phone number, but she did have her email, from that time Trynn was trying to get featured in Donna’s West Coast Wednesdays column. The

woman had a bottomless need for attention—of all sorts.

Donna never responded, not out of rudeness or spite, but because the email had arrived the same week Frank Sinatra died, and Donna had fallen into a deep well of grief. Up to this point in her life, Donna had largely been shielded from significant loss. So the constant knot in her stomach, the loss of appetite, the extreme fatigue, and the inability to focus on anything for longer than 3 minutes took her by surprise. Old Blue Eyes was almost 15 and basically blind, so it was beyond his time to go. But he was her first leading man and her biggest fan since she was 6 years old, and she felt his absence acutely.

Donna didn't feel like explaining her lack of response to Trynn, who didn't seem to be the pet-loving type. So she started a new email thread and copied her professor on the request.

Within the hour, Trynn responded in the affirmative.

The professor asked Donna to introduce Trynn at the panel discussion, read her bio, and explain her personal connection to the television actress. Each member of the panel would be introduced similarly, either by a student who knew them or who was a particular fan of their work. But there was an additional catch. The students were all asked to deliver their introductions in character, using a regional accent they'd draw secretly from a bowl the week before. The student who was voted most convincing by the panelists earned an automatic A for the entire unit.

Donna cringed when she drew "Minnesota," but she was in it to win it. She spent the week drawing out her O's and throwing some "you knows" and an occasional "oh boy!" But she had to be careful not to go too over-the-top and turn into a stereotype or caricature. She aimed for just enough of a dialect to make the classmates who knew her well—and weren't in on the scheme—to wonder, "Wait, where is Donna Gable from again?"

Donna really leaned into the assignment, deciding to devise a whole new character for the event. On the day of the panel, Donna wore her hair in two braids, with a beret perched saucily on her head, and put on a pair of prescription-free glasses with bright purple frames. She wore a black t-shirt from the touring company of Xanadu, a pleated plaid skirt that hit above the knee, a slouchy cardigan with the sleeves pushed up, and a pair of platform Mary Janes with white ankle socks. The perfect blend of cute and quirky, with a dash of nerdy thrown in.

Given her propensity to vary her style wildly from day today—thanks to the endless clothing samples she received from her blogging gig—nobody batted an eye at her changed appearance.

As Donna waited for her turn at the podium and listened to the other introductions, she giggled internally at Trynn’s ridiculous bio. It had to be more than twice as long as any of the other panel members,’ even though she was by far the youngest one there.

At the nod from her professor, Donna walked to the microphone, pushed her glasses up on her nose, and started to read. As she recited Trynn’s comprehensive list of roles and acting credits—including a WonderLand commercial when she was a child—the side door to the auditorium opened at stage left. In walked a man in blue hospital scrubs, scowling and glancing frequently at his watch, just as Donna got to the part of the bio that mentioned him. “...she lives in Malibu, California, with her very own Dr. McDreamy. Trynn’s husband, Dr. Jack Gentry, is an emergency room physician with the looks of Michael Fassbender and the smarts of Dr. Oz. Oh, doesn’t that sound nice? Please, folks, let’s welcome Trynn Gentry.”

Donna suspected Jack wouldn’t be too keen on the second comparison. As the audience applauded, Donna walked to the stairs at the edge of the stage to take her seat. A quick glance over at his furrowed brow confirmed her hunch. He leaned against the wall near the exit, arms folded, his shirt tucked into the drawstring pants

resting low on his narrow hips. She was starting to understand what all the fuss was about.

Just as Donna glanced back down at the stairs, her chunky heel slipped off the second-to-last step, she stumbled precariously, and she emitted an accidental “Ope!” that took all eyes off Trynn and trained them on her. She righted herself, successfully avoiding a full-on tumble, and bowed deeply to scattered applause and laughter before scurrying off, trying to conceal a painful limp, to her seat at the end of the front row. She giggled to herself for staying in character with that very Midwestern exclamation.

A new rumble of laughter from the students in the audience indicated that Trynn had made a joke of some sort, possibly at Donna’s expense. But she didn’t hear it, distracted as she was by the stabbing pain in her right ankle.

She was having trouble breathing normally, but the professor sitting next to her seemed to be blessedly oblivious. She was starting to sweat, so she slipped off her cardigan to cool off, feeling much better in just her T-shirt and skirt. She didn’t want to cause a fuss, so she channeled her energy into gripping the armrests—so tightly that she wouldn’t be surprised to see indents in the wood.

As covertly as she could, she reached down to unbuckle the strap that was cutting into her rapidly swelling ankle. She was not going to limp out of here in front of everyone. Heck no. She could hang on until the panel was over. As the pain grew less and less tolerable, she quietly scooted her backpack out in front of her and to the right, slipping her foot out of the shoe and resting it on top to elevate it ever so slightly. She looked like she was growing an orange beneath her skin.

“Do you need help?” whispered a deep voice in her ear.

Startled, she whipped her face to the side and cracked her temple against the forehead

of the whispering man, who had leaned forward from the seat behind her.

“Oof,” she said, rubbing the side of her head, as the man stealthily rounded the row to slip into the empty seat next to her. It was Jack, who must have taken a seat behind her at some point while she was trying to manage her pain. Had he been watching over her shoulder this whole time? The thought made her distinctly self-conscious.

“Oh, hi,” she said with gritted teeth.

“How’s your pain?” he whispered. “Scale of 1-10.”

“Nine,” Donna said. “How’s yours?”

He chuckled a little and touched his forehead.

“I’m fine. Would you like me to help you walk out?”

“No, I’ll stay. Just 15 more minutes.” Donna realized she still hadn’t dropped the accent.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Don’t want you. To miss. Your wife.”

Donna tried to focus on taking slow, deep breaths.

Trynn was in the middle of a long-winded answer, basking in the audience attention. But whenever she wasn’t answering a question or injecting a comment, her eyes flicked over to them, sitting in the last couple of seats of the front row, nearest the exit at stage left.

There was no way Donna was getting out of this room without causing a huge scene.

“I’m leaning in,” Jack whispered, so she wouldn’t lurch toward him and bash him in the head again.

Donna nodded. He leaned toward her, his breath tickling her ear in a way that would be utterly delicious if he wasn’t married and she wasn’t about ready to scream in agony.

“Lift your ankle onto the top of my knee so you can keep it elevated until you can leave.”

Donna nodded again.

Jack scooted down in his seat, his knees extending far enough past the armrest that she could angle her foot onto the top of his thigh. It helped a little. She pushed her knee-length skirt between her legs to make sure she wasn’t flashing her underwear to the entirety of the panel.

With the stage lights on and the house lights down, she hadn’t gotten a great look at her ankle. But now she could see how purple it already was.

“Yikes,” she whispered.

He nodded in sympathy.

She hadn’t absorbed a word of the panel discussion, but the closing round of applause flooded her with relief. This was almost over.

Trynn and the other panelists were instantly swarmed by eager students hoping to land their own first roles in television and film, asking for autographs, peppering

them with questions. Donna was grateful for the lack of attention coming their way. If anyone had noticed her stumble, they'd forgotten about it by now. Luckily, she had a doctor on the case.

"Would you be okay if I feel your ankle?" Jack asked.

"Sure, I shaved today," she tried to joke through gritted teeth.

His cool fingers gently probed her leg above where the swelling started.

"No wedding ring," she didn't mean to say out loud. What was wrong with her? Did the pain in her ankle somehow turn off her internal filter?

"I never wear it on shift," he said as his fingers worked their way down the ankle bone.

"Sorry," he said at her sharp intake of breath, barely manipulating her foot to test range of motion. "I suspect it's not broken. But I'd suggest an x-ray to be sure. I assume there's a student health center?"

"Yeah," Donna said.

"Can I help you get there?"

"Let's see if I can stand up," she said.

She eased her throbbing foot back to the floor, and Jack stood up. He turned to face her and reached out both hands, which she gripped tightly as she rose up on her left leg. She half-smiled, half-grimaced into his eyes and carefully placed her foot on the ground.

“Here goes,” she said, putting the tiniest amount of weight on her foot, then pitching toward him. He caught her in his arms.

“Ow, ow, ow,” she said, tears springing to her eyes. “Sorry, guess not.”

“Is there someone you can call?” he asked.

“I’ll have my mom or dad, or maybe my grandpa come get me,” she said, feeling like a little girl. Why oh why couldn’t she have had a boyfriend to come to her rescue instead?

“Well let’s at least get you to the health center, and they can meet you there,” he said. “I have an idea.”

He helped her hop toward the stage, then turned her around so her back was against the waist-high edge. He put his hands on her hips, about to hoist her up.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Hang on,” she said. “Are you sure you can lift me?”

He scoffed.

She wasn’t insulting his strength, but her own heft. She probably outweighed petite Trynn by at least—well, she didn’t even want to think about how many pounds.

“Don’t lift with your back,” she warned, half-teasing, and he made an exaggerated show of using his legs. The next thing she knew, she was perched on the edge of the stage, her right foot sticking straight out in front of her. To her relief, it seemed effortless. She adjusted her short skirt once again.

With Trynn still surrounded by adoring fans, he stepped between Donna's legs and turned around. He gestured that she should climb onto his back.

"Oh no no no," Donna said. "You can't carry me to the health center. It's across campus!"

"Let's just get you outside, and we'll figure it out from there," he said. "Come on. I need to get back to work."

Not wanting to inconvenience him any further than she already had, she obeyed, wrapping her arms around his shoulders as he held her legs against his waist—her bare, thankfully shaved legs—and started walking toward the exit, her injured foot sticking straight out in front of her. If her skirt was flapping up behind her, she didn't care. Maybe the yellow happy faces dotting her underwear could spread a little joy to someone else, despite her own indignity.

She was aware she was breathing through her teeth right into Jack's ear but couldn't do much to help it.

"You've got this," he said in a soothing voice. "Just a little bit further."

She felt like she should be encouraging him instead. He was the one carrying the extra burden, after all. Why oh why couldn't she be built more like Audrey or Betty or Cat? Her humiliation was palpable, but it paled in comparison to the pain in her ankle.

A fellow student finally clued in to what was going in and rushed to open the door for them. Jack politely asked him to run and grab Donna's backpack and shoe, which he did without question. Donna blinked at the brightness outside. To her great luck, a landscaper with a golf cart was just across the sidewalk. Jack talked him into giving her a lift to the health center. Donna had no idea doctors could issue commands

everywhere they went, not just at the hospital.

“Thank you so much, Jack,” she said. “You’ll be an amazing doctor.”

He stared after her a little quizzically as the golf cart rolled smoothly away, but she wasn’t sure why. Was he puzzled that she knew his name? Even if he didn’t recognize her from the Guys and Dolls photo op, she thought he’d at least remember dancing with her at Cat’s wedding. And if he didn’t know who she was, why had he been so helpful and attentive? Was he obligated to because of the Hippocratic Oath or something? Even if he was, the piggy back ride definitely went above and beyond.

Perhaps she had offended him by saying “you’ll be an amazing doctor.” If residents were already considered real doctors, maybe she’d offended him by calling him “Jack” instead of “Dr. Gentry.”

If he was anything like his wife, he must care a lot about status and image and how he was perceived. The thing was, he didn’t seem to be very much like Trynn at all. She couldn’t exactly say why she thought that, though. She barely knew the man.

The x-ray didn’t show a fracture, but the campus doctor assured her she wasn’t being a wimp, because sprains are often more painful than breaks. After her ankle was wrapped up, she was given an ice pack and an instruction sheet and told it could be 4-6 weeks before she was back to normal. Her mom and dad arrived at the clinic together so one of them could shuttle her home and the other could retrieve Kermit from the parking lot.

By the time they pulled in to the driveway, Abba and Papa Walt had already set up their guest room for her, since climbing the stairs to her apartment was out of the question. And Elizabeth drove Ginger and Grace over in Bart, the yellow version of Kermit that was even older. They even stopped on the way to grab a pint of Donna’s favorite—raspberry sherbet. The girls fetched anything Donna wanted from her

bedroom and, at Julie's instruction, begrudgingly cleaned The Launchpad for her while she fielded texts from all of her big sisters. Audrey was especially relieved that Donna's foot was only sprained, since a broken foot had sent her home from Europe early when she was around Donna's age, separating her from the love of her life for 5 long years. Her foot still caused her problems now and then.

Most surprising to Donna was the sympathetic phone call she got from Lavinia, who'd experienced several foot injuries in her ballet days. Her part-time boss urged her not to cut corners on her recovery, as she'd done way too many times. She also offered a few additional blogging tasks to keep Donna busy while she was off her feet, which Donna was extra grateful for since she wouldn't be waitressing for the next few weeks at least.

Cat called from her new apartment in Boston, offering to fly home and baby her as long as she needed. She had carte blanche to fly home twice a month if she wanted to, but Donna convinced her that with Abba on the case, she really didn't need a thing. So when an unexpected business trip popped up for Liam, Cat sent six home-baked lemon-curd cupcakes with him on the plane instead. He dutifully carried them on his lap for the entirety of the flight and presented them to Donna with the pride of a man in love. He was in awe of everything his wife did, and Donna loved him for it. He hadn't quite edged out her other two brothers-in-law, but he was earning his own place in her heart.

Cat would have come with him, but she didn't want to reschedule on her first two violin students. And she'd gotten an interview with Lavinia's favorite caterer, who'd asked her to help with a Quinceañera that same weekend.

Liam still stayed with Abba and Papa Walt when he was in town on business, just as he'd done when they were engaged. But with Donna occupying the guest room, he slept in Cat's old room in the apartment instead. Both nights of his trip, he and Donna stayed up late chatting long after they had worn Abba and Papa Walt out. Donna

relished hearing how Cat was adjusting to a new city and a new social class. Donna was not shocked to hear that Cat had just joined a book club that hadn't admitted a new member for 20 years; she was the only one there under the age of 60. She'd always been a grandmother magnet.

Cat noted the joy that filled Liam's eyes every time he mentioned Cat's name. Sigh. When would she find someone who got that look whenever he thought of her? Or was that the kind of devotion that only someone as beautiful as Cat could inspire?

Before heading up to the apartment, Liam helped her to her room, giving her armpits a break from the crutches. As much as she hated being out of commission, gestures like these almost made up for it. The texts, the phone calls, the visits, the cupcakes, the shoulders to lean on. And best of all? Abba's cooking. Her tamales were a medicine of their own.

She counted her lucky stars that she wasn't in the middle of a play—and that she'd only have to hobble to school for a couple more weeks. The end of her junior year was approaching fast.

Danno stepped up to courier homework back and forth for her and help her to the classes she couldn't miss. She lamented, and not for the first time, that her feelings for him remained platonic. He really was a good guy.

A few days after the injury, she opened an email from Trynn with the subject line "Weird Question." It read:

Donna—

It was so fun to see you again! And I have to tell you that your invitation came at the perfect time. My agent wants to start charging appearance fees, since so many people mobbed me after the panel. I was getting hand cramps from all of the autographs!

Hazards of the job, right? Haha.

Anyway, can I ask you something super confidential. You remember my husband Jack, right? He came to my appearance. He's always so supportive. Anyway, it was hard to tell for sure with the stage lights and all those people around me, but I think I saw some girl hanging on him after the panel. She was wearing black and she had a bigger frame—not exactly fat, but not thin either. Kind of like Kate Winslet. It seemed like she was hugging him by the stage, and then she jumped on his back, right in front of everyone.

He's usually too nice to hurt anyone's feelings, and he has women throwing themselves at him all the time, especially when he's in his scrubs. But if you happen to know who it was, maybe you could say something to her, or make sure the faculty talks to students about how to behave appropriately around the spouses of honored guests. Otherwise, I'm not sure if I'll be able to come back again in the future.

Trynn

Donna could hardly believe her nerve.

Part of her suspected that Trynn was perfectly aware that Donna was the mystery girl, and she'd sent the email in order to both insult her and warn her off. Another part of her thought Trynn really could be that clueless and narcissistic. After all, Donna had removed her cardigan and beret before the piggyback ride, so it was theoretically possible that Trynn really didn't recognize her. Either way, Trynn was probably hoping the “incident” would be further publicized in the drama department, so everyone would know that the famous Trynn Gentry's husband was both A) irresistible and B) a doctor.

In the end, as much as she wished to defend Kate Winslet—and herself—against such baseless accusations as being being “not exactly fat,” she opted not to respond. In

Donna's eyes, Ms. Winslet was practically perfect in every way, and she couldn't believe Trynn would disparage her perfectly lovely figure. She decided to take the comparison as a compliment and leave it at that

Donna couldn't care less whether she remained in Trynn's good graces. Now that her star was on the rise, they weren't likely to run in the same circles anymore—a welcome development, as far as Donna was concerned.

Donna found she could accomplish quite a lot while reclining on her grandmother's couch with her foot resting on the arm, as long as she had her laptop and her smartphone handy.

She finished her classwork, having received one automatic A (against stiff competition) for delivering an accent that had the panelists wondering if she really was from Minnesota. She remixed and repurposed old blog content for Lavinia, since she wasn't up for in-person shopping or appearing in any photo shoots. And she planned her next three months of posts and searched her favorite designers' new collections online, requesting samples of everything that caught her eye.

Then she got Betty, Cat, and their mom on the phone to plan a baby shower for Audrey, who had 3 months to go. She spoke with Lavinia's assistant, Andie, to start working on a blog-worthy bridal shower, and she brainstormed with her mom about Elizabeth's upcoming high school graduation party. Elizabeth would be moving into The Launchpad with Donna for the summer, then leaving for Pomona College in the fall, where she'd won a full-ride scholarship.

The summer months passed by in a blur, and Donna's ankle grew stronger every day. By the time Audrey went into labor, during the 4th of July fireworks they were watching as a family from her beachside rooftop patio, Donna was able to literally jump up and down in excitement.

She slept at her parents' house that night, cuddled in bed with Elizabeth, so they could race to the hospital together the moment they heard from their mom. Julie and Brian planned to stay in the waiting room all night, just in case they were needed. But after an hour or two of contractions, Audrey decided she wanted her mom by her side as well. Brian ducked in and out for updates, depending on the level of exposure in the delivery room. He was conscious of giving Audrey her privacy, but his presence was calming for Ty, since he'd been through this four times before.

Ginger was the first one awake, so she woke up Grace, who woke up Elizabeth and Donna, and they were on their way to the hospital by 6:30 a.m. Betty had already been there for an hour.

Hudson Joseph Westerbrook made his debut at 8:13 a.m. on July 5—a tiny thing with what looked like a black toupee, bearing the name of Audrey's late father as his middle name. Donna knew Abba and Papa Walt would be so pleased. When the sisters were finally admitted to the private suite, Ty was perched next to Audrey in the hospital bed, his hair more disheveled than Audrey's, gazing down at his swaddled son with quiet amazement and pure awe. He was very nearly dumbfounded.

"You've continued with the alphabet!" Elizabeth said. "After G negativity simply wasn't in her nature. And she would never marry someone like that either."

If she couldn't have what Audrey, or Betty, or Cat had—or even her parents, who were still madly in love after 26 years—then she'd rather be on her own.

She'd heard it said that the four tiers of contentment in life are, in order: happily partnered, happily single, unhappily single, unhappily partnered. She was already in the second most desirable quadrant, most of the time at least. And she intended to stay there, until the right person came along to upgrade her to quadrant number one.

CHAPTER SIX

JUNE 2010

By the time Donna graduated from college the next summer, she had won starring roles in two university productions. She perfected her British accent to portray the shallow society lady Gwendolen Fairfax in *The Importance of Being Ernest*. She played opposite Ansel Fishbein, who played dashing Jack Worthing and had the perfect head of hair for it. But her attempt to turn her on-stage love interest into an off-stage love interest sputtered out without incident after a few short weeks. Donna at least counted herself lucky to have had him around when she rang in her 22nd birthday in February.

Then she exercised her comedic skills playing murderous aunt Abby Brewster in *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Her post-production fling with her character's nephew lasted for a month and a half—a new personal record. Long enough, at least, for Tony (aka Mortimer Brewster) to accompany her to Lavinia's elaborate June wedding in Boston.

Donna had never been to a wedding where it was more obvious who came from the bride's side and who came from the groom's. Both eyed the other half with barely disguised suspicion. The one exception was the Gable family, who eyed no one with suspicion. They were technically there to support the bride but fit in better with the middle-class Woods clan. Brian and Mason in particular had hit it off when he'd visited California with Lavinia. So Brian happily accepted Ty's offer to fly them all to Boston on his private jet for his sister's big day.

For 16 long months, Donna had a front-row seat to Lavinia's painstaking wedding planning, which was covered wall-to-wall on the blog: "10 Top Trends for Bridesmaid Dresses," "Seating Chart Dos and Don'ts," "What to do When Your Groom Just Doesn't Care About Table Settings," and her personal favorite, "Clash of the Families: Bridging the Gap Between His Side and Her Side."

Despite the vast cultural gulf between the Westerbrooks and the Woodses, the ceremony went off without a hitch. Mason's parents couldn't have been warmer or more welcoming, and Lavinia's dad crossed the aisle with enthusiasm. It didn't take him long to join Team Mason, even if Lavinia's mom retained her reservations. She largely kept her disapproval to herself at least, which was a victory of its own.

Baby Hudson very nearly upstaged the bride, however, as both the Gables and the Westerbrooks competed for time with the 11-month-old, which amused Ty and exasperated Audrey.

The one exception was Paris Frownfelter-Frost Westbrook, Bradford's wife, who couldn't hide her displeasure when Hudson sneezed some applesauce on the Dior gown she had worn to the rehearsal dinner. She wondered aloud where the nanny was, although she knew perfectly well that there wasn't one.

From then on, anytime Hudson had a full diaper, Ty would seek out Paris, say "Here, hold this for a second," hand over the baby, and dart away. At first, Paris would smile slightly at her bewildered nephew. But once the smell reached her nose, she'd glare murderously at Ty. This only worked a couple of times before Paris started refusing delivery, and Audrey intervened with an elbow to Ty's ribs.

Donna's favorite part of all was seeing Mason's little brother, Dale, who had Downs Syndrome, proudly act the part as the best man. He took his responsibilities incredibly seriously, frequently patting the breast pocket of his suit jacket to be sure Lavinia's ring was still there. He looked dashing in his fitted tux, standing proudly

next to Lavinia's much taller brothers, Ty and Bradford, plus a couple of Mason's friends.

During the ceremony, Dale winked prodigiously at his girlfriend, Sabrina, who beamed next to her fellow bridesmaids: Lavinia's sisters-in-law Audrey and Paris, her co-workers Andie and Donna, a cousin, and a couple of college friends.

If Donna were to write a memoir of this time in her life, she could call it "Always a Bridesmaid," or maybe "Four Weddings and a Funeral"—the four weddings being Audrey's, Betty's, Cat's, and Lavinia's, and the funeral being poor old Frank Sinatra's.

Back at home, Donna felt disoriented, like she'd just stepped off a rapidly spinning carnival ride. With her part-time boss off on a 2-week honeymoon and her college days now behind her, the endless succession of events she'd been anticipating for months had ground to a sudden halt. Donna found herself staring into the void of her future life.

She had yet to decide exactly what she wanted to do with her degree, and she was acutely aware that having a free place to live and the continued use of her parents' car gave her the luxury of taking time to decide. She wasn't aiming for a career in the cutthroat world of television or movies. She didn't care about seeing her face on the front of the TV Guide, as Trynn Gentry's was this past week. She wasn't sure she wanted to teach high school theater, and she'd have to complete a teaching certificate if she did. Would she just continue to work as a waitress and audition for roles in community theater? Did she want to try out for a traveling production or a regional theater? Get a full-time job in some other aspect of theater production?

Donna had now been waitressing on and off at her grandparents' cafe for more than 6 years. And Grace had started too, now that she was 16. Donna was charmed by Grace's enthusiasm to finally be donning the uniform worn by all of her sisters, and

her mother before her. But it also highlighted the fact that the job had completely lost its luster for Donna. (Ginger, meanwhile, wouldn't be caught dead in a poodle skirt, so she was working as a kids' soccer referee for the county parks and rec department.)

Her personal life was limping along, just as it always had. She loved dating, flirting, kissing, whether it was Nick, Danno, Mychal, Ansel, or Tony. She'd liked a lot of guys. A lot of guys had liked her. But no one yet had swept her off her feet—and piggy back rides from married doctors did not count.

She still lived alone above Abuela's garage, but at least Elizabeth had moved back in for the summer, home from her first year at Pomona, which she was absolutely loving. They stayed up late watching Law & Order reruns together after their shifts at Burgerito's, chowing down on microwave popcorn and cinnamon bears.

One night, during a particularly grisly episode, Donna sat up and gasped. She recognized one of the murder victims! It was Moira, who had played Sarah Brown in Guys & Dolls . The girl clearly had range—from an uptight and idealistic saver of souls dancing across the stage to a drug-addicted prostitute, dead in a dumpster. Donna found herself wishing she was the one lying on a gurney in a morgue, covered in latex wounds.

That's how she knew she was itching for a change.

So it was that the text from Nick, aka Nathan Detroit, came at the perfect moment. He'd gotten a job managing a new themed cafe and he was looking for talent.

The aptly named In Character Cafe was an extension of the In Character Costume Co., which Donna had frequented for years. It was the best rental company in the area, servicing high school, college, and community theaters. Donna and her high school friends found their Halloween costumes there every year. They'd dressed up

as the cast of *Clue* one year and as zombie brides another. But her favorite was when they all dressed up as different Julia Roberts characters. Donna was the buxom Erin Brockovich, while her friends were Vivian from *Pretty Woman*, a runaway bride in a wedding dress and tennis shoes, Shelby from *Steel Magnolias*, and the redheaded Tinkerbell from *Hook*. They won the group costume award at their senior year Halloween dance.

When the coffee shop next door closed, the costume shop owners bought it and turned it into a cafe that leaned hard into the actor/waiter trope. The waitstaff was limited to experienced actors only, who had to audition as well as interview. They would wait on patrons while dressed as the character of their choice from stage or screen—a new character each week, with custom name tags.

The staff could select from almost anything in the warehouse, dropping the costumes off at the end of each shift to the adjacent dry-cleaning business, which was also under the same management.

Nick said tips had been fantastic for the staff thus far. And they only served breakfast and lunch, so Donna would always have her evenings free.

Donna figured this sounded like a fun way to pass the time while she decided what to do next. So she auditioned, and she got the role. She decided she could even parlay some of her costumes into content for her column on Lavinia's blog, at the very least putting together a round-up of costume ideas every Halloween. She made sure to have a co-worker photograph her at the beginning of every shift, before the inevitable tomato-soup splatters or soda spills.

Her first week, Donna waited tables as Elle Woods from *Legally Blonde*. She spent the week acting wide-eyed and sweet, using her best Valley Girl accent. She alternated her costume each day between sorority-sister Elle, with a pink party dress and heels, and nerdy lawyer Elle, with a green cardigan over a white button-up shirt

and tie, with fake glasses perched on her head.

It turned out Nick wasn't exaggerating about the tips. Her first week, she easily earned double what she'd ever made at Burgerito's. This could be in part because she had a steady parade of family members come in and request a table in her section. Her mom and the twins were, in fact, her very first customers of her very first shift. Betty and Gavin stopped by that same afternoon for coffee and scones. Audrey and Ty brought Hudson in for breakfast the next day, and Brian popped in just as they were leaving. While Donna kissed Hudson all over his chubby little face to say goodbye, Ty slipped an embarrassingly large tip into Donna's apron that she didn't discover until the end of her shift.

By her second week, when Donna was waiting on tables as Mary Poppins, Abba and Papa Walt came in for breakfast twice, and Grandma Caro dragged in Grandpa Shane for lunch as well. Donna was proud of herself for working the phrase "a spoonful of sugar" into twelve different conversations that day, but she still lost a bet with a co-worker dressed as the Terminator, who managed to say "I'll be back" in 18 different customer interactions. Elizabeth, who came in every day she wasn't working to sit in her favorite booth and read, acted as the scorekeeper. When she failed to cheat in Donna's favor, Donna considered cutting off her endless beverage refills.

During her third week at In Character Cafe, Donna approached the corner table carrying menus under her arm and two glasses of ice water. She wore a black button-up blouse with the collar turned up and a tight black pencil skirt, with a wide elastic belt that emphasized her curves. A pink jacket with the sleeves pushed up and a slim red neckerchief completed the look. Her nametag said "Rizzo." She'd even added a hickey to her neck with makeup, which was easily visible thanks to the short brown wig. Donna was no stranger to wigs, but this one was itchier than most.

Donna set the glasses down in front of two men. The one facing her wore blue scrubs and had buzzed hair to hide his baldness. The other, who sat in profile, was looking

down at his phone in a baseball cap and t-shirt. She dropped the menus on the table and cocked one hip.

“You boys want something’ to drink while you look over the menu?” she asked while chomping her gum, blowing a giant bubble for effect. Chewing gum at her grandparents’ cafe had always been off-limits, so this felt oddly rebellious.

The man in the scrubs scanned Donna from head to toe before his eyes traveled back to her face.

“Lookin’ good, Rizz,” he said, delivering a line from Grease.

“Eat your heart out,” she said automatically with a characteristic smirk.

“I’ll have a double espresso,” he said. “And the good doctor here will have a...”

“Water’s fine for me, thanks,” said the man in the baseball cap, glancing up at Donna with a polite smile in his clear blue eyes.

Donna’s eyes widened in recognition for a second, but she quickly masked her surprise. Jack Gentry. Here in her cafe. And why not? There was a hospital just a couple of blocks away—the same hospital where she’d stood in line behind him while he was buying an egg-salad sandwich the day Hudson was born.

“So you’re both doctors, huh?” Donna said, in the unimpressed tone that Rizzo would use.

“I’m a surgeon,” said the bald doctor with a broad smile, clearly expecting Donna to care about the distinction. He was acting awfully flirtatious for a man wearing a wedding ring.

“That must impress the ladies,” Donna said, cracking her gum.

“Depends on the lady,” the bald doctor said. “Are you impressed?”

“Oh, very,” Donna said, with a bored Rizzo smile. She mentally assigned him a nickname: Dr. Balding.

“She has dimples,” Dr. Balding observed. “Dr. Gentry here is really into dimples.”

“Oh, is he?” Donna didn’t break character, keeping her eyes half closed to signal her disinterest in the whole conversation.

Jack glanced up and took in her face with a quizzical expression. Did he not recognize her again? If all it took was a wig to throw him off, he couldn’t be that smart. She’d been in his presence a half-dozen times. She’d danced with the man at his sister’s wedding!

She scratched her scalp with the end of her pen.

“I don’t remember telling you that,” Jack said to his friend.

“When you treated that one actress. The Hollywood blonde with the dimples?”

“HIPAA,” Jack coughed from behind his hand, signaling to Dr. Balding to be quiet.

“Do you mean Kirsten Dunst? Cameron Diaz?” Donna asked a little too eagerly, then reminded herself that Rizzo would be cool and unimpressed.

“I’m sorry about my colleague, he really shouldn’t have said anything,” Jack said, casting a sideways glance at Dr. Balding. “Patient privacy.”

Donna pantomimed locking her lips and tossing away the key, pleased that she'd probably guessed right. She turned to grab the espresso and heard Dr. Balding still talking behind her.

"Oh, I forgot. You don't do actresses," he was saying, possibly unaware of how well his voice carried. "But she's probably not a real actress, if she works here."

Donna was thoroughly grossed out. Jack doesn't "do" actresses? What would his wife say if heard that kind of talk? She was half tempted to spill the espresso in Dr. Balding's lap. Or Jack's lap. Possibly both. And what gave him the expertise to decide who was a "real" actress and who wasn't?

At least as Rizzo, she didn't have to pretend to be pleasant.

She set the cup and saucer in front of Dr. Balding, then pulled her notepad from her jacket pocket and held her pen suspended above it.

"You ready?" she asked, popping her gum.

"Nice mechanical purpura you got there," Dr. Balding said.

"Say what?" Donna asked.

Dr. Balding just smiled mysteriously.

"That's the medical term for a hickey," Jack said, with a head nod toward her neck.

"Or an ecchymosis, erythema, or hematoma, if you like," Dr. Balding said.

"I do like," Donna said, tilting her head suggestively. "But this one is courtesy of Graftobian."

Dr. Balding looked confused.

“Look it up, genius,” Donna said, going full Rizzo. “I’ll give you boys another minute.”

Donna spun sassily away to check on her other tables, almost colliding with Lady Macbeth, who was carrying a BLT and a French dip to table seven, looking tormented and tragic. Donna had talked her out of staining her hands crimson, as it had the potential to gross out the customers, so she settled for painting her fingernails a vicious blood red instead.

When Donna returned, Dr. Balding held up his phone, search results visible on the screen.

“Graftobian,” he announced proudly. “A brand of stage makeup. So you did that yourself?”

“Who else?” Donna asked. “I find The Severe Trauma Makeup Wheel works much better than the Zombie Flesh palette, which I tried first.”

“I like her attitude,” Dr. Balding said to Jack, standing up.

“I like your attitude,” he repeated to Donna. “Mind if I get a closer look?”

Donna shrugged.

Dr. Balding leaned in and gently tilted Donna’s chin. Why do doctors always have cold hands?

“Well done,” he said, stepping aside. “Would have convinced me. Even this close up. You should see this, Doc.”

Trying to be helpful, Donna bent toward Jack and turned her neck to the side, belatedly remembering how tight and low-cut her blouse was, an effect that would be greatly emphasized from this angle.

She quickly lifted a hand to her chest, presumably to pull her scarf out of the way, so Jack could see the fake hickey better. But really she was trying to block his view of her substantial cleavage—a move that would be completely out of character for Rizzo. But Donna wasn't that committed to the part.

She saw some color creep into Jack's cheeks. Weren't doctors supposed to be unaffected by the human body? Hadn't they seen absolutely everything?

Jack cleared his throat.

"Yes, very convincing," he said.

"If I didn't know you were acting a part," Dr. Balding said, sliding back into the booth. "I'd tell you to get rid of that boyfriend."

"All because of a little old hickey?" Donna scoffed.

"The bruise on your wrist would be the bigger concern," Jack said.

"Also thanks to our old friend Graftobian," Donna said, holding it out for inspection. She'd practiced her technique on her wrist first and had forgotten to wash it off.

"So, do you have a boyfriend then?" asked Dr. Balding.

"What's it to ya?" Donna asked, channeling Rizzo.

"Oh, nothing," he said, glancing at Jack meaningfully before looking down at the

menu.

Ugh. What was with these two? Weren't they both clearly married? She knew Jack never wore his wedding ring on shift. But Dr. Balding wasn't even trying to hide his.

"So are you fellas gonna order or what?" Donna/Rizzo asked. "I don't got all day, you know."

After Donna dropped the men's order off to the kitchen, Elizabeth flagged her down and started quietly interrogating her about the scene she'd just witnessed. Nothing escaped that girl's attention.

"I'll tell you later," Donna said through an overly bright smile, almost without moving her lips. "Ugh, this wig is driving me nuts."

"Why didn't you just dress up as Sandy, dummy?" Elizabeth asked.

"The costume department was fresh out of black sharkskin hot pants," Donna joked. "By the way, did you know Olivia Newton-John had to be sewn into those each morning of filming?"

"Why do you know these things?"

"For the same reason you know the name of every obscure Jane Austen character."

"Oh, because we're both insane?"

"Exactly. Hey, why don't you make yourself useful while you're just sitting there and make me a list of all the blonde characters you can think of, so I can wear my real hair to work sometimes."

“You got it,” Elizabeth said, starting a list on a spare napkin. “Starting with Marilyn Monroe.”

“That’s not a character.”

“Pick a character played by Marilyn Monroe then. You could also be Galinda from Wicked. ”

“The dress might be too big. Add Alice in Wonderland. In fact, add all of the WonderLand princesses.”

“Oh! Cindy Lou Who. ”

“That would be a fun one. Galadriel from Lord of the Rings ?”

“Too unbelievable,” Elizabeth shook her head. “Are there any lady dwarves?”

“You suck,” Donna laughed.

“Or, you could be Samwise Gamgee’s girlfriend!”

“Guess I’d rather be a hobbit than a dwarf. Her name is Rosie Cotton, by the way.”

“I know that, but I didn’t think you did.”

“I’ve seen all the movies,” Donna said, mock defensively.

“They’re not as good as the books.”

“So you always say.”

The next time Donna stopped by Elizabeth's table, she was gone, but she'd left her list behind. To Donna's amusement, she'd written a few more names on the napkin in her surprisingly perky handwriting:

Regina George

Sarah Sanderson

Rainbow Brite

Galadriel (I was kidding! You'd be a beautiful elf queen)

Dolly Parton (any role)

She pocketed the note with a smile, glancing up to see Jack's eyes on her again before he quickly looked away.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE NEXT WEEK, Jack was back. But he was by himself. Hostess Wednesday Addams seated him in Indiana Jones's section, and Donna noticed his eyes flitting in her direction throughout her shift.

She was dressed as a blonde Princess Leia, her real blonde hair wound into cinnamon-roll buns around her ears. She had to stop by her mom's house to have Grace help her, since Elizabeth was hopeless at braiding. More than one male customer lamented her choice of the modest white tunic Donna chose over the sexy Jabba the Hut slave costume. In response, Donna called a couple of them "half-witted nerf-herders." After all, Princess Leia was known for speaking her mind. Elizabeth, who was back in her favorite booth for the day, found it all highly entertaining.

Jack left without saying anything to her. And why did she think he would? The man was probably just stopping in on his way to or from the hospital.

The week after that, he returned again. This time, he requested to sit in her section, according to hostess little orphan Annie.

"He asked me not to tell you," Annie said, with wide, intrigued eyes. "But of course I'm going to tell you. Do you know him?"

"A little," Donna said, shrugging it off outwardly. But she felt a little zing in her heart anyway, which was ridiculous. Because, married man. Had he realized who she was after all? Or had she done such a stellar job serving him as Rizzo that he just had to come back? She wasn't entirely sure.

Donna had assumed the role of Daphne from Scooby Doo for the week, while her co-workers waited tables as Maria Von Trapp, Captain Jack Sparrow, and the Cowardly Lion.

Business was booming.

As Daphne, Donna needed to be upbeat, confident, and feminine. But her stomach did a couple of flip-flops as she approached Jack's table in her purple mini-dress. He was alone again.

"Jeepers, it's you again," Donna said brightly, handing him a menu. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Hi," Jack said, looking a bit hesitant—maybe even shy? He glanced down at her name tag. "What would you recommend, uh, Daphne?"

"It depends. Do you want something hot or cold? Do you need a pick-me-up or something to calm you down?"

He stared at the menu, considering.

Too long. Much too long.

Donna couldn't stand an awkward silence, so she jumped in.

"If I was just getting off work, I might want the chamomile tea. If I was about to go in, maybe an espresso or a latte?"

"You would, or Daphne would?" he asked, his blue eyes holding her gaze like a tractor beam. She was feeling uncharacteristically flustered.

“Both,” Donna said. “So, which is it? Are you on your way to work or just getting off?”

“Just getting off,” Jack said.

“Where are your scrubs?”

“We’re discouraged from wearing them outside of the hospital.”

“Why?” Donna asked.

“Germs,” Jack said.

“So why was Dr. Balding—er, your friend wearing his the other day?” Donna stammered, embarrassed at her slip of the tongue.

Jack chuckled, clearly amused by the nickname.

“Surgeons. They think they’re above the rules sometimes,” he said. “And I think he likes to be fawned over.”

“And you don’t?” Donna asked.

“Depends on who’s doing the fawning,” Jack said and flashed a devastating smile.

Zoinks! Why, oh why, did he have to be married?

“What if it’s a certain actress?” Donna asked, referring to Trynn but suddenly realizing he might think she was referencing herself. She felt her cheeks heat up.

“Still depends,” he said with an air of mystery.

“What about Trynn Gentry, for example?” she asked, in an innocent Daphne voice, wide-eyed and sincere.

A dark look flashed over his face.

He stiffened slightly and looked back down at the menu.

Aha, busted! Donna thought. Hitting on waitresses as a married man.

Now it was clear that he didn't remember her from their past meetings. He would never try such a thing if he knew Donna knew his wife.

“What about her?” he asked finally, without looking up.

“So, you really don't remember me?” Donna asked him, still in her smooth, lilting Daphne voice.

He looked up and studied her face again, beneath her orange-red wig.

She decided to mess with him.

“That kiss,” Donna said, putting on a wistful tone. “It was electric. For me, at least.”

Confusion crawled across his brow.

“I've been trying to figure out how I know you,” he said. “You look so familiar. Have I seen you in something?”

“Yep,” she said.

“And you remember me somehow? From the audience?”

“You stood out.”

“Am I supposed to be flattered by that?”

“Nope,” Donna said in her sweet Daphne voice.

He gave her a helpless look.

“Our performance must have been riveting,” she explained. “We could barely keep you awake.”

“Unfortunately, that doesn’t narrow it down much,” he attempted to joke.

Donna narrowed her eyes. Why was he even bothering to come to the In Character Cafe if he had so little regard for the dramatic arts?

“I’m guessing you were in something with Trynn?” he asked.

“Bingo,” she said.

“I’m not always the best with faces,” he said. “You must know her pretty well then?”

She gave him a wry smile.

He seemed to slump a little in his seat.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to pull off a latex mask and reveal my secret identity,” Donna said, more gently. “But you and I do go way back, you know.”

“And you’re not going to help me out at all?”

“Nope.”

“Okay,” he said, defeated. “I think I’ll have the Cobb salad. Dressing on the side. And a chamomile tea.”

The awkwardness didn’t dissipate at all during the rest of their encounter. But Donna masked it well by leaning into her character.

When he finally left, she found a \$50 cash tip and a note scrawled on the receipt, in characteristic barely legible doctor’s handwriting.

Daphne—

Good luck with those meddling kids.

—Jack Gentry

Jack didn’t come back after that.

Which was fine with Donna given that A) he was married, B) to one of her least favorite people, and C) he didn’t “do” actresses anyway.

But she couldn’t deny that he was by far the most attractive of all the married men who had hit on her at the In Character Cafe. A tan line or an indentation on the left ring finger was always a dead giveaway. And depending on the character Donna was playing at the time, she could turn him down with vicious sarcasm, or coy humor, or innocent evasion. She’d often subtly played a part while waiting tables in the past, but how she had license to go all out.

By now, Elizabeth had returned to Pomona for her junior year. Donna continued working full-time at the cafe through the fall, her itch to perform satisfied by her

weekly rotation of characters. So she wasn't auditioning for anything at the moment. She spent her evenings casually dating, fighting for a slot in the Hudson babysitting schedule, or watching classic movies with her parents and the twins—when the 16-year-olds could be persuaded to stay home for more than an hour. But the new backyard pool, a 25th anniversary gift from all the kids (mostly Audrey and Ty) to their parents, was the biggest attraction.

Donna had been instrumental in pulling off the feat, which took over a year to plan and have installed. Brian and Julie were far too stubborn to allow their kids to give them such a generous gift, but the girls all agreed that after birthing and raising seven daughters and suffering through more than three decades of manual labor, their aching joints deserved some soothing weightlessness. So Ty simply hired a pool contractor and started paying him a monthly retainer. The sooner Brian and Julie decided what they wanted and green-lit the construction, the less it would cost Audrey and Ty in the long run. If Brian and Julie refused the gift, the pool contractor would continue to be paid indefinitely, but for nothing.

So they relented, and at the final unveiling party, each of the girls contributed whatever she could afford to the group gift, from pool noodles and pool floats to deck chairs and towels. Betty's husband Gavin contributed architectural plans, Cat made gourmet donuts in the shape of life preservers, and Donna managed to secure donated designer swimwear for every member of the family through her blogging connections, as long as everyone would consent to be featured on the blog. Even Ingrid Bergman, Frank Sinatra's replacement, got a doggie swim vest with a shark fin on the back.

Ingrid Bergman.

Donna was the only one who looked at Ingrid's sudden addition to her parents' household as a betrayal. For Donna, it was too soon to be expected to get attached to another dog. But Ginger, Grace, and Elizabeth were another story. They had no

memories of life without a canine companion underfoot. The house felt unbearably empty, and Brian would do anything to ease his daughters' despair. So one day he came home from work carrying a salt-and-pepper Australian Shepherd puppy with one blue eye and one brown eye and a giant red bow around its belly.

All of the Gables were instantly smitten. Except Donna, who kept an iron fence around her heart—at least until the puppy stopped chewing on her Jimmy Choos.

Over time, as Ingrid would slink up and lay her nose on Donna's foot during a Doris Day movie marathon, looking up at her with those soulful eyes and expressive eyebrows, Donna would let little pieces of the fence fall away, one by one. Then one Friday afternoon, she woke up curled on her side on her parents' couch, just in time to catch the last 10 minutes Pillow Talk. She found sweet little Ingrid snuggled in the crook of her legs, snoozing. And with that, she was officially won over.

Ginger, noticing Donna's softened attitude toward the dog, gave her a satisfied smile from the other end of the couch.

"I knew she'd grow on you," Ginger said.

"Hpmfh," Donna said, but she reached over to scratch Ingrid behind the ears. The dog leaned heavily into her hand as if to say, "more of that, please."

"How far do you think we'll be able to carry this alphabet thing?" Donna asked. "Audrey had to go and name her child with a 'H,' and the new dog is an 'I.' So I guess the next grandchild has to be a 'J.'"

"But Hudson isn't a classic Hollywood name," Ginger said. "So at least that pattern is broken."

"Wait, didn't you know that Hudson was named after Rock Hudson?"

“Who’s that?”

“That guy,” Donna said, pointing at the screen where the classically handsome actor was verbally sparring with Doris Day.

“My bad,” said Ginger. “I guess the insanity continues. I wonder what letter we’ll get to by the time I have kids. I better not get stuck with Q.”

“It has to peter out eventually,” said Donna. “I mean, surely not every husband will go along with this madness.”

“It’s so cute that Ty did,” Ginger said. “And I love Hudson. The name, I mean. But also the baby.”

“It’s perfect. He’s perfect,” Donna agreed. “And Audrey will probably be grateful to be able to skip ‘I.’ Is there any other choice besides Ingrid?”

“We couldn’t think of any,” Ginger said. “Plus, she looks like an Ingrid, don’t you baby girl?”

Ingrid lifted her head at the sound of her name and wandered across the couch to plop down next to Ginger, expecting a belly rub.

“There are lots of good ‘J’ names,” Donna said, looking at search results she pulled up on her phone. “James Dean, Jayne Mansfield, Jimmy Stewart, Jean Harlow, Judy Garland...”

“Please not Judy,” Ginger laughed. “I can’t imagine calling a baby Judy.”

“Jack Lemon! I’ve always loved the name Jack,” Donna said, thinking briefly of a certain big-tipping doctor whose eyes had followed her around the cafe. “Or Joan

Crawford...”

“Ugh, no, not Joan either.”

Donna hoped someone broke the pattern before she started having kids, because she didn’t want to be the one to do it, and she’d love a little boy named Jack. But they’d be well past the middle of the alphabet by the time Donna started adding to the gene pool.

“Aren’t you glad Mom didn’t name you after Doris Day?” Ginger asked, nodding at the spunky blonde actress on the screen, who was being carried through the streets of New York in her pajamas.

“Oh my gosh, yes,” Donna said. “Remind me to thank mom the next time I see her.”

“You’re welcome!” Julie called in from the kitchen.

As much as she enjoyed Pillow Talk and Move Over, Darling . Donna couldn’t imagine going through life in the 21 st century saddled with a name like Doris, and not just because of the Seinfeld joke about names that rhyme with female anatomy. “Donna” was old-fashioned enough. Most of the other Donnas she’d met were a decade or two older than she was. The only other Donna in her high school was a math teacher.

Donna sat up and stretched. She found she was always tired on Friday nights lately. Ginger made fun of her for being an old lady. And Donna couldn’t disagree. She’d reached the age where she adored a good nap after a busy shift—especially an accidental nap on her parents’ especially comfy sofa.

Grace came skipping down the stairs with her purse and keys.

“Hey, where are you going?” Ginger demanded, which just made Grace race faster for the door. Ginger leapt from the couch to chase her down.

Lately, they were always fighting over who got to drive Bart for the night. Despite being twins, or perhaps because of it, their friend groups didn’t overlap in the least. You’d rarely see them together on a Friday or Saturday night.

Ginger came back in, looking dejected.

“Need a ride somewhere?” Donna asked.

“Could you take me? A bunch of us were going to meet at the Circle tonight, and I’ve had to bum a ride with Riggs like five times.” It was Ginger’s habit to refer to her friends, most of whom were also athletes, by their last names.

“Of course,” Donna said, rising to get her keys with the belated realization that it was high time she got her own car, rather than continuing to take advantage of her parents’ generosity. There were now four young-adult drivers and only two cars.

Elizabeth’s campus was very walkable and only an hour from home, and she wasn’t allowed to have a car on campus during her first year anyway, so Donna felt fine keeping Kermit all of last year. But Elizabeth was now in her second year. And even though Donna happily drove to pick her up anytime she wanted to come home—and didn’t feel like bringing her laundry home on public transit—Elizabeth probably deserved her time with Kermit.

That wouldn’t solve the twins’ problem, of course, but everyone else had been forced to share vehicles when they were 16, and Ginger and Grace could too.

Donna was just returning from dropping Ginger off when Audrey and Ty’s orange Jeep pulled into the driveway.

“Hudsy!” Donna squealed and ran to collect the 15-month-old from his carseat. “How’s my favorite boy in the whole world?”

“No hot date tonight Donna?” Ty teased.

“Just Hudson, I hope,” she said.

“You’ll have to fight Grace for him,” Audrey said. “She’s babysitting while we go to a movie.”

“Er, Grace already left.”

“How did she already forget? I reminded her this morning,” Audrey sighed.

“That’s Grace for ya,” Donna said, hugging her nephew, who immediately melted into her neck and made Donna’s day. “But no biggie. Auntie Donna is here! I’ll take him.”

“Are you sure?” Ty asked. “He’s into everything now.”

“Don’t let this fool you,” Audrey said, reaching over to rub her son’s back. “He just woke up from a nap. Beast mode comes later.”

“Totally sure. Plus, Mom’s here.”

“Mom and Dad are going out with the Robertses,” Audrey said.

Donna suddenly felt like a loser. Everyone was off enjoying their exciting and full lives, except for her. But hey, being a loser had its benefits. Like getting unexpected solo time with her nephew.

“I got it. I promise,” Donna said, reaching into the back seat for the diaper bag. “Ooh, Prada!”

“Yeah, it was a gift from Lavinia,” Audrey said. “Betty thinks I should sell it and provide meals for 2,000 homeless people.”

“Eh, Lavinia probably got it for free,” Donna shrugged. “And isn’t Betty doing enough good with the foundation?”

“She is,” Ty said. “But you know Betty. There’s always more to be done.”

Audrey walked Donna into the house, giving extremely detailed instructions about Hudson’s dinner, snacks, the dangers of electrical outlets and stairs, and which creams to use in what order to help with his diaper rash. Donna didn’t interrupt, knowing Audrey had to go through this list more to ease her own anxiety than to prepare Donna.

Sure, Donna felt completely out of her element when he was tiny, but she wasn’t scared of him anymore. She’d found she was actually pretty good at entertaining the little tyke. Nobody besides Ty could make Hudson giggle like Auntie Donna could.

Rather than moving the carseat, with its complicated latching system that could not be installed without copious amounts of sweat and swear words, Ty suggested they trade cars for the evening.

“Don’t worry about it,” Donna said, addressing her comments to Hudson in baby talk. “We’re not going anywhere, are we Bubba? We’re gonna stay right here.”

“It’s just in case of an emergency,” Audrey said.

“We’re not gonna have an emergency, are we Big Boy?” Donna asked Hudson, and

he responded by yanking a handful of her hair.

“Ow!” Donna said, disentangling his fist from her loose waves.

“I know,” Audrey said. “But just in case.”

“Fine, fine,” Donna said, exchanging keys with Ty. “But don’t roll down the passenger window. It gets stuck. And you have to lock all the doors manually, because the automatic lock is broken. Oh, and you can’t adjust the driver’s seat.”

“Why didn’t you just let me get you a new car for your graduation?” Ty complained, then snapped his fingers. “Or...we could go get you one right now!”

“Stop it,” Donna said. “You don’t have to be everyone’s knight in shining armor. You’ve already taken Audrey off our hands.”

Audrey swatted at her sister. Donna held Hudson up in front of her as a shield. Audrey gave her a “how dare you use my child against me” look.

“Once again, you underestimate the Gable pride,” Audrey told Ty. “Anyway, I’ll drive. You’ll never fit behind the wheel if the seat won’t scoot back. It’ll be fun! Like old times.”

“If the driver’s seat won’t scoot back, it won’t be like old times,” Ty said suggestively.

“Didn’t need that mental image,” Donna said, as Audrey blushed.

Donna still marveled at how down-to-earth her brother-in-law was. He could order a chauffeured car—or a private helicopter—to come pick them up right now. He could have an extra safety seat delivered for Kermit, like the one they’d given Julie and

Brian for their mini-van. But he was willing to ride shotgun in an ancient hatchback to a regular movie theater and sit alongside regular people, when he could easily reserve every seat without blinking an eye, or get himself invited to a star-studded premiere.

While she loved these things about Ty, she also did not understand them. Donna had an eye for luxury but a middle-class budget, where Ty seemed to be the exact opposite. The man drove a 5-year-old Jeep for heaven's sake. He could afford to buy a new car every month, possibly even every day.

Of course, Donna and Hudson did have an emergency, just 45 minutes after Audrey and Ty left. Their phones went straight to voicemail, so they'd probably turned them off during the movie. Her parents weren't answering their phones either, because they were parents of a certain generation. And parents of a certain generation were not used to being chained to their technology. They'd probably left their phones in the car. Or maybe Brian's was dead and Julie's was vibrating helplessly from the bottom of her purse, under the table at a crowded restaurant. She didn't have the Robertses number, and she didn't know what restaurant her parents had gone to, nor which movie theater Audrey and Ty had chosen.

She didn't want to bother any of the grandparents. Or alarm them. And the emergency wasn't life-threatening, thank goodness. It was just an eyeball. Stuck up Hudson's left nostril.

Hudson wasn't even crying about it, but the thing wouldn't budge. He had managed to pry it out of a stuffed alligator and shove it up his nose during the two minutes Donna had run to the bathroom. He'd been kneeling on the living room rug, surrounded by a basket of toys Julie kept under the coffee table—some new and some from when the girls had been little—methodically picking up one toy after another, studying it, and then discarding it for something better, while *Toy Story* played in the background. When Donna came back, he hadn't budged one inch, but when he

looked up at her, there were three eyes staring back at her—two lovely green human eyes and one glassy reptilian eye peering out of his nose. The skin was stretched tight around the yellow, marble-like eye, with its black vertical pupil. Hudson was grinning as though he was proud of himself.

“How did you even get that in there, Huds?”

“Dunno?” he said, holding his palms up innocently. This was his new favorite phrase.

Hudson mightily resisted every effort Donna made to dislodge the eyeball. It didn’t seem to bother him unless Donna tried to touch it. Then he’d scream, throw his head back, and fight her off. She tried to mesmerize him with a popsicle, since he was rarely allowed sugar, and pinch the sphere out from the top. As soon as he was onto her, he started flailing and managed to push the eyeball further up, so his nostril was distended and you could only see the eyeball from below. She tried to talk him into blowing his nose, but the poor kid just looked confused. Donna had no idea at what age kids were capable of blowing their own noses.

She finally decided to call Cat for advice. She seemed the most naturally maternal of all of her sisters. And she was far enough away that she wouldn’t be able to come take over, as Donna feared Abba and Papa Walt would do. And the other grandparents didn’t live quite close enough to be of use. Besides, Donna wanted to prove she could handle the situation herself.

After Donna assured Cat that Hudson was fine and all alarm subsided, Cat couldn’t stop laughing.

“I thought you’d be more helpful than this,” Donna grumbled. She was starting to panic.

“I’m sorry,” Cat wheezed. “But you have to admit it’s funny. Can you send me a

picture?”

“Hold on,” Donna said, and texted a picture to Cat, which only made her more hysterical.

“Just let me know when you catch your breath,” Donna said drily. She could hear Liam’s amused voice in the background, trying to figure out what was going on.

“Sorry, sorry,” Cat said, composing herself. “Okay, I think you just need to take him to like an urgent care. Or the emergency room.”

“The emergency room? For this?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Unless you know of an urgent care close by. They’re cheaper.”

“Ty won’t care what it costs,” Donna said, not wanting to bother researching where the nearest urgent care was or finding one that was open this late on a weekend. The hospital where Hudson had been born wasn’t far, and it had a 24-hour emergency room.

“Okay, let me know how it goes,” Cat says. “Wait, can we switch to a video call? I want to talk to my little buddy.”

Donna made the switch and pointed the phone at Hudson, who was toddling around hugging the one-eyed alligator.

“Cat!” Hudson said, pointing at the phone. “Cat! Cat!”

“Hi sweet boy!” Cat cooed. “Yeah, it’s your favorite Auntie Cat, who would never ever let you stick an alligator eyeball up your nose. Never ever.”

“I knew I would regret calling you,” Donna grumbled.

Hudson kept on insisting on putting the phone up to his ear and holding it with his shoulder, jabbering unintelligibly, like he’d seen his parents do.

“Okay, we better go, Hudsy,” Donna said, picking him up and grabbing the diaper bag.

“I’ll just stay on the phone with him while you drive,” Cat said.

So Donna drove to the hospital in a lifted orange Jeep she had a hard time climbing into, with her three-eyed nephew in the back, now holding the phone correctly and babbling to his aunt and uncle in Boston face-to-face. The cadence of his voice sounded like he was saying actual sentences and carrying on an adult conversation, but the words were mostly nonsense, punctuated by regular bouts of laughter from Cat and Liam, who could see the eyeball clearly from the angle Hudson was holding the phone, down below his chin.

Donna had a feeling she would never live this one down.

CHAPTER EIGHT

AT THE EMERGENCY room, Donna and Hudson were shown into an exam room relatively quickly. By the time she heard the clacking sounds of someone picking up the clipboard from the plastic bin screwed to the wall outside the door, Hudson had fallen asleep in her arms. Donna had been gazing down at his elegant dark lashes brushing his flushed cheeks, his mouth hanging open in sleep. She felt a wave of love wash over her. She brushed his dark hair off his forehead and cuddled him closer against her chest. He was sleeping with his left arm under her right arm and around her back, with his head tilted back and his mouth open. She imagined it wasn't easy to breathe with a foreign object blocking one nasal passage.

After a quick knock, the doctor walked into the room, eyes on the chart, and said, "So, foreign object in the nostril, huh?"

As Dr. Jack Gentry glanced up and their gazes met, Donna's heart jumped. To mask her discombobulation, she quickly lifted a finger to her lips in a shushing motion. He lowered his voice and looked at her curiously, as though she looked familiar, but he couldn't place her. He wore blue scrubs and a white lab coat, with a pen tucked behind one ear. How did the man look good in absolutely everything?

"Mrs. Westbrook?" Jack asked quietly, looking from the chart to Donna and holding out a hand. Donna lifted her left hand and gripped his in an awkward shake.

"No, it's Gable," Donna replied in a whisper. "But I'm not a Mrs."

Then Donna inwardly cringed at the clarification. Did he think she was making sure

he knew she was single? Ugh.

“My apologies,” Jack said, looking chagrined. “Failing at my training already. I’m not supposed to assume.”

Donna appreciated his humility. In her experience, it was a rare trait among those of his profession—Dr. Balding being a prime example.

“So, how did this come to be?” he asked, sitting on a rolling stool and inching toward her, close enough that her closed knees were between his open knees, and he bent to take a look at Hudson’s predicament. The proximity made her head swim just a little.

Stop it, Donna! She reminded herself that he was married. To the worst person in the world.

“Well, he pried it off a stuffed alligator when I was in the bathroom and decided his nostril would be a great place to store it. Maybe I need to get him clothes with better pockets,” she joked.

Dr. Gentry smiled.

“Well, it’s good that he’s sleeping. We may be able to make some headway without waking him up. One thing we could try is the mother’s kiss. It could be almost over before he knows what’s happening. He’s how old?”

“Fifteen months,” Donna said. “Does it matter that I’m not his mother?”

“What’s the relationship?”

“I’m Hudson’s aunt. Donna.”

“Donna Gable,” Jack repeated slowly, still trying to place her. “We know each other.”

It was a statement, not a question.

“We do,” Donna said without elaborating and smiled, revealing her dimples. That seemed to jog his memory, but he didn’t say anything.

“So the mother’s kiss involves pressing his unobstructed nostril closed and placing your mouth over his. You have to make a good seal. Then you deliver a short, sharp breath into his mouth. That will often dislodge the object—or even shoot it across the room.”

Donna nodded and bit her lip in thought.

“Will it hurt him?”

“It feels strange, and it might scare him. But it won’t hurt.”

“If you think it’s the best way, we can try it. I hate to wake him up, though,” Donna said.

“I’m afraid that’s inevitable,” he said with a kind voice.

Whispering, they talked through the logistics of the maneuver. Then Dr. Gentry rolled around so he was on her right side and hovered his left hand over Hudson’s face and the other over his torso.

“Ready?” he whispered. Donna nodded, struck by the intensity of their eye contact as he counted to three.

With smooth assurance, he pressed Hudson's left nostril closed while reaching his forearm across the toddler's upper chest to keep him from fighting them off. Donna instinctively grabbed Dr. Gentry's elbow as she took a breath and leaned over to cover Hudson's open mouth with hers, the two of them cocooning her nephew in a strangely intimate hug. She vaguely registered the feel of the doctor's hand against her stomach as she engaged her abs to force out a breath. The curtain of her hair swung over her shoulder and draped over them as Hudson's eyes flew open in alarm and he started struggling, coughing and wailing.

The doctor backed away and Donna instantly felt his absence. An unwelcome thought flew into her mind. She had been wasting her time on overgrown boys. This was a man. She might be tempted to ask if he had a brother, except for the prospect of having Trynn as a sister-in-law.

She marveled at her brain's ability to process that train of thought even as she lifted Hudson to her shoulder, rubbing soothing circles on his back, simultaneously jittery about his welfare. Dr. Gentry swung around behind Donna to peek at the progress they'd made, holding Hudson's arm against Donna's shoulder to keep him from messing with his nose.

"Good job, Aunt Donna," he said reassuringly, and she liked the way he said her name. "It's almost out."

A nurse knocked briskly on the door and walked in. For some reason, Donna was glad she hadn't interrupted them earlier. How would that have looked to an outside observer? Would Donna's elevated heart rate be obvious to a trained medical professional? If it was, Donna hoped she'd attribute it to the stress of the moment.

While Hudson sobbed, Jack blew up a disposable glove into a balloon and pretended to tickle Hudson with it, and Donna too. Her laughter bubbled up naturally; she didn't have to pretend for Hudson's sake. But nothing worked, until Jack slapped himself in

the face with the balloon hand, then scolded it, and got slapped again. The mock battle had Hudson sitting up and giggling in no time, as one final tear followed the slope of his cheek and dripped to his t-shirt. The eyeball was now partially protruding from his nostril. Their goal was to keep Hudson from undoing their progress.

Jack continued to engage Hudson's attention with an animated smile and unexpected movements, while simultaneously instructing the nurse in a quiet voice to prepare a suction device. He was good at this. He showed Hudson how the device worked, trying it on his own palm and then Donna's, on his own cheek and then Donna's, on the balloon hand and then on Hudson's shirt.

"Auntie Donna, I'm going to keep playing this game with him," Jack said, without breaking eye contact with her nephew. "You start playing with his hair and work up to where you're holding his forehead back against your chest."

Donna complied, and Hudson was surprisingly cooperative, distracted as he was by the suction device Jack was moving around Hudson's body, from his toes, to his knees, to his tummy, to his chin. Once Hudson was accustomed enough to the clear tube and the whooshing sound it made that he stopped following it with his eyes, Donna tightened her grip on her nephew's forehead, and Jack deployed some magician-level sleight of hand to wave the balloon glove with one hand while swiftly suctioning the eyeball from Hudson's nostril with the other.

Donna released her grip and turned Hudson around on her lap before he could react. She started bouncing him on her knees, while the nurse took the instrument from Jack and put it away.

"Who's a brave boy?" Donna asked, and covered his face with kisses.

"Good teamwork," Jack said, holding out his fist for Donna to bump. Hudson lifted his chubby fist too, wanting in on that action.

The nurse paused near the door for a moment, looking at the doctor expectantly.

“I’ll be just a minute,” he said. “Donna’s an old friend.”

The nurse looked back and forth between them, trying to size up the level of familiarity, before leaving the room. This must not be usual behavior for him.

“Thanks Doc,” she said, smiling broadly.

“You’re welcome Daphne,” he said, folding his arms with a satisfied smile.

“You figured it out,” she said, breaking eye contact to hand Hudson his father’s car keys to play with.

“The dimples,” he said by way of explanation and flashed a devastating smile. “You were also someone from Grease?”

“Rizzo,” she said, wondering if his thoughts had returned to the cleavage incident, as hers had.

“But I know you from somewhere else, too, don’t I?”

“Several places,” Donna said.

“And you’re not going to tell me,” he said flatly. She could see the questions in his eyes. Was he reflecting back on their previous conversation, where she had referenced a kiss but didn’t elaborate?

“Nope,” she said with a mysterious smile that probably came across as more flirtatious than she intended, flipping her long hair back over her shoulder unconsciously.

“And can I ask why not?” he asked, leaning toward her with his elbows on his knees, his gaze searching but amused.

She felt a fluttering in her chest again. Did he know the effect he was having on her? But his pager went off before she could answer, drawing his attention to the little black device in his hand.

“Well,” she said lightly. “Just because you don’t wear your wedding ring at work doesn’t mean you’re not married.”

He gave her a startled look, all traces of friendliness disappearing in an instant.

“I have to get this,” he said, rising briskly and holding the eyeball out to drop it in Donna’s palm.

“You’re free to go,” he said over his shoulder when he reached the door, and humiliation washed over her.

Why had she opened her big mouth?

It seemed like he was flirting, but of course he couldn’t have been. That would be so unprofessional, possibly even unethical. And he seemed like the type to take his profession seriously, if not his marriage.

How mortifying that she had read his banter as anything more than geniality. No wonder he clammed up and raced out of the room. He must think she was so pathetic. Why would a devastatingly handsome doctor with a tv-star wife who had recently been photographed for People magazine wearing a barely-there bikini, in a feature about diet tips from the cast of Drama Club , stoop to flirting with a waitress who worked at a gimmicky theme restaurant and absolutely did not have washboard abs?

It was probably just bothering him that he couldn't figure out how they were acquainted. He was used to having all of the answers. And she, who was nothing more than a puzzle for him to solve, had basically accused him of hitting on her. At a hospital. While he was on duty.

As she carried her nephew to the Jeep, she wished desperately that she could erase the entirety of the last hour. An alligator eyeball in a nostril is hardly an emergency. She should have listened to Cat and taken Hudson to an urgent care instead.

She sincerely hoped she would never see Dr. Jack Gentry ever again.

After a visit to the bathroom, a diaper change, and visit to the vending machine for some Goldfish crackers, Hudson ran to the shiny, silver elevator doors and begged to ride the "owigator."

He'd been so brave about the eyeball extraction. How could she say no to the excitement that was practically bursting out of him? She lifted him so he could push the up button, deciding she'd let him ride all the way to the top and back down just once.

On the top floor, they spent a good 20 minutes looking out the windows of the visitors area, gawking at the fluffy clouds above them and the miniature cars below. She pointed out the direction of the ocean, even though they couldn't actually see it from this vantage point.

On the way back down, Hudson lit up the numbers to every floor before Donna could stop him, which made for a long, slow descent. He said an enthusiastic "Hi!" to everyone who joined them for a floor or two, instantly charming patients, staff, and visitors alike. Donna decided this could count as her service project for the week—taking her nephew to spread cheer throughout all 15 floors of the hospital.

When the doors slid open on the eighth floor, Donna's stomach sank into her Prada leather sneakers.

Jack raised his eyebrows at her as he stepped onto the elevator in his street clothes, with a leather satchel over his shoulder. He smiled down at Hudson, who was now breathing free through both nostrils. She was tempted to pretend she forgot something and hop off at the next floor, but Hudson had already toddled over to Jack and reached up his arms. Jack visibly softened and picked the little boy up. Hudson reached out his hand to touch the digital floor-number display, now at his eye level, watching intently as the number changed at each floor.

They rode in silence as two people joined them on floor six. After they both exited on floor four, Donna and Jack started speaking at the exact same moment.

"I'm divorced, by the way," Jack said while Donna blurted out, "I didn't mean to assume..."

"Sorry, what did you say?" she followed up.

"You mentioned at the restaurant that you know Trynn," Jack said, eyes trained on Hudson. "We've been divorced for a year."

"Oh, no," Donna said. "I'm sorry. I hadn't heard that. I haven't seen Trynn since the panel at UC-Irvine."

"You were there?"

"You really aren't good with faces," she laughed.

"Okay Donna Daphne Rizzo Leia Gable, you must enjoy torturing me," he said, putting Hudson down when he started to squirm. "I know I know you from the In

Character Cafe. Where else?”

“Let me refresh your memory,” she said, pulling up her pant leg and pointing her toe to display her shapely right ankle above the curve of her no-show socks, which were, in fact, showing.

He looked at her blankly.

“I came late and was a little distracted by a sprained...” he said, and she saw the moment it dawned on him. “That was you!”

“Yes, and thank you,” she said. “You were right. It was just a sprain.”

“Do you wear glasses?”

“Just that day,” she shrugged. “They went with the outfit.”

“But you had an accent.”

“It also went with the outfit. I was in theater school, remember?”

“I don’t remember that girl having dimples, though. She did have a ‘manic pixie dream girl’ vibe, though...” he said.

Did he just say “dream girl”?

“My dimples only show when I smile, and I didn’t have much to smile about,” she said.

By now, they had reached the lobby and were walking to the parking lot, each holding one of Hudson’s hands.

“One, two, fwee,” he kept insisting, lifting his little feet off the ground with every “fwee.” So Donna showed Jack the intricacies of the “one-two-three-swing-Hudson-high-in-the-air” game. His squeals brought smiles to both of their faces, and when their eyes met, Donna felt a jolt in her heart. Generous lips. Straight, white teeth. What a smile.

They paused the game to allow someone in scrubs to pass them on the sidewalk from the other direction.

“Beautiful family, Doc,” she said, walking briskly past before Jack had a chance to respond.

Donna and Jack glanced sideways at each other and laughed.

“I’ll set her straight next time I see her,” Jack said.

“A medical professional should be able to tell that this little boy could not be the product of the two of us,” Donna said, mussing Hudson’s hair, the same dark shade as his mother’s.

“We’d definitely have little towheads,” he said, practically swallowing the last word. They both fell silent, each of them quietly contemplating how their conversation had taken such a personal turn.

Donna cleared her throat. Had he parked near her? Didn’t hospital staff have designated spaces?

“So, you and Trynn didn’t have any kids?”

Jack cough-laughed. “How well did you know her again?”

“Just from the one play,” Donna said, wisely suppressing her initial inclination to say, “Better than I wanted to.”

They had reached the orange Jeep on the first floor of the parking garage.

“Well, this is me,” she said, pulling Ty’s keys from her pocket and lifting Hudson up to buckle him in his carseat, which was not a smooth process for her even when Jack Gentry’s eyes weren’t following her every move.

“These things are ridiculous,” she grunted, finally clicking all of the latches into place and handing Hudson a board book to play with.

She flipped her hair back over her shoulder and turned to Jack, still standing back by the bumper with his hands in his pockets.

“Well, thanks again,” she said, reaching out to shake his hand, then instantly wondering if that was weird. Probably not, since he didn’t immediately let go.

“Did I dance with you at a wedding?” he asked, looking closely at her face.

For reasons she couldn’t identify, she was tempted to lie to him.

But she didn’t.

“Yes, my sister Catharine’s,” she said. “At your wife’s insistence, I might add.”

“Ex-wife,” he felt it necessary to clarify. “I remember now. Your hair was up. You wore a pink dress.”

“Good memory.”

“Well, I don’t get to dust off those old dance moves very often these days,” he said.
“Plus, I rarely forget a face.”

“Ha! You’ve managed to forget mine several times.”

“There were extenuating circumstances!”

“Such as…”

“Such as the fact that you look completely different every time I see you. Glasses, braids, wigs, entire costumes…”

“All clothes are costumes, if you think about it,” she said. “You were wearing your doctor costume earlier. And now you’re dressed like an office worker on casual Friday.”

He glanced down at his plaid button-up shirt and olive chinos.

“Is that bad?” he asked.

“Not necessarily,” she said. But if she were dressing him, she would have suggested something less drab—something that brought out the intense blue of his eyes.

“So I know you from the cafe,” he started counting on his fingers, “from the musical you were in with Trynn, from the sprained ankle, from your sister’s wedding…”

“And now from the great alligator eyeball rescue,” she grinned, peeking in at Hudson, whose eyelids were growing heavy.

“But somehow, I don’t remember kissing you.”

His eyes flicked to her mouth, and she felt delicious tendrils of heat swirling in her stomach. “You didn’t.”

“But you, er, Daphne, said...”

“I kissed you,” she said mysteriously. “But it wasn’t my idea. I was just following orders.”

“Orders?” he looked more confused than ever. “Honestly, I’m pretty sure I would remember.”

“And yet, somehow you don’t,” she teased.

Her phone started ringing.

“It’s Hudson’s mom,” she said. “I have to grab this.”

“Okay,” he said, looking reluctant. “Well, see you around.”

“Given our history, the odds are pretty good,” she said, then swiped to unlock her phone.

“Hi Audrey! Everything’s fine,” Donna said into the phone, watching Jack walk away, back toward the hospital. “But hang on, I need to ask the doctor something real quick.”

She muted her phone and called after Jack.

“Hey Doc!”

Jack paused and turned around.

“Is his nostril going to be all stretched out now?”

“No,” he said, amusement in his voice. “Cartilage doesn’t work that way.”

“Got it. Thanks again!”

He nodded, and she turned to close Hudson’s door.

“Audrey?” she said, unmuting the phone as her screen lit up with another call. “Hudson’s totally fine. The doctor got the eyeball out in no time. He barely even cried. Hang on, Mom’s calling on the other line.”

She answered Julie’s frantic call, reassured her, then clicked back over to Audrey, who was in a full-blown panic.

“Audrey! Audrey, calm down. It was a toy eyeball. He stuck it up his nose. He still has both of his original eyes.”

Hysterical laughter bubbled up in Donna’s chest, which she tried unsuccessfully to suppress.

“Deep breaths, Audrey,” she said, ignoring a new call coming in from Cat. “I guess you didn’t read all my texts. I’m SO sorry for the misunderstanding. No you don’t need to come to the hospital. He’s fast asleep. We’re on our way. We’ll meet you at Mom’s.”

She rounded the bumper to the driver’s side and nearly collided with Jack, who had returned to hand her a small piece of paper.

“I promise,” she was saying, accepting the paper without looking at it. “We got the best doctor on duty. He’s right here, do you want to talk to him? No? Okay, hang on.”

She covered the mouthpiece, tears of mirth gathering in the corners of her eyes.

“She thought you removed her son’s actual eyeball,” she said with a half-snort, grabbing his forearm to steady herself. Jack’s face broke open in a grin as bright as a sunrise, and Donna felt blinded by the rays. Until this moment, she had no idea how sexy shared laughter could be.

Then Abba’s number flashed on the screen.

“Audrey, now Abba is calling, and I just missed a call from Cat. If you accidentally spread some rumors, I’m going to need you to go ahead and tamp them down. I need to drive.”

She looked helplessly at Jack as her phone lit up like a switchboard. He gave a low wave and, chuckling, walked away for the second time. She read the hastily scrawled note he had torn from a prescription pad.

D—

I’m interested in solving the mystery of the alleged kiss.

—J

Professionalism be damned, they had now fully entered flirting territory. He’d even included his phone number—in stereotypically bad doctor handwriting. Did medical school have a mandatory course called Illegible Penmanship 101? Or was this simply a topic that got neglected in favor of more important matters like, say, the circulatory system?

“Yes, like I said, he’s asleep in his carseat,” Donna continued to reassure Audrey as she pulled out of the parking lot, passing Jack with a wave. “We’ll be home soon.”

It occurred to her that Jack hadn't been parked anywhere near her. He must have had some other reason for walking her all the way to her car.

The next day, Donna considered the note and what she knew of Dr. Jack Gentry.

For one thing, they crossed paths with unusual frequency, given the very different circles they traveled in.

For another, his surgeon friend had made it clear that Jack had sworn off actresses, so why had he returned to the cafe several times, even requesting to sit in her section? (Back before she reminded him he was married, of course, which he actually hadn't been at the time, as it turned out.) Donna didn't think he seemed like a player, but maybe she was misreading him.

For a third thing, his short-lived marriage to Trynn Gentry made Donna doubtful that she could be his type in any way, shape, or form. She and Trynn were opposites in practically every way, except for their shared background in theater.

But...maybe that was the reason right there. Since things had fallen apart with Trynn, perhaps he was looking for someone as different from her as possible? Donna would definitely fit that bill.

Or could it be that the physical response she felt in his presence was reciprocated? Did he feel the same gravitational pull toward her that she'd been trying to deny, with limited success? Did he get that sinking sensation in his stomach, the shallow breathing, the electrified nerve endings? Did he wonder what it would be like to kiss her for real?

Donna almost couldn't bring herself to imagine it. He'd always been so utterly out of reach, either married or so far out of her league that she hadn't let herself even entertain the thought. But now that she knew he was single, and he'd sent her some

very unsubtle signals, she found she couldn't get him out of her head.

So, with a swarm of butterflies swirling in her chest cavity—to a degree she hadn't felt since junior high—she texted the number he had scrawled on the note, rewriting her response several times before finally settling with:

“What do you mean ‘alleged kiss’? Are you accusing me of telling but not kissing?”

She hit the send button and sat staring at the screen, willing those three little dots to appear that would tell her he was texting her back.

But he didn't respond right away.

Or at all that day.

Or the day after that either.

And refreshing her messages every 15 minutes didn't seem to be helping.

She knew residents worked long shifts and weird hours, and he didn't have the kind of job where he could be on his phone all the time. But after a couple of days, she concluded there had to be more to his lack of response than that.

He must have regretted handing her that note, decided she wasn't worth the effort, or moved on to someone else. Possibly all three.

And Donna wasn't about to make herself look desperate by texting him again.

A couple of weeks later, while Donna was wiping down tables at the end of the afternoon shift, dressed as Samara Morgan from *The Ring* horror movie—a dark curtain of hair hiding her face—she saw Jack walk slowly past the wall of windows,

hands in pockets. Was he trying to look casual or something? He seemed to be surreptitiously scanning the interior of the restaurant. She ducked into a corner, watching him through her stringy wig. When he reached the corner, he turned back the way he came, again glancing repeatedly into the empty restaurant.

What was that all about?

He obviously wasn't just passing by on his way somewhere else.

But if he was looking for her, she wasn't hard to find. The hours were posted clearly on the door, and she was here almost every weekday.

A waiter in a Freddy Krueger costume walked in from the kitchen and screamed. Surprisingly high pitched.

"Donna!" he said. "You don't have to stay in character after we close. You almost gave me a heart attack."

Donna laughed and pulled off her wig, going along with his assumption rather than confess the truth—that she was hiding from a hot young almost-doctor who'd been loitering on the sidewalk.

"And you thought you were going to be the scary one on this shift," she said.

She finished her closing checklist, climbed into Kermit, and headed back to her apartment.

A sudden weight of loneliness and dissatisfaction pressed on her. Was the novelty of the In Character Cafe beginning to wear off? Or was it that Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas were just around the corner, and all the looming family parties were already starting to get to her? She could picture it now. At gathering after gathering,

she would still be stuck at the kid table with her younger sisters, with three blissful couples at the other end of the room reminding her every second of what she still didn't have. Four couples, if she counted her parents.

She hadn't realized how high Jack had gotten her hopes that day at the hospital until they sputtered out like a deflated balloon.

When she was holding that prescription in her hand, she finally let herself acknowledge the unspoken attraction she felt toward him—which had been building, interaction by interaction, for years. He must have felt it too, at least a little. Otherwise, why walk her all the way to her car, and then return to hand her a flirtatious note? And why go radio silent when she responded? And even more puzzling, why bother scouting out her place of work if he can't even be bothered to respond to a text?

Maybe his sarcasm detector was on the fritz, and he took her message to mean she was actually upset. Which, if he had gleaned anything about her personality at all, would not make sense. And it wouldn't reflect well on him either. If there was one personality trait she would never be able to live with, no matter what other myriad attractions he possessed, it was humorlessness.

Maybe it was better this way.

Maybe if she immersed herself in another play, she'd find something—and maybe even someone—new to occupy her thoughts.

CHAPTER NINE

FEbrUARY 2011

An all-female cast wasn't exactly what Donna had in mind, but when Nick told her he was assistant directing *Steel Magnolias* at the Majestic, she decided to audition. Just after Halloween, she found out she'd won the role of Annelle Dupuy, a shy Southern hairdresser turned Bible thumper in the Monday-Wednesday-Friday cast. Rehearsals started in February.

"So, I hear you and Nick used to go out," Amelia said one day while she and Donna waited for their scenes to be run. Amelia was playing the beautiful Shelby Eatenton Latcherie the same nights as Donna.

"For like 5 seconds," Donna said. "I'm surprised he even mentioned it."

"He didn't," Amelia said, giving her a meaningful look.

"Oh," Donna said, knowingly. "The Other Shelby."

"How did you guess," Amelia said drily.

"I'm surprised she remembers that," Donna said. "Actually, I'm surprised she noticed in the first place."

"It's always shocking when Trynn Gentry discovers there are other people in the world," Amelia laughed.

Donna had only known the bubbly brunette for a few weeks, but it already felt like they'd been friends for years. Amelia was the only one Donna had told about her plotting with Nick to make sure Trynn ended up in the other cast. Trynn would assume the role of Shelby for the Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday performances, along with duplicates of Truvy, M'Lynn, Clairee, and Ousier.

"You have no idea how glad I am that you are my Shelby," Donna told Amelia for the millionth time.

"I'm glad too," Amelia said. "But I'd kind of rather be in your shoes."

"You're perfect for Shelby! Shelby is supposed to be effortlessly beautiful."

"You are beautiful."

"I'm cute. There's a difference."

"Agree to disagree," Amelia said. "But it's not the part itself. It just sucks to be playing the same part as a legit tv star on her nights off. I just know half of the audience will be disappointed it's me up there instead of Josie from Drama Club."

"They'll forget all about it the minute they see you," Donna said encouragingly. "Plus, we got the better Ouiser and the better Truvy. All they got was Trynn."

"And we got Nick too."

"Oh, he made sure of that. Remember, he knows Trynn all too well."

"That's right! She was in Guys and Dolls with you two."

"He was Nathan Detroit to her Miss Adelaide."

“Did she ever try to put the moves on him off stage?”

“Oh no, she was married at the time.”

“Like that would stop her.”

Donna looked at Amelia curiously, then realized where her questions were really coming from.

“Oh! You like Nick!”

Amelia covered her cheeks with her hands.

“Have I been too obvious?”

“Not enough to get it through my thick skull. I love it! You guys would be great together!”

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“Not at all. We’ve been just friends for years. Has he figured out you like him yet?”

“I don’t think so. And I don’t want him to until after the show’s over.”

“I won’t say a word,” Donna said.

Then Amelia peppered her with questions about Nick’s dating history. Donna assured her that Nick would make a great boyfriend, that he hadn’t been serious with anyone at least since they’d started working together at the cafe, that he wasn’t a user or a player.

“Not every guy would sign up to work with an all-female cast on a play set in a beauty salon,” Amelia said. “I think it’s cool.”

“And honestly, he’s easier to work with than Bellamy,” Donna said, referring to the high strung director, who was born and bred in the South and was deeply committed to an authentic portrayal that didn’t succumb to stereotypes, which Donna fully supported. But sometimes he got a little testy about it.

“Poor Trynn,” Amelia said. “Bellamy is losing patience with her accent.”

“More. Drawl. Less. Twang,” they recited in unison, clapping once between each word, as they’d seen the director do dozens of times, then dissolved into laughter.

“Trynn can be hard to feel sorry for,” Amelia said. “But when I think about what they did to her on Drama Club...”

“Killing off her character you mean?”

“No, the reason why her character was killed off...” Amelia began, executing a seamless topic switch when Trynn herself walked up behind them. “...Oh my gosh, yes I really did try Clairee’s Cuppa Cuppa Cuppa recipe. It really was rich. Oh hey, Trynn!”

“Hi-i,” Trynn said in her sing-song way. “You mean the cup of flour, cup of sugar, and cup of fruit cocktail recipe?”

“With the juice,” added Donna.

“Isn’t that Truvy’s recipe?” Trynn asked.

“It’s Truvy’s recipe in the movie,” said Amelia. “But in the play, it’s Clairee’s. And it

really is sweet. I felt like I needed to check my blood sugar afterwards.”

“Speaking of blood sugar,” Trynn said. “I have an idea for how we can nail our diabetic shock scenes.”

Amelia and Donna exchanged a surreptitious look. They hadn’t known Trynn to be much of a team player in the past.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it,” Donna said, excusing herself. Maybe Trynn’s recent professional disappointment had humbled her a little. And Donna did have to give her credit for getting right back in the saddle. It took guts to return to semi-professional theater so soon after starring in a hit tv show. It didn’t exactly qualify as anyone’s preferred career move.

But the way Majestic Theater was billing Trynn’s presence in the show, with her face splashed all over the promotional materials, had to soften the blow. Not to mention the private dressing room with its engraved nameplate, which read “Trynn Gentry,” despite her divorce. But Donna couldn’t fault her for that, given her recent discovery that Trynn’s given name was Trinity Mae Wegfahrt. Donna would much rather be a Gentry too.

For her day job at the cafe, Donna chose as many Southern-themed roles as she could find, from Daisy Duke to Scarlett O’Hara to Scout Finch, to keep in practice for her accent. She’d even spent a week as the elderly Miss Daisy from *Driving Miss Daisy*. This week, she was Charlotte La Bouff—in her 1920s flapper dress rather than the giant antebellum gown she was more known for, which is probably why nobody could figure out who she was.

“Charlotte who?” Nick asked.

“Not you too,” Donna said. “Nobody’s guessing this one right. I’m making this

accent as obnoxious as I can. I even tell everyone the kitchen is fresh out of beignets, and they still don't catch on."

"Beignets?"

"Haven't you seen Princess and the Frog? I'm Tiana's best friend, Charlotte La Bouff."

"Of course, Charlotte La Bouff!" he said, smacking his forehead with his palm. "Just kidding, I still have no idea who that is. But you look great."

"Oh, this old thing?" she drawled, swishing her pink mid-calf skirt.

"Would you call that color 'blush' or 'bashful'?" he teased, borrowing a line from Steel Magnolias .

"Don't let Shelby hear you making fun of her wedding colors," she replied, and Nick walked right through that opening to ask her a few questions about Amelia, which she suspected he would.

The infatuation was clearly mutual, but they were both determined not to make any moves until after closing night, which Donna appreciated. So far, Donna was the only one who knew about their interest in each other, which she simultaneously loved and loathed. She loved playing cupid and vicariously experiencing the bliss of new infatuation; she hated the creeping loneliness she felt at her own lack of prospects. Given the almost total lack of testosterone in this particular production, Donna had no one to dream about or flirt with at rehearsals. Beside the stage crew, Nick was about it.

Work wasn't yielding any results either. She'd had exactly three customers scribble a name and phone number beneath the tip line on the receipt in recent months, but none

of them were even remotely tempting.

And on top of all that, she'd been on two excruciating blind dates in the previous month. The first was a new architect just hired at Gavin's firm, who spent the evening pouting after she beat him at bowling. Then the brother of Elizabeth's college roommate took her to see a movie—a documentary about Chicago gang violence—and tried putting the moves on her immediately after a gut-wrenching funeral scene. Had he absorbed even one second of what had just been on the screen, or was he just looking for a dark place to make out? Needless to say, neither of those two got a second chance.

Not that she had much time to date anyway, since she spent her mornings and afternoons at the cafe and her evenings rehearsing. She was often free during the fun-filled hours of 3:00 and 6:00 p.m., however. Prime senior citizen dining hour!

"How's Amelia feeling about the diabetic scene," Donna asked Nick later on in their shift.

"I think she'll feel a lot better after tonight," Nick said. "Trynn has lined up an expert to come in and coach them."

"That's...surprisingly generous of Trynn."

"That's what I thought," Nick said. "But apparently she's calling in a favor, so I'm not about to look a gift horse in the mouth."

"That's the weirdest expression," Donna laughed.

"Yeah, imagine getting a horse as a gift," Nick said.

"I'm sure it used to be much more common, back in the day."

“I doubt it. it’d be like giving someone a car today.”

“Oh, I’ve been offered a gift car. Turned it down.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“It was from my brother-in-law.”

“Was it a POS?”

“No, brand new.”

“Again, what is wrong with you?”

“So many things,” she laughed. “See you tonight.”

As the double Shelbys, Annelles, Truvys, and M’Lynns ran through their lines for the diabetic shock scene, Trynn kept checking her phone. Her makeup looked even more impressive than usual.

“He’s here!” she erupted, then ran to open the door to the rehearsal hall, revealing Dr. Jack Gentry on the other side. Donna’s heart fell into her shoes.

“Who’s this?” murmured Amelia in an appreciative tone.

“Trynn’s ex-husband,” Donna whispered back.

“He must be a saint,” Amelia said.

“For marrying her?”

“For still talking to her after the divorce.”

Donna was beginning to suspect there was a story here, and that Amelia was acquainted with the details. She’d have to follow up on that later, because Trynn had slipped her arm through Jack’s elbow and was walking him over to the assembled women for introductions.

“Oh, Donna, hi!” he said when his eyes collided with Donna’s. He looked surprised, but pleased.

She wanted to tease him for recognizing her for once, but it didn’t seem like the right time, with so many women watching them curiously and Trynn’s eyes narrowing in suspicion.

“Hi Jack,” Donna said. “Nice of you to come.”

“You’re in this scene too?”

“Yes, but Amelia and Trynn are doing all of the heavy lifting. I just get to look concerned.”

“As I remember, you’re good at that,” Jack said with a smile.

“I invited Jack because he knows what real diabetic shock looks like,” Trynn said. “And I’ve run lines with him more times than I can count. He gives good feedback. I always tell him he could have had a career on the stage if he weren’t so determined to go save lives and everything.”

The women laughed, and Donna took note of the genuine warmth in Trynn’s voice, despite the way she looked at him—with a mixture of possessiveness and regret. For his part, he remained friendly but guarded around her. And his eyes strayed

frequently to Donna. She wasn't imagining it, was she? She suddenly felt grateful she had showered after her shift at the cafe, and that she'd blown her hair dry rather than pulling it up into a messy bun. It hung in a silken sheet down her back, shiny and straight.

"How do you know Dr. McHottie?" Amelia asked while Jack answered another one of Trynn's overly detailed questions. The poor thing was trying too hard, and to Donna's dismay, she found herself feeling sorry for Trynn. Again.

"Through Trynn originally," Donna said. "But beyond that, it's kind of a long story."

"Do tell."

"I think you have some things to tell too. How about I call you on the way home?"

"Yes please!"

Donna felt Jack's presence like a gravitational pull, even as they moved around the room in their separate orbits. She looked up several times to catch his eyes on her; and he'd done the same.

At the end of the evening, Donna stood at Kermit's door under the glow of a street light, jiggling the key in the lock to catch the perfect angle, since the key fob had long since stopped working. She saw Jack across the parking lot, talking to Trynn next to her silver Saab, on which her old "DRAMAQN" license plate had been affixed.

A few cast mates drove out of the lot, Jack and Trynn were still talking, and Donna had yet to get the door unlocked. Donna knew she was being superstitious, but when this happened, she found it worked best to turn her back on the car for a few minutes. Act like she didn't care. The more eager she appeared, the less cooperative Kermit tended to be. So she leaned against the driver's side door and scrolled through her

phone for a few minutes, realizing the car next to her was the same model of hatchback as Kermit, but about a decade newer and light blue in color.

“Hey,” Jack said, walking up to her in the space between Kermit and his better-looking twin. “This yours?”

“Meet Kermit,” Donna said, patting the hood, then she lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “He can be stubborn. As soon as he’s had a second to relax, I’m going to try the key again.”

“Careful, he might hear you,” Jack stage-whispered back. “What happened to the Jeep?”

“It’s my brother-in-law’s,” she said. “Hudson’s dad.”

“How is Hudson? Nostrils still the same size?”

“Yes, Doc. And no new eyeballs have sprouted in there either.”

“Good to hear,” he grinned, then leaned back against the blue car.

“Wait, that’s yours?” Donna asked.

“Yup.”

“I expected you to have a better car.”

“Ouch,” he said, clutching his chest comically.

“Sorry,” she laughed. “I just mean, I’ve seen Trynn’s car. Her other one, I mean. And, well, you’re a doctor.”

“Her other car is the reason I still have this one. Or it was, anyway. I just haven’t gotten around to upgrading.”

“Still busy at the hospital?”

He nodded.

“Sometimes I wonder if they’re trying to kill us,” he said. “Just have to make it 7 more months.”

“And then you can switch to regular stress, not ‘I can’t stay awake during a brilliant production of Guys and Dolls stress.’”

“Exactly,” he grinned. Okay heart, Donna told the overactive organ in her chest cavity. Slow down. You’ve seen a man smile before.

“Well, I’ll pray for you,” Donna said. Wait, where had that come from? What if he wasn’t the praying sort? How embarrassing.

“Thank you,” he said, simply and sincerely. No sarcasm detected. Nice.

“So it was Guys and Dolls you were in with Trynn,” he said.

“Haven’t I told you that before?”

“Not that I remember,” he said. “But that’s not saying much.”

“At least you remembered me this time,” she joked.

“Oh, I always remember you. I just don’t always recognize you.”

She tilted her head, not quite understanding.

“I mean,” he clarified, boldly. “Each version of you made an impression. I just didn’t connect that they all added up to you. ”

What a nice way of putting that, Donna thought. They smiled in unison. Zing went Donna’s heart. They looked away simultaneously, then made eye contact again. Zing again.

Donna cleared her throat.

“What year is your car, and does she have a name?” Donna asked. It was one of Donna’s many quirks that she assumed cars belonging to men were female and cars belonging to women were male.

“2002 and no, I’m not that creative. What name would you suggest?”

“Hmm, let me think about that,” she said. Smurfette? No. Dory? No. Then it struck her. “Sally!”

“Sally?”

“Yes, the girlfriend in the Cars movie. She’s blue too.”

“Sally it is,” he said. “How old is...what’s his name?”

“Kermit is almost 20. He’s a 1992 model.”

“He looks good for his age.”

“Eh, he’s been through a lot. And I really should pass him on to my younger sister,

but I hate car shopping.”

“Sally’s for sale.”

“Really?”

“Well, she is now. Seems like she’s starting to hurt my reputation.”

Donna laughed. More cars pulled out of the parking lot, briefly lighting them with their headlights as they swung past. She waved at Amelia, who gave her a wide-eyed double-take.

“But seriously,” he said. “I’ve already looked at her trade-in value and decided I’d rather sell her directly. To someone who will appreciate her.”

“You don’t want to hang onto her for just 7 more months?” she asked.

“Wasn’t planning to. So seriously, let me know if you’re interested.”

“I’m interested,” she said quickly, not shying away from the double meaning.

He grinned, then shielded his eyes with his hand as another set of headlights lit him up, but didn’t swing past quickly like all the others. She glanced over her shoulder. Besides Kermit and Sally, only one car was left in the lot. Trynn’s. What was she waiting for?

“If I give you my number again, will you text me this time?” he asked. “About the car?”

What did he mean? She had texted him.

Trynn's car was in motion by now. She pulled up next to their bumpers and rolled down her window.

"Jack," she called out across the passenger seat. "One more question."

Jack walked over and leaned into the window to chat with her, their voices too low to carry. Not that Donna was eavesdropping.

Donna turned and tried her key in the lock again. Kermit had relented, to Donna's relief and her dismay. She no longer had an excuse to linger.

Jack wrapped up his goodbyes with Trynn, and she inched her car away, pausing far too long before pulling onto the street. Could she be any more obvious?

Donna had climbed into her car, but she rolled down the window when Jack walked up. He placed a forearm on the Kermit's roof and leaned under it. She raised her eyes to meet his.

"I texted you last time," she began, at the exact moment he started reciting his phone number.

"You first," they said simultaneously, and Donna slumped back in her seat, grinning up at him, noticing the attractive crinkles in the corners of his eyes. He hadn't made the best first impression on Donna, but he improved upon acquaintance.

He pantomimed zipping his lips together, then swept one hand toward her, palm up, indicating that she had the floor.

"Okay," she laughed. "What I said was that I did text you when you gave me your number."

She scrolled through her phone to locate the text in question and handed it to him to read.

“See? You didn’t respond,” she replied.

“Because that’s not my number.”

“I triple checked it!”

“It’s 4327, not 4321.”

“I’ll show you the note. There’s no way that was a 7.”

“You kept it,” he said, with a half smirk.

She blushed, then decided to just lean into it.

“Framed it, actually. As an example of the worst handwriting I’ve ever seen.”

“Well I obviously wrote 9 of the 10 numbers legibly,” he said, glancing down at the screen to check the number again. “90% isn’t bad.”

“When it comes to phone numbers, 100% accuracy is kind of important...”

“So what’s this you texted me?” he said, then read aloud from the screen. “What do you mean ‘alleged kiss’? Are you accusing me of telling but not kissing?”

“I still stand by statement,” she said.

“I am certain I would remember.”

“How certain?”

“Certain enough to make a wager.”

“Name your terms.”

“Loser buys dinner.”

“I warn you. I’m not a cheap date.”

“Neither am I.”

“Isn’t this a he said/she said situation though?” Donna said. “How do you propose we determine who is right?”

“I have thoughts,” he grinned.

“Care to share them?”

“Not at present.”

“Okay, but you should know I have proof.”

“What kind of proof?”

“Photographic. But I don’t have it with me.”

“Naturally.”

“Fine, don’t believe me,” she said, reaching out a hand to shake his to seal the deal.

“But prepare to go down.”

“Bring your evidence to dinner. If I’m not convinced, you pick up the tab.”

“Hold on, why do you get to be the judge?”

“Because there’s no way for me to prove a negative. The onus is on you to make a convincing case.”

“Who uses words like ‘onus’?” she teased.

“People who originally planned to be a lawyer.”

“What might change such a person’s mind?”

“Other lawyers.”

She laughed.

“Well in this case, counselor,” she said, pulling in words she’d heard on Law & Order . “I don’t think I can trust you to be objective.”

“Oh, you definitely can’t. In fact, I’m already inclined to rule in your favor.”

“And why would you want to do that?”

“Well, the way I see it. I’m a winner either way. So I’m not all that invested in the outcome.”

“How so?”

“The worst-case scenario for me is that I turn out to be wrong, but I’ve spent a couple of hours with you. If it costs me a dinner, so be it.”

Warmth spread through Donna's solar plexus.

"Oh, it'll cost you," she challenged. "Just name the time and place."

"Do you like sushi?" he asked.

On her way home, Donna was so caught up in her own thoughts she forgot to call Amelia back.

The next day at rehearsal, Trynn was unusually attentive, in a "keep your enemies closer" kind of way. Donna tried to remain friendly without being drawn in.

"I see The Other Shelby is horning in on my territory," Amelia said during a break. "Do I need to tell her to back off? She has her own Annelle."

"You're the only Shelby for me," Donna said.

"Aww," Amelia said. "But seriously, why the sudden change of heart?"

"My guess is that she didn't like me talking to Dr. Gentry in the parking lot last night."

"I knew there was a vibe between you two!" Amelia said. "Let's hear this long story."

Donna shared the abbreviated version of her history with Jack—if an intermittent series of random encounters could be called "history"—from the electric kiss on the cheek and the pantomimed tug-of-war for the photographer to the dance at her sister's wedding, the sprained ankle, and the eyeball up her nephew's nose.

"Fate certainly has a way of bringing you two together," Amelia said.

“I don’t think fate has had as big of a hand in this as Trinity Mae Wegfahrt does,” Donna said. She had recently learned Trynn’s real last name, and now she couldn’t stop using it.

“With a name like that, I’d remain Trynn Gentry for life, too,” Amelia laughed.

“Same,” Donna said. “Anyway, besides making him coming to see her in Guys and Dolls , Trynn also dragged him to my sister’s wedding. She made him dance with me so she could proposition my brother-in-law.”

“Financially,” Donna quickly clarified when she saw the look on Amelia’s face. “And then she insisted he come see her speak to my college class, where he ended up helping with my sprained ankle.”

“Don’t forget she also roped him into coming last night,” Amelia said. “So really, the stars in your eyes could be considered her fault, too.”

“I do not have stars in my eyes.”

“Oh, yes you do,” said Amelia.

“Okay, fine,” sighed Donna. “Maybe I do. But I’m trying not to.”

“Why? He seems great.”

“Because it doesn’t make sense. Why me? He could get anyone.”

“I say why not you? You’re not just anyone. You’re Donna Freaking Gable! And if you ask me, you blow his ex out of the water in every possible way.”

“Where have you been all my life?” Donna asked. “Can I just carry you around in my

pocket for an instant pep talk anytime I need one?”

“You already do,” Amelia said, pointing at the phone in Donna’s hand. “I’m also available for secret keeping, accent coaching, and salacious gossip.”

“Wait,” Donna said, remembering all their interrupted conversations over the last couple of days. “You know what happened with the divorce, don’t you?”

“I’m friends with the Drama Club costume designer,” Amelia said with a knowing nod.

“You know Camila?” Trynn broke in, appearing out of nowhere again. Donna jumped. She sure hoped Trynn had only heard Amelia’s response and not the question that came before it.

“Cam’s the best. She always made me look amazing,” Trynn said.

“She really is,” Amelia said. “And she’s a big fan...”

“How sweet,” Trynn broke in prematurely.

“...of yours, Donna,” Amelia finished awkwardly. Trynn pretended she hadn’t heard.

“Mine?”

“She reads your column. She’s been following Lavinia’s blog for years. She knew exactly who you were when I mentioned you.”

“You mentioned me?” Donna asked, batting her eyelashes with exaggerated delight.

“It’s not every day that you meet a new bestie,” Amelia said warmly, and Donna

could see even this was making Trynn jealous, not that she'd ever been all that interested in either one of them individually. Something about their instant friendship seemed to threaten Trynn's sense of self.

"I could totally get her featured on the blog," Donna said. "What other shows has she worked on?"

Amelia rattled off an impressive list of television and movie credits.

"How do you know all of this?" Trynn asked.

"You'd be surprised what people will tell you if you just ask them," Amelia said, not unkindly. "Some might say I'm nosy, but I prefer to call it 'curiosity.'"

"I'd love to meet her sometime," Donna said. "I helped with costuming for *Into the Woods* at UCI and loved it."

"She's always looking for good talent," Amelia said. "And by the way, she's worked on two shows that were nominated for Emmys for Outstanding Costuming."

"Eh, nobody watches that part of the Emmys," Trynn said dismissively.

"I do," said Amelia and Donna simultaneously.

"But don't you think it's hilarious to see the crew in tuxes and gowns?" Trynn laughed. "They remind me of kids who got into grandma's costume box. There's a reason they usually stay behind the scenes, you know?"

She did not get the solidarity she expected.

"Oh my gosh, that's so mean," Amelia said in that upbeat, perky way of hers. She had

a genius for calling people out without actually offending them.

“I know,” Trynn said. “But you have to admit it’s true.”

Donna didn’t have to admit it. She knew not everyone secretly longed for the spotlight. Some people (ahem, Betty) would rather die than have a whole theater full of eyes on them. Some people chose to work backstage, not because they weren’t attractive enough to be on camera, but because that’s where their creativity best shined.

Donna had gotten a taste of that world on *Into the Woods* , and she’d jump at the chance to work for a professional costumer someday. Not only would it be a perfect blend of her interests and talents, but she would also get out of the grind of auditioning. The thought of no longer subjecting herself to that level of scrutiny and rejection had its appeal.

CHAPTER TEN

DONNA HADN'T BEEN this nervous for a date since high school. (If it even counted as a date.) She went through a half-dozen outfits, now strewn across her floor, in her efforts to look her best without looking like she was trying to look her best. She finally video called Lavinia, who talked her into a pair of dark skinny jeans, a floral baby-doll top, a light sweater, and sisal wedge sandals—fitting for early spring. How other people got through life without having a fashion consultant on call at all times, she had no idea.

Determined not to arrive first, she circled the block until she saw his car safely in the parking lot. Then she took a few deep breaths, grabbed her Alaia handbag—featured on the blog last week—and headed inside, trying to calm the electric current that was beginning to build in her veins.

Jack was standing just inside the door, hands in his pockets, when she walked in. He wore black, slim-fitting slacks and a light blue button-up that brought out the color of his eyes. And he seemed to understand that for men, shoes can make or break the look. His made it.

They silently appraised each other, both half-smiling. She noted the appreciative look in his eyes without him having to say a word.

“Hi, dimples,” was the first thing he said, and she broke into a grin.

“Hi, Doc,” she said.

“Been here before?”

“Nope.”

She’d driven past it a million times, thinking it looked a little divey from the outside. But the dimly lit interior was cozy, clean, and inviting, with oversize light fixtures that looked like inverted umbrellas dangling from a red-painted ceiling.

“So I realized something,” Donna said, once they were seated. “You’ve met my entire family—including three sets of grandparents—and I don’t know anything about yours.”

“Wait, I have?”

“You don’t remember?” she asked, preparing to unleash a torrent of ridicule.

His eyes narrowed as he searched his memory.

“Oh, your sister’s wedding,” he snapped his fingers. “What I remember is that there were a ton of you, and none of you looked anything alike, apart from matching pink dresses.”

“Accurate,” she said. “And oddly, out of all of us, the twins look the least alike.”

“There are twins?”

So she went through the whole Gable family spiel: seven sisters, all named after classic actresses (middle names coming from a role that actress had played), in alphabetical order, from A to double G.

“And somehow you ended up being the only actress in the bunch?” Jack asked.

“So far,” she laughed. “Okay, that’s enough about me. I asked about your family first.”

But they were interrupted by a waiter, followed by a twenty minute debate about what to order, before they finally returned to the original question.

She learned that Jack had been expected to go into medicine from a very young age, since his father was a hospital administrator and his mother was a third-generation nurse. He went through a brief rebellious phase where he wanted to be a lawyer, but he eventually realized medicine was indeed in his blood. And his older sister’s, too, who had a successful orthodontic practice in San Diego. Then their black-sheep little brother came along, who was now playing baseball in the minor leagues.

“So you’re a middle child, too,” she said. “Is that why you’re an over-achiever? To keep from being invisible?”

“Maybe,” he laughed. “My parents did forget to pick me up from summer camp once. The counselors finally stuck me on a bus home, by myself, which took 8 hours. I was twelve.”

“Brutal,” Donna laughed. “I once got left in a gas station in Yellowstone on a family vacation. They were 30 minutes down the road before anyone noticed I wasn’t in the van.”

“I’m surprised that didn’t happen more often, with all those kids to keep track of.”

“Oh, it did,” Donna said, recounting a few more infamous tales of Gable children who’d been left behind, as the waiter set a platter of sushi rolls before them that was almost too beautiful to eat.

Jack had an easy laugh, low and almost hoarse, and she couldn’t get enough of it.

Every time their eyes met, her lips curled into an involuntary grin, an affliction he seemed to share. The electricity coursing through Donna's limbs had only grown more potent. Soon there would be sparks shooting from her fingers. She hoped she didn't look as jittery and discombobulated as she felt, but at least he didn't seem entirely relaxed either.

"It's nice to have dinner with someone who actually eats," Jack said, just after Donna had placed a deceptively large bite of sushi in her mouth. She covered her mouth with her hand as she self-consciously chewed the tempura shrimp and spicy tuna roll for what felt like an eternity. She finally swallowed and set down her chopsticks, hoping she didn't have asparagus or wasabi in her teeth.

"You realize I'll never be able to eat normally in front of you now," she said.

"I meant it as a compliment," he said. "It's refreshing."

"Chipmunk cheeks are refreshing?"

"Yeah, I could have timed that comment better," he laughed.

"By the time I knew what I was in for, I had no choice but to see it through, you know? Have you ever tried to bite a piece of sushi in half? It's not pretty."

"Never had the need. But I have a big mouth."

"I get accused of that too," Donna laughed. "But they don't mean size."

Their eyes darted to each others' mouths, while both trying to appear like they weren't. Donna cleared her throat.

"Sushi really is terrible first date food, if you think about it. I mean, not that this is a

date.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Well, I wasn’t exactly sure,” Donna said more casually than she felt, popping a few edamame beans in her mouth. Ugh, why did she mention the D-word at all?

“What criteria have to be met for you to consider something a date?” he asked.

“Hmm, let’s see,” Donna said. “Well driving separately is a point in the Not a Date column. But the fact that you’re paying is a point in the Date column...”

“Which we haven’t determined yet...”

“Oh, I’ve got it in the bag,” she said, patting the phone that lay on the white linen tablecloth next to her plate. “But regardless of who pays, it really comes down to intentions.”

“Good point,” Jack said, leaning forward, a glint of wickedness in his eyes. “And what, may I ask, are your intentions with me, Ms. Gable?”

Donna leaned forward as well.

“To beat you at your own game,” she said.

“Is that all?”

“For now.”

“And how do you intend to do that?”

“I brought my proof,” Donna said, scrolling through her phone. “Of the ‘alleged’ kiss. Are you prepared to admit defeat?”

“It depends entirely on the quality of your evidence,” he said.

“Then read it and weep,” Donna handed over the phone, which she’d opened to a screen-captured photo from the theater’s blog. It showed Jack looking sheepishly at the camera while Donna and Trynn each kissed him on one of his cheeks.

“This was you too?” he asked.

“See? You never recognize me.”

“It’s not that I don’t recognize you, it’s that...never mind,” he stopped himself. “Do you save everything?”

“Well, I had to hunt it down just for this purpose. But now I can keep it for my resume. Plus, I look really cute in this picture.”

“Can’t disagree there,” he said, staring at the photo. “I do remember this. You’re right about it being...electric.”

“I think those sequins can really hold a charge,” she laughed.

“So I wasn’t the only poor schmuck you electrocuted that night?”

“Oh, I never shock and tell. Swipe left, there’s another one.”

Jack took in the photo of his hapless self being pulled between Donna and Trynn.

“Interesting metaphor,” he said. “Almost prophetic.”

When he handed the phone back to her, she noticed for the first time that Jack was leaning decidedly in her direction. Was it prophetic? Or was she simply stronger than waif-like Trynn?

They finished their sushi, talking easily about everything and nothing. Given the differences in their ages and educational attainment, she felt remarkably at ease around him.

When the waiter brought the check, Donna pushed it toward Jack with a triumphant smile.

“Thank you for dinner,” she said. “You were a worthy opponent.”

“Thank you for not gloating too much.”

“I’m gloating on the inside,” she said. “But, thanks to my many years in the theater, you’d never know it.”

His smile was followed by a serious and thoughtful look that flashed across his face. Had he always been this readable?

“How often do you use your, er, professional training in your everyday life?” he asked.

“Probably less than you do,” she teased.

“I’m honestly curious,” he said. “When you spend so much time pretending to be other people, do you ever...forget who you are?”

“Not really,” she said. “But I get what you’re saying. Some of my theater friends can’t not be in character. Basically everything they say is a line from a movie or a

play. You can never tell if they're being real or trying a line on you."

"It's exhausting," he said, clearly from experience.

"Don't get me wrong," she said. "Every play you're in affects you—opens you up in some new way. But you have to stay grounded too. Come back to the real world now and then."

"I could do with a little less of the real world myself," he said.

"Yeah, your job is all real, all the time, isn't it?" she said, thoughtfully. "I can't even imagine what that would be like."

"It can be overwhelming," he said.

"Maybe that explains your thing for actresses," she said. "It's like, vicarious escapism, or something."

He choked on his drink of water.

"Sorry," he said, clearing his throat.

"What?" she asked.

"You just surprised me."

"Oh wait, maybe not," she said thoughtfully. "Dr. Balding said something about you not 'doing' actresses anymore, which—don't worry—I didn't take literally."

His laughter erupted from his chest.

“What?” she asked.

“You are refreshingly direct,” he said, leaning back, placing his napkin on the table, and looking at her with unmistakable admiration.

She tried to deflect.

“This is the second time you’ve called me refreshing. What am I, a beverage?”

He laughed.

“If you are, I think you might be the intoxicating kind.”

It was kind of a cheesy line. But it didn’t feel cheesy. She felt her cheeks heat up.

“Wow, doctor, you’re making me blush.”

“Please, it’s just Jack,” he said, lifting one corner of his mouth in a half-smile as he signed the receipt the waiter had brought back.

“Okay. Just Jack, are you flirting with me?”

“If you can’t tell, I must be doing it wrong.”

“And you accuse me of being direct?” she laughed, reaching for the tea light in the center of the table and twisting it so the patterned glass cast intricate shadows on the tablecloth.

He watched her thoughtfully.

“You don’t play games, do you?” he finally asked.

“I don’t,” she said with a shrug. “What you see is what you get.”

He laughed at that, and she realized the irony of what she’d just said.

“I mean, when I’m not in character, of course,” she clarified.

“I like that about you.”

“Do you?”

“Yes, I do.”

“But you barely know me.”

“I feel like—” he stopped himself.

“You feel like—” she prompted.

Donna felt a hesitant anticipation rising in her chest, not sure where he was going with this.

“How do I put this?” he finally said. “So, I’ve met all these different versions of you: pink-haired showgirl, dancing bridesmaid, clumsy college student with glasses, waitress in a Daphne costume, mom of a toddler who turned out to be his aunt. Did I miss any?”

“I think that’s all of us,” she laughed, leaning back in her chair and tilting her head in the dim light. “Except there was that one time I stood in line behind you at the hospital cafeteria.”

“Was I buying an egg-salad sandwich?”

“Yes!”

“I remember that day...” he said as her eyes widened. “Just kidding. That’s what I always get. It’s the only thing that’s reliably edible in that place. Why didn’t you say hello?”

“Like you would have recognized me.”

“See, that’s exactly what I’m trying to get at. Every time I met a new, er, iteration of you, I would get the same impression. I don’t know how to describe it. Something familiar, something like *deja vu*...”

“Because you had literally met me before,” she said, brushing it off.

“No, that’s not it,” he said earnestly. “I know I’m not explaining it right. But I kept having these unusual reactions—”

“Like a rash?” she joked.

“I’m being serious,” he said, finally finding the words. “Okay, so I thought I was feeling an instant connection to all these different women, right? But all this time, they all turned out to be one person. You.”

“Me,” Donna repeated quietly.

He nodded.

She held his gaze. His eyes wouldn’t let her go. The world was silent around them. Utterly still. Too still. She looked around with a start. They were the only ones left in the restaurant.

“We better go,” she said, gathering her purse and quickly rising to her feet.

He walked with her across the parking lot to where Kermit waited.

“Thanks for dinner,” she said, the weight of what he’d said hanging between them. She was still trying to absorb it.

“Me too,” he said.

Not wanting to appear like she was expecting anything else from him, Donna fumbled the key in the lock. No luck.

“Okay, let’s just turn around and pretend we don’t care whether he lets me in or not,” Donna said. “Works every time.”

“Sally’s still for sale.”

“Shhh, Kermit can hear you.”

She leaned back against the car, and he positioned himself next to her.

“Did I make you uncomfortable in there?”

“Oh no, not at all,” she smiled sideways at him. “It’s just, as a waitress, I always hate it when people linger forever after I’ve been on my feet all day and I just want to go home. I suddenly realized we were the only ones in there.”

“I didn’t notice either.”

“Shoot! I should have left an extra tip to make up for it,” she smacked her forehead.

“I got it covered. I come from a long line of over-tippers.”

“Yes, I think I know this about you,” she said, thinking back to the \$50 he left her at the In Character Cafe. She didn’t read anything into it back then, given her assumption that he was still married. But in hindsight, he was obviously trying to signal his interest, even back then. And if she were ready to be honest with herself, she’d admit that she’d also felt that instant connection he was describing, every single time. But it had never been a real possibility. Until now.

“You sure can tell a lot about someone by the way they treat service workers,” she said, reaching for a safe topic.

“Absolutely,” he said emphatically.

“Do you know from personal experience?”

“Oh yes,” he said. “I’ve valeted cars. I worked at a bagel shop in high school. And I cleaned hospitals when I was an undergrad.”

“And look at you now,” she said, nudging him with her shoulder. “A full-fledged doctor.”

“Half-fledged,” he corrected.

“How old are you?” she blurted out.

Jack burst out laughing.

“I mean, I just realized. You don’t seem old. But you’ve been in school forever, so you’d have to be...what? At least 30?” she said.

“Ouch!” he said. “I’m twenty-seven. And a half.”

He angled toward her, still leaning against Kermit. Donna angled too.

“That’s pretty young to be a resident, isn’t it?”

“My birthday’s in August, so I graduated from high school at 17. Then I finished my undergrad in 3 years.”

“So you started med school when you were...”

“Just barely 21.”

“And how old were you when you got married?”

“Twenty-four. The summer before my last year of med school.”

“And divorced?”

He paused. Not a pleasant topic.

“Two years later. I was 26.”

Donna wanted to ask what happened. But she didn’t.

“That sucks,” she said.

He shrugged.

“Since we’re getting personal,” he said. “How old are you?”

“Just turned 23,” she said. “Three days ago.”

“Happy birthday,” he said slowly and seriously. He was looking at her intently, mesmerizing her with his tractor-beam eyes.

“Thank you.”

She didn’t break eye contact.

“Can I kiss you?”

Donna’s eyes widened and she felt a melting sensation behind her ribs.

“Yes?”

“Is that a question?” he asked, leaning closer.

“No!” she shook her head and bit her lip as his face descended in excruciatingly slow motion. “I mean, no it’s not a question. Yes, you can—”

His lips caught hers, and he slipped his left arm around her back and pulled her close.

Donna had never been kissed like this. So expertly. So thoroughly.

His right hand reached up to caress her neck, his thumb brushing along her jawline and coming to rest against her pulse.

Wait, was he measuring her heart rate?

She laughed against his mouth.

“What?” he asked with a grin.

“Am I having heart palpitations, doc?”

“Well, your heart is racing,” he said. “Might need to get it checked out.”

“I think I know the cause,” she said.

She lifted two fingers to his neck, searching for his pulse, but not practiced enough to know exactly where to look.

“Here,” he said, taking her hand and guiding it across his stubbly skin until she could feel the rapid thrum of his heartbeat against her fingers. It was thrilling to feel the evidence of her effect on him.

“Uh-oh,” she said. “I think it’s contagious.”

“I think so too,” he said, a deeper timbre to his voice than she’d heard before.

She pressed her mouth against his again. But loud voices behind her startled her, and she broke away self-consciously.

It was the restaurant staff, emerging through the side door, speaking rapidly in Japanese and laughing. Hopefully not at what they had just witnessed.

She turned away from the interlopers and leaned back against the car again, shoulder to shoulder with Jack, catching his fingers in hers.

She glanced up sideways at him and they shared an amused glance at being caught kissing in a parking lot like teenagers.

“You are so. Damn. Cute.”

He kissed one dimple. And then the other. Then he checked his watch and groaned.

“I’m on shift tonight,” he said. “When can I see you again?”

“You have my number.”

She turned to try her key in the lock again, her hands trembling. What was the big deal? It was just a kiss. She enthusiastically kissed Mychal on stage every night for weeks and experienced nary a tremor.

Despite her bumbling, Kermit let her right in, apparently satisfied that his matchmaking had yielded the desired result.

Jack shut her door for her and waited until she had started her engine and backed out of her space before climbing into his car. She waved one more time over her shoulder as she pulled out of the parking lot, certain she could still feel his eyes on her.

And Donna drove her cute self home.

Cute. That was the word he used. Not beautiful. Not sexy. Just cute.

The kind of thing you’d say about a little sister or a puppy.

But then again, if that’s how he thought of her, he wouldn’t have kissed her like that.

Donna woke up the next morning to a text from Jack. He’d sent it at 6 in the morning, right about when his shift ended. Just seeing his name pop up on her phone so soon sent her heart rate skyrocketing.

“That’s the most fun I’ve ever had losing a bet,” he’d sent.

“Happy to beat you anytime,” she replied, not expecting an immediate response, since he was probably sleeping. But she was wrong.

“You can choose our next wager,” he said.

“How are you still awake after working all night?”

“I dozed off for a minute, but the adrenaline is keeping me up.”

“From your shift?”

“And the events immediately preceding.”

“Nice vocabulary, Doc.”

“You’re one to talk, Ms. Vicarious Escapism.”

“Hit the nail on the head, though, didn’t I?”

“I’m still trying to decide.”

“That means I did!”

“I think you’re trying to change the subject.”

“From?”

“From the events immediately preceding.”

“You mean the kiss.”

“Yes.”

“Maybe I was.”

“Why?”

“It feels safer, somehow.”

“Safer than...?”

She wasn't sure how to answer. There was an intensity to Jack that she wasn't used to. Their interactions always felt supercharged. She'd assumed it was due to an age gap, but he wasn't as much older than her as she'd initially thought. Just four and a half years.

“Safer than what you're actually saying, I guess.”

“How's your heart rate now?” he texted.

“Gallop,” she admitted.

“Mine too.”

In the cold light of day, no longer intoxicated by sushi and tea lights, she wanted to ask him why. What he saw in her. It made sense that he would affect her in this way. He was a gorgeous, capable, relatable, funny, mature, brilliant older man who saved lives for a living. But why would someone like that take Donna Gable seriously? She wasn't beautiful as his former wife, or as thin, or as successful. And he must have said something disparaging about actresses to Dr. Balding at some point. She was just

a silly blonde cliché. He was...adult. Serious.

“But why?” she texted.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“Lol, no it’s not.”

“I’m afraid if I tried to put it into words, I’d scare you off. Again.”

“You didn’t scare me last time,” she lied.

“Okay then, here goes,” he texted.

Then the three little dots appeared on her screen, undulating, intriguing, teasing.

Was he doing this on purpose?

He had to be.

She pictured him grinning mischievously on the other end of the phone.

She finally texted him a single question mark.

He responded with: “I’m drawn to you.”

Whoa.

That sent her heart hammering.

“But I don’t really think I’m your type,” she replied.

“And what evidence are you using to come to that conclusion?”

Your ex-wife, she thought. Your profession. Your physical superiority.

When she didn’t respond right away, he texted again: “You literally had your fingers on my pulse last night. What did that tell you?”

Double whoa.

Donna felt increasingly out of her depth. A little bit exposed, somehow, and a whole lot vulnerable.

She realized with a jolt that every boy she’d ever dated—and they all felt like boys—she had hand-picked precisely because they felt safe and non-threatening. This felt like something else entirely.

“I see what you mean,” she finally responded.

“That’s why I didn’t believe you about the kiss. I would have remembered.”

“And yet I was telling the truth.”

“Sort of.”

By the time Jack asked when he could see her again, Donna was riding high. Flirting had never been so thrilling, never felt so amped up. And she was definitely looking forward to a repeat of last night.

Unfortunately, between his 60-hours-per-week work schedule, her day job, and her evening rehearsals, they couldn’t find more than an hour of overlap for at least 10 days.

“I could come opening night,” he texted.

“Will you be able to stay awake?”

“That depends on how riveting your performance is.”

“Well I won’t make any guarantees. I don’t usually like people I know coming opening night. I’d rather work out my jitters in front of strangers.”

“As you said, we barely know each other.”

“And you are pretty strange...”

“That settles it. I’m buying a ticket for opening night. And I’ll take you out after. I could use a little more of that vicarious escapism.”

“Okay, fine,” she texted. “I’ll be the one on the stage, down front. Floral dress and glasses at the beginning, pregnant by the end. Super convincing Southern accent. You’ll know which one is me because I have the very first line.”

“I think I’ll recognize you.”

“With your track record, I didn’t want to take any chances.”

“Can you give me a secret signal from the stage, just in case?”

“Okay, in the first scene, you’ll hear me say ‘Excuse me. Should I call a doctor or something?’ Consider that my secret message just for you.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE NEXT WEEK passed in a blur of work and rehearsals and flirtatious texting.

“You sure have been grinning at your phone a lot lately,” Amelia said one day in the dressing room.

“Earth to Donna,” said Betty at Sunday dinner.

“You’ve been a million miles away lately,” chimed in Audrey, her hand resting on her newly pregnant belly. A girl, due in August. Audrey was relieved that the arrival of Ingrid Bergman had spared her from needing to research I names. And the family had just spent an hour brainstorming J names: Judy, Joan, Jean, Jane, June, Judith, Jessica, Janet, Jeannette.

Donna played dumb, even when Ginger accused her of being “in lo-o-ove.” She obviously wasn’t. But she liked Jack more and more with each passing day. She didn’t want to jinx whatever this was by talking about it. Even an open book deserved to close its cover now and then.

But Amelia sleuthed it two days before final dress rehearsal.

“It’s that doctor isn’t it?” she said while they stood side by side at the lighted mirror, practicing their makeup. Donna was helping Amelia achieve an upscale look, while going for a lower-class vibe herself.

Donna tried to stammer a denial, but she was too caught off guard to be convincing.

“Well, he’s just a half-fledged doctor,” Donna replied, remembering his earlier joke.

“I didn’t know it was possible to be only partially fledged,” laughed Amelia.

“Apparently it is,” she said.

“So, spill it, sister.”

“Well, we went out once. A week ago.”

“And?”

“We had sushi.”

“And?”

“There was some kissing.”

“And?”

The flush that lit up Donna’s cheeks said it all. Amelia squealed and bumped Donna with her hip.

“Girl! When are you seeing him again?”

“Well, his work schedule is insane. The soonest we could get together is Friday.”

“Friday is opening night.”

“He’s coming to the show and taking me out after.”

“As if you don’t have enough to be nervous about!”

“I know. I tried to talk him out of it. Sort of.”

“Who’s coming to opening night?” asked a voice behind them.

Zoinks! Where had Trynn come from? And why was she even here tonight?

“Oh, just a guy—man—I met,” Donna said, unable to keep the guilty look out of her eyes.

Ugh, why did she correct herself?

“Good for you,” Trynn said in a falsely bright voice, dripping with condescension.

“An older man, huh? How’d you meet?”

“Long story,” Donna said. “So, isn’t your dress rehearsal tomorrow night?”

“Sure is. I just came to support y’all. See how I measure up to The Other Shelby. Pretty stiff competition.”

Donna and Amelia exchanged a look, fully aware that Trynn was really interested in seeing how The Other Shelby measured up to her .

“I’m just happy to be here,” Amelia said. “I don’t mind being the consolation prize for people who can’t make it to one of your performances.”

“Oh, please,” Trynn said. “I’m sure there are some people who won’t even know who I am.”

Such humility.

“Well, break a leg, girls,” Trynn said and sauntered away.

When she was safely out of earshot, Donna let out a deep sigh.

“That right there is my biggest hesitation about Jack.”

“Who cares what she thinks?”

“What I care about is that he liked her enough at one point to marry her. And what does that say about his judgment?”

“Maybe he was young.”

“He was older than I am right now.”

“She is a great actress, though,” Amelia said. “Maybe she had him fooled. Did you ever watch Drama Club? She really was perfectly cast.”

“Never could get into it,” Donna said. “Wait! You never told me what Camila said about Trynn and the divorce, or whatever...”

Had she really been so distracted that she’d forgotten to ask?

“Well, you know I’d rather walk on my own lips than criticize someone,” Amelia said, borrowing one of Truvy’s lines from the play, much to Donna’s glee. “But Trynn’s character ends up having a torrid affair with the school principal. And apparently Trynn wanted to do some authentic research into her character’s motivations.”

“No!”

“Yes. According to Camila, she was caught in the back of a catering truck with a producer. A married producer, mind you.”

“With a producer, in a truck full of produce? How weirdly poetic.”

“Her character was killed off not long after that.”

“And her marriage too,” Donna said, suddenly finding it incredibly generous of Jack to have agreed to coach the Shelbys after such a betrayal. And Trynn fell even further in Donna’s estimation, if such a thing were possible.

By the time rehearsal ended that night, Donna had to drag herself out to her car. She had not worn sensible shoes to the cafe earlier that day, and as her dad liked to put it, “her dogs were really barking.”

But she forgot all about her feet when she found a prescription slid beneath her windshield wiper, with a note written in exaggeratedly careful handwriting.

“If it’s not too late (for you), I’d like to see you tonight. It won’t be too late for me.”

Maybe Donna wasn’t so tired after all.

“It’s not too late,” she texted Jack from the front seat of her car.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” he instantly replied.

“Where are you?”

“Home.”

She realized she couldn’t picture anything about his home. Did he still live in the

house he once shared with Trynn? She'd made all kinds of assumptions about his previous life and marriage but knew very little about how and where he lived now.

"Don't you have an early shift?"

"Yes."

"Won't you be tired?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to come over anyway?"

"Yes."

So she sent him her address and drove to her apartment at slightly unwise speeds. By the time she heard his car in the driveway, she'd just finished tossing several armfuls of clutter onto her bed and closing her bedroom door. She managed to sweep the dishes from the countertop into the sink and light a scented candle on the countertop by the time his knock sounded at the door.

She took a couple of calming breaths, looked down at her outfit—yoga pants, an oversize t-shirt, and fuzzy, polka-dotted socks—and silently fretted that she'd chosen to tidy her apartment instead of her person.

She opened the door. Jack Gentry stood on her doorstep in a t-shirt and jeans, holding a plate of cinnamon rolls in one hand. She'd never seen him in jeans. She broke into a grin and stepped aside so he could walk through. She took the dessert from him and set it on the countertop.

"Hi," he said, lifting one corner of his mouth in that way of his.

“Hi,” she smiled, awash in giddiness.

He stuck his hands in his pockets, looking half pleased/half embarrassed by his offering.

“My sister is famous for her cinnamon rolls,” he explained. “She dropped some by, and I didn’t have anyone to share them with.”

“You live alone?” she asked.

“With my brother. Temporarily,” he said.

“And he doesn’t like cinnamon rolls?” she asked, scraping a dollop of icing off the edge of the plate with her finger and relishing the burst of sugar on her tongue.

“He’s on a very strict training regimen,” Jack said. “So he only ate two.”

Donna laughed.

“He begged me to get rid of the rest,” he said.

“And naturally, you thought of me.”

“I was thinking of you anyway.”

He said it so matter-of-factly that she was momentarily speechless. Her heart rate accelerated.

Unsure what to do next, she gestured toward the loveseat, which took up most of the wall opposite the television, and curled herself into the corner of the sofa beneath the window overlooking the driveway. He settled onto the loveseat cushion nearest her,

the edges of their armrests kissing—just like their knees would be if she didn't have her feet tucked under her. A side table covered with stacks of old VHS movies sat in the corner between them.

She couldn't believe Jack Gentry was here, inside her house.

“Did you wait long outside the theater?”

“Long enough to wonder if I'd get accused of being a stalker.”

“Oh, our cast doesn't get stalkers. We're a bunch of nobodies.”

“Well, I wasn't the only one out there, so think again...”

“A whole gaggle of stalkers was out there? And I only got the one note? How disappointing.”

“Um,” he said, clearly searching for some clever way to continue the banter. “I threw the rest away?”

“Rude,” she said, leaning her chin on her hand and looking up at him under her eyelashes. “What if I had a better option in there?”

“You didn't, I'm afraid,” he said, his face breaking into a wide smile. “It was either me, a door-to-door salesman, or a washed up sitcom star from the '80s.”

She pretended to thoughtfully consider those choices.

“Which sitcom?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

He laughed.

“Ouch, maybe I was overconfident in my chances.”

“And what exactly was the salesman selling?”

“I’ll just see myself out,” he said, putting his hands on his knees and leaning forward like he was about to stand up.

She stuck one foot out to stop him.

“Well, since you’re already here,” she said.

He relaxed against the back of the loveseat.

“Nice place,” he said, looking around. “Do you have roommates?”

So she explained the history of The Launchpad, her current solo status, and Elizabeth’s sporadic comings and goings on weekends and school breaks.

In return, she learned a little more about his history and family, although he was still guarded about his first marriage. She tried not to appear too curious or eager for details. They would come in time. She found she wanted to soak up every detail she could learn about him, even if it involved one Trinity Mae Wegfahrt.

As he talked about summers at his grandparents’ house in Oregon, he absently picked up one video cassette after another from the side table and stack them in precise piles.

“Have you seen any of those?” she asked.

“Just this one,” he said, holding up an Audrey Hepburn film.

“Abba, my extra grandma, whose house this is, was cleaning out her old movie

collection, and I asked if I could bring some up here. And the VCR too,” she said, pointing at the old video playing device sitting on the floor in front of the television.

“Be kind, rewind,” he said, repeating the old slogan from childhood. “I haven’t seen one of those in years.”

“My family loves old movies,” Donna said. “The current stuff just doesn’t compare.”

“So you’re saying you don’t think we’ll all still be watching Transformers and Twilight thirty years from now?” he said, referring to a couple of the top movies currently in theaters.

“I hope not,” she laughed. “Or Pirates of the Caribbean , part twelve.”

He started reading the titles of the movies out loud:

Philadelphia Story, It’s a Wonderful Life, How to Marry a Millionaire, My Fair Lady, Taming of the Shrew, Top Hat, To Catch a Thief

“These are all the movies my sisters and I are named after,” she said. “Abba made sure she got a copy of all of them. Top Hat was pretty hard to find, though. It’s from 1935.”

“Who’s named after that one?”

“One of the twins. Ginger Dale Gable is named after Ginger Rogers and her character Dale Tremont. And yes she hates that her name rhymes with a soft drink.”

He chuckled.

“And you?”

“Mary in It’s a Wonderful Life . Played by Donna Reed.”

Jack picked up the cassette and flipped it over to read the back.

“The D names were hard to come by,” she said. “I was almost named Doris Jan. Can you imagine? I would have gone by my middle name for sure.”

“Or initials. You’d be a cute DJ,” he said without even looking up to catch the pleased look on her face.

“What’s your middle name?” she asked.

“Oliver.”

Swoon.

Jack Oliver Gentry. Even his name was giving her heart palpitations.

“You shall henceforth be known as JOG,” she declared.

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” he said, and their eyes caught and held for a second longer than she expected. And that’s all it took for her insides to start to liquefy.

“Wanna watch it?” she asked, indicating the movie in his hand.

“In March?”

“Let’s live a little,” she said, leaning forward eagerly and taking it from him. “Walk on the wild side.”

“I don’t know,” he said, feigning skepticism. “Next thing I know, you’ll be wanting

to watch Valentine's movies in October, or go trick-or-treating in December. Complete and utter pandemonium."

"Valentine's movies are appropriate any time of year," she declared.

"Depends on who you're watching them with," he said.

She couldn't disagree with that.

He caught her eye and patted the seat next to him. An invitation.

She countered by patting the seat next to her.

He raised his eyebrows.

She raised hers.

"I have a feeling you could talk me into anything," Jack said, rising with a sigh and settling next to her on the sofa, a little too far away for comfort.

She quickly stood and slid the Christmas movie into the dusty machine, the familiar clicking, clattering, and winding sounds taking her straight back to her elementary years.

She pressed the play button and settled back in her corner of the couch, lifting her feet onto a pillow she'd placed on the coffee table.

"Long day?" he asked.

"And bad shoes," she nodded, again regretting the Carrie Bradshaw costume she'd worn to work earlier.

“All right, hand them here,” he said, patting his lap. “Come on.”

So she swung her legs onto his lap and snuggled down.

As the black-and-white movie played, he mapped her feet for her, quietly and competently identifying this muscle or that bone through her zany socks, pressing here and massaging there, managing to both stimulate and calm her nervous system at the same time. She felt alert and highly aware of his every touch, but also so relaxed she might melt into the leather cushion.

“What did I do to deserve this?” she asked.

“You work hard,” he shrugged.

Donna’s heart swelled. His job was so much higher pressure than hers, although probably not as physically demanding. She found it extra touching that a man like him took her exhaustion seriously, and didn’t downplay it as less important than his because she was “just” a waitress and “just” an actress.

“You definitely know what you’re doing there, Doc,” she said.

“Hope you’re taking notes, because it’s going to be your turn here in a minute,” he said.

“If I’m not a pile of goo by the time you’re done. I’m so relaxed I can barely hold my head up anymore.”

So he pushed into a pressure point, and that woke her right up.

“Rude!” she said. “Now you owe me at least 10 more minutes.”

And he obliged.

They talked through the whole movie. Talking through movies was one of Donna's favorite pastimes. She couldn't understand people who wanted to just sit in silence. There were so many things begging to be commented upon! And comment she did, encouraged by his low laughter. She felt aglow from head to toe.

He was charmed by her. There was no doubt about it. And the feeling was mutual.

They forgot about the cinnamon rolls.

Opening night rolled around, and Donna couldn't distinguish which of the butterflies in her stomach were there because her upcoming performance and which were due to Jack's presence in the audience.

With 20 minutes until showtime, Donna peeked from backstage to find him sitting in the center of the second row, in about the same seat he'd occupied all those years before, when he'd come with his parents to sleep through his fiancé's debut in *Guys and Dolls*.

Donna realized she could pinpoint that as the exact moment she'd first laid eyes on Jack Gentry. And once she told him that fact, he'd be able to pinpoint the exact moment he'd first laid eyes on her too.

"I see you," she texted him.

He glanced at his phone, grinned and looked around, searching for her.

"No fair. I can't see you," he replied.

"Well you'll see plenty of me here in a few minutes."

“It’s about time.”

“You saw me three days ago.”

“That’s not good enough,” he texted, still grinning.

She agreed.

As more of the audience filed in to take their seats, the two on either side of Jack remained empty.

“I think you may have forgotten your deodorant...” she started typing, as Amelia sidled up to her and peered over her shoulder.

“He’s here!” Amelia said and squeezed her shoulders. “You’re brilliant in this role. He’s going to love it.”

“Let me reiterate once again how grateful I am that you are my Shelby,” Donna said, turning for a quick hug. “Are you ready to go into diabetic shock?”

“More than ready,” Amelia said. “Ooh, there’s Nick. I’ve been looking for him.” And she chased after him. Just a few more weeks, and they could finally act on their mutual attraction.

Donna looked back at her phone.

“Ha ha,” Jack had typed. “No, I purposely bought three seats. Doing my part to support the arts.”

“And give you room to man spread?”

“That too. But don’t worry, I made sure I smell amazing.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” she texted back.

“Challenge accepted.”

Oh how she loved bantering with this man.

Just as she was starting to formulate a witty reply, the doorbell chimed in the theater, reminding the audience to find their seats. And another text popped up from Jack.

“Be thinking about where you want to go for dinner,” he said.

“Somewhere with a trough?” she typed back rapidly. “I’ve been too nervous to eat much today. My appetite will kick in around the middle of Act II.”

She saw his face light up with laughter. He’d once said he found her willingness to eat in front of him “refreshing.” She wanted to test his commitment to that statement. So far he was passing.

“Shoot, I forgot my portable one. I could have sneaked it backstage during intermission,” he texted back.

“Next time,” she replied, still baffled and mystified by the attention he was showing her. She wasn’t sure what she’d done to deserve it.

“Places everyone,” the director called, and Donna hurriedly stashed her phone and took position behind one of the styling chairs in the salon.

The curtain rose to generous applause. It was almost a full house tonight. And Donna nervously launched into her first line. What a stroke of luck that her character was

supposed to appear awkward and nervous. A trembling voice and shaking hands would only make her performance more convincing.

Donna sneaked surreptitious looks in Jack's direction whenever she could. He was leaning forward, rapt with attention. He sat up extra tall when she delivered the "Excuse me. Should I call a doctor or something?" line. Donna struggled to hide the growing giddiness in her chest, reminding herself she was supposed to be timid, shy, awkward Annelle Dupuy Desoto. Not floating-on-cloud-nine Donna Mary Gable.

It wasn't easy.

Until it was.

During her longest break off stage, Donna couldn't help sneaking back to her secret spot to peek out at the audience. The seat to Jack's left was now occupied.

By a tiny brunette.

Trynn.

Jack was turned away from Donna and toward his ex-wife, and her face was turned up to his, eyes shining with something that looked like hope.

She was so beautiful. Truly movie-star beautiful.

Donna felt herself deflate.

If she wanted Jack back, and it appeared that she did, would Donna really, truly stand a chance?

For her own sanity, she had to stop looking toward the second row. She channeled

her desperate, discombobulated feelings into her poor, jilted character until the end of the play.

“Wow, you were amazing tonight!” Amelia gushed after curtain call. Donna smiled half-heartedly. The whole cast was supposed to do the meet-and-greet for opening night, so Donna and her fake pregnant belly headed out to the lobby.

Jack found her instantly and produced a huge bouquet of roses from behind his back. Where had those been hiding? Under his chair?

“That was incredible!” Jack said, pulling her in to a tight hug, her maternity pillow squishing between them. “I’m proud to say I recognized you right away.”

“Even with the glasses?” Donna tried to joke. “I’m proud of you too!”

Donna felt herself starting to melt into him, even as her mind darted to the image of Trynn sitting by him in the audience. Still, she didn’t want to end the hug, and Jack hadn’t broken free either.

“I know this sounds weird because we’ve been texting every day and I just saw you, but...I missed you,” he said into her ear, a tone of something like wonder in his voice.

“I...” she started to respond, then made eye contact with two wide eyes staring at them from across the lobby. Trynn quickly masked her look of utter shock, squared her shoulders, and sauntered over.

“Hi guys,” Trynn said brightly as Jack released Donna and turned toward the sing-song voice. “You two sure have gotten friendly.”

She stole a glance at Jack and detected subtle signs of irritation in his demeanor,

which pleased her.

“You seemed like you were in such a hurry a minute ago,” Jack said, guardedly.

“Oh, you know my parents. They won’t mind if I’m a teensy bit late. I had to come congratulate the B cast. It was your best performance yet, truly. Didn’t you think it was adorable , Jack?”

She threaded one arm through Jack’s. He stiffened.

Trynn was such a natural at this. In just a few short sentences, she managed to emphasize their joint history and Donna’s place as an outsider, downplay the “B” cast’s status, infantilize their performance, and recruit Jack to her side of the conversation.

“I remember seeing your parents at Guys and Dolls ,” Donna couldn’t help replying. “How are the Wegfahrts?”

Before either could reply, another audience member broke in to tell Donna how much she’d enjoyed the play, but caught a glimpse of Trynn and screamed. “Oh my gosh, it’s Josie from Drama Club ! Can I get your autograph?”

Without letting go of Jack, Trynn obliged, flipping to the cast photos section of the program and signing beneath her name, which drew a few more audience members over to request signatures as well.

One of the women took pity on Donna and asked for her autograph too, which would have been fine if not for the superior expression on Trynn’s face.

“You have to come tomorrow night too and see if my medical crisis measures up to the one you saw tonight,” Trynn told the assembled women with a musical laugh. “I

got this handsome doctor to coach us both himself, so you can blame him if you're not convinced."

She heavily emphasized the word doctor, which sparked newfound interest in the women's eyes. Donna could tell he wasn't loving the attention.

Just as he started to disentangle himself, Trynn suddenly swooned into Jack. He caught her, and their small audience erupted into startled laughter and applause, thinking she was giving them a preview of what was to come tomorrow night.

Donna's eyes nearly rolled out of her head at Trynn's embarrassing antics.

But when Trynn didn't immediately perk back up to bask in the attention, an awkward silence descended. Trynn continued to slump toward the ground, completely limp, until Jack had the presence of mind to scoop her up and carry her to a settee against the wall behind them, as if she weighed nothing at all. He was in full doctor mode, checking her pulse, lifting her eyelids, trying to rouse her.

The line of actors had parted to let them through, and Donna sprang into action, subtly redirecting the actors to close ranks and block the public's view of the spectacle, assuring everyone that Jack was a trained professional and Trynn was in good hands.

Donna rushed to the concessions stand and grabbed an overpriced bottle of water, promising to pay for it later, and returned to find Trynn looking up at Jack with tear-filled eyes and tightly gripping his forearm as he perched sideways next to her, speaking intently.

"Quick thinking, Donna, thanks," Jack said, looking up at Donna with a grateful expression, tinged with regret.

Trynn didn't look away from Jack or acknowledge Donna in any way. He helped her sit up so she could drink the water, and she leaned against him—unnecessarily, Donna thought.

Donna slipped back into the line of actors, then made her escape to the dressing room as soon as there was a lull. In all the confusion, she had no idea where she'd put the roses. She'd probably dropped them.

She wouldn't mind if they'd been trampled on and strewn throughout the lobby.

CHAPTER TWELVE

IT TOOK SEVERAL hours, but Jack did eventually try to call Donna that night, a couple of times. She sent both calls to voicemail and sank lower into her bubble bath. She'd listen to the messages later.

She replied to multiple texts from her family asking how opening night had gone and promising to come as soon as they were authorized. She responded to Amelia, promising to fill her in more fully in the morning.

And just as she was about to put her phone down to wash her hair, she got an email alert.

Donna—

I have to thank you for helping tonight, and for being a friend to Jack during our break. You don't need to be worried about me. The water really helped, and I'm back on my feet. Just got a little lightheaded is all. Jack was an angel to me, as always.

I think it's so important for all of us in the production to support each other, and I was planning to just watch you guys from the sidelines. But Jack saw me and waved me over, which was such a surprise. I can't believe he showed up on the wrong opening night! But it's a good thing he did, because I don't know what I would have done without him.

You and Amelia should come tomorrow night to return the favor. I think Jack will be there too, just in case I need him. I think I'm fine now, but he's just so concerned.

He's going to be the BEST Dad.

Hugs,

Trynn

First of all, Donna wasn't worried about her in the least. Secondly, did Trynn really think a divorce counted as being "on a break"? And thirdly, she didn't believe Trynn's version of events for one second. There's no way Jack waved her over to sit by him. And was that last line a passive-aggressive pregnancy announcement? Donna tried to ignore the pit in her stomach.

She now wished she knew more about Jack's thoughts about his failed marriage. It seemed like an uncomfortable subject, so Donna hadn't pursued it, and he'd been in no hurry to divulge anything. But maybe she'd been misreading the reasons for his discomfort around the topic. Maybe he wasn't feeling betrayed and angry, as she'd assumed. Maybe he was heartbroken and hoping Trynn would change her ways and return to him. Donna had no idea.

Trynn's position, on the other hand, was abundantly clear. And did Donna really want to get involved with a man whose ex was so clearly not ready to let him go? To the point where she may or may not have fake fainted in public just to stir up his sympathy? It seemed a little psycho, and did Donna really need any more drama in her life? (Besides the kind she was trained for?)

Yes, Jack had stirred up a lot of feelings in Donna. She couldn't deny it. And she was grateful. Because at least she'd glimpsed the level of connection that was possible for her. In the future, she wouldn't settle for less. But there wasn't going to be a future with Jack. Donna didn't have it in her to try to compete with someone like Trynn. Especially if there was going to be a baby in the picture.

At the cafe the next day, Donna opted for a completely different vibe to break out of her funk. She needed to embody someone perky and upbeat. And Phoebe from Friends was just the ticket. Too bad she and Betty weren't the same size, because just about anything from her sister's Bohemian wardrobe would have been perfect for a Phoebe costume.

Although Donna did her best with what was available from the warehouse, very few customers figured out who she was from her outfit alone. But they caught on once she started talking. Donna's Phoebe impersonation was spot-on, especially the mannerisms. A couple of men playfully asked if she offered massages on the side, several started singing "Smelly Cat" to her, and one customer called her by Phoebe's fake name, "Regina Phalange." Donna had to have that one explained, which she hoped didn't affect her tip. She hadn't memorized every episode, after all.

All in all, it turned out to be an effective distraction from her muddled thoughts about Jack and Trynn. By the end of her shift, she had almost absorbed some of Phoebe's cheerful optimism. And she really needed to, since she'd spent the day serving alongside Napoleon Dynamite, who said everything with his eyes half closed and his mouth hanging open, and Edward Scissorhands, who barely said anything at all.

Just 10 minutes before closing, the front door chimed, and Donna did rock-paper-scissors with Napoleon and Edward (minus the actual scissors on the hands, of course). After Napoleon lost ("Gosh!") he abruptly ran up front in his moon boots, holding his arms stiff against his sides, only to return a few minutes later.

"He pretty much wants Phoebe," Napoleon muttered, followed by an awkward fist pump and a "Yes!" uttered through his closed teeth. He hadn't fallen out of character once all day. Impressive.

"Me? Ugh."

Edward, with his eyes wide and unblinking and his mouth pursed, nudged her around the corner into the dining room.

There, standing just inside the wall of windows with an armful of roses, was Jack. The same roses from last night, only slightly worse for wear.

Donna's heart instantly lifted, and hope started to bloom on her face, but she willed it back down.

"You forgot something," he said with a hesitant smile, reaching the roses out toward her.

That magnetic force pulled her toward him without her being aware of moving her feet. She took the roses from him.

"Thanks," she said.

They stared at each other.

"I know you're almost closed, but table for...two?"

"Sure," she shrugged, showing him to her favorite booth, the one in the corner with the view all the way down the historic main street.

"Sit with me?" he asked.

"Do you want a menu?"

"Can you just bring us something? Whatever is easy."

"Of course. How hungry are you?"

“Very. Just finished a 10-hour shift.”

She hadn’t realized he’d been scheduled to work after their almost date last night.

Donna quickly consulted with Napoleon and Edward, promising to finish the closing checklist on her own if they’d take care of the two remaining tables. They sent the cooks home.

Napoleon stared at her, slack-jawed, and gave her a fist bump. Edward raised his eyebrows and didn’t say a word.

Donna returned to Jack and slid into the seat across from him in the U-shaped booth.

“Sorry to keep you after hours,” Jack said. “It seems you’re always closed by the time I’m done signing out my patients.”

Donna thought she’d seen him stroll past the windows a couple times. That explained that.

“How was your shift?” she asked

“Fine. I was anxious to talk to you the whole time. I did try to call.”

“I know.”

She didn’t want to admit that she hadn’t listened to the voicemails. It made her feel petty.

“I know it doesn’t make up for me disappearing,” he said. “But I am really sorry. And I understand why you’d rather avoid me.”

“Apology accepted,” she said. “And I’m sorry I bolted. I just didn’t want to hang around while you hovered over your ex-wife.”

He cringed.

“Well, when you put it like that, it sounds even worse.”

“I mean, she did have a genuine medical emergency,” Donna said, then paused. “Didn’t she?”

“Yes, she did. But it’s understandable why you wouldn’t be sure.”

Donna waved at Edward and Napoleon as they locked the front door and disappeared into the back, heading toward the employee entrance.

“And I’m sure you’re obligated to help,” she said.

“Of course,” he said. “Even if it’s my ex-wife.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I know you’re the kind of person who would help anyone.”

“It’s okay. I know what you meant.”

“And she’s okay now?”

He shrugged and wiggled his hand in the so-so hand gesture.

“She has a pretty serious eating disorder that she refuses to get treatment for,” he said.

“Oh!” Donna said. “Sorry to hear that. I didn’t mean to pry. Did I just make you

violate HIPAA?”

“No, I never was her treating physician,” he smiled. “Just my observations from living with her. And it explains why I felt like I had to stick around last night. It was the best opportunity I’ve had to convince her to try to get some help.”

His prior compliments about her willingness to eat in front of him suddenly made more sense.

“That is kind of you, considering...everything,” Donna said.

“So you know what happened then?”

“I think so? A friend of a friend worked on Drama Club , so the story did make its way back to me.”

“You’ve probably got the gist of it,” he said, running his fingers through his hair. “I’m glad I don’t have to tell you. I hate reliving it.”

Donna had a flash of a memory of standing behind him in the cafeteria line the day Hudson was born. That had to be right around the time the affair was discovered. No wonder he looked so lost and defeated. She couldn’t imagine the depth of that betrayal.

“I don’t blame you,” Donna said.

“She really wishes I’d forgive her and get back together. Which, yes on the first. She’s forgiven. She might have even done me a favor. Not a chance in hell on the second.”

Donna laughed in relief. He was not pulling any punches.

“Yeah, she’s not being subtle about what she wants,” Donna said.

“She thought I went to opening night to try to make her jealous,” he said with a roll of his eyes. “I honestly didn’t think she’d be there. She’s generally not very interested in other people’s big nights.”

“That sounds about right.”

“I mean, one minute I’m watching you praying over everyone in the beauty salon, and the next minute Trynn is next to me, whispering in my ear.”

“She told me you saw her and waved her over.”

“Hardly,” he laughed. “Wait, you’ve talked to her?”

“She emailed me.”

“Emailed you? Why?”

“Oh, you know. To tell me that you two are just on a break, that you’d really meant to go to her opening night instead. And to make sure I knew how very concerned you are about her wellbeing. And drop a hint that she might be pregnant.”

“I’m surprised she mentioned that.”

“So it’s true?” Donna’s heart sank into the vinyl seat.

Damn. Damn. Damn.

“I’m afraid it is, which is another reason I was so long last night. Again, not a HIPAA violation, since I’m not her doctor. Plus, she basically told you herself.”

“So what are you going to do?” she couldn’t hide the dread in her voice.

He looked at her sharply.

“Oh! It’s not mine,” his whole body sighed to show his overwhelming relief. “According to my extensive training on the human reproductive system and the average length of gestation, there is zero chance that I am the father.”

Donna’s whole body probably showed her own relief.

“And I respectfully declined her request to do the ‘noble’ thing and raise her married former boss’s child as if it were my own. But I do sincerely wish her luck in getting the child support she deserves from her partner in crime. And I’m glad she has her parents to lean on.”

“The Wegfahrts?”

“You love saying that.”

“I do.”

Then it hit her, the weight of everything he had just told her.

“As much as she irritates me,” Donna said. “I do feel sorry for her. I know she’s responsible for all of the decisions that led her to this point. But it’s sad to see. And I can’t believe she thought you’d go for that insane plan!”

“She lives in a fantasy of her own making. Always has. It took me a ridiculously long time to see it. I wish I could say it’s just because I was young. But I was also stupid. And very distracted.”

“And she’s very beautiful.”

“Too beautiful for her own good. And mine.”

Ouch, that stung a little, even though it shouldn’t. There was clearly no part of him that was still pining over her. But she didn’t like the thought of being compared to her, eating disorder and all.

“As much as I’d love to get off this topic as soon as possible,” Jack said. “I have to say that I hate how she showed up and ruined your night. You were amazing. You deserved for the whole night to be about you.”

Wow, how lovely. As a middle child, Donna wasn’t used to anything being all about her.

“It was nice of you to come,” Donna said.

“I’d come every night if I could.”

“No you wouldn’t.”

“I would,” he insisted.

“But I thought you weren’t that into the theater.”

“I’m not into non-stop pressure campaigns to go to the theater,” he laughed. “When I choose to go on my own terms, I really enjoy it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Donna said, feigning innocence. “I’ve never known Trynn to be bossy and controlling.”

“You have no idea,” he laughed. “And it just so happens that when I suspect someone’s trying to control me, it triggers my rebellious streak. Bit of a personality flaw, but at least now you’ve been warned.”

“I’ll try not to take that as a challenge,” Donna said.

They stared at each other in silence.

“Okay, I have to ask,” Donna blurted. “Now that I know you a little better, you and Trynn just...don’t make sense to me. Is it okay for me to ask how the heck that even happened?”

“Here’s the short version,” he sighed. “Our second year of college, my roommate started hanging out with her roommate, and we often tagged along. Trinity was different back then, she seemed kind of lost and insecure. I felt a little bit protective of her, actually. Eventually, we started going out too. Mostly because she was always just...there. And then we never stopped, which is obviously not a good enough reason to get married.”

“Relationships must be hard in medical school.”

“They’re non-existent for a lot of people. In hindsight, the only reason ours lasted as long as it did is because I wouldn’t let myself look at it too closely. I didn’t have the time, and I was avoiding the hassle of breaking up. Which is also not a good enough reason to get married.”

“Makes sense,” Donna said. “Thanks for telling me.”

“There’s obviously more to the story, and I’ll tell you the rest sometime. But I can say I learned a lot about myself and what I really want. And if she’d be honest with herself, she’d realize she doesn’t want me either, not really. People who are happy

with their spouses don't have affairs.”

“It must have been awful.”

“You wanna know what's truly awful? I was a little bit relieved when I found out, you know after the sting of betrayal died down. But it made my decision crystal clear, and it gave me the nudge I needed to do what I should have done all along.”

Donna felt her heart lift.

“And I do feel bad about that, by the way,” Jack continued. “We weren't a good match. I knew it all along. And I just followed the path of least resistance rather than do the hard but the right thing much earlier.”

“But you must have loved her, at least a little?”

“I had feelings for her, for sure. She was my first...everything. But in the last couple of years, I've seen what real love looks like, over and over again. I've seen people collapse in relief when they arrive at the ER and see that their loved ones are okay. I've been hugged in such extreme gratitude when we've been able to save someone. And I've seen the flip side too. The agony I've seen from a spouse after we lost a patient—it's a mirror image of the depth of their love. It's holy to witness. Sanctifying. And terrifying, too. But what's the alternative? A love so shallow that losing them is no big deal?”

“I want terrifying love,” Donna said. “Otherwise, what's the point?”

“I feel the same,” he said.

“It's not like there's a pain-free option anyway,” she said. “Even if you close your heart off completely, you'll just get hurt in a different way, as your heart wastes

away, little by little.”

“How’d you get so wise?”

“The theater,” Donna said in her best British accent, with a flourish of her hand.

He laughed.

“And well, all these years I’ve spent in the shallow end of the pool, while everyone I know is diving into the deep end.” And as the words came out of her mouth, Donna realized how true they were.

“Why not dive in yourself?”

“I don’t know. What if I can’t swim?”

“I could teach you.”

“You could?”

“I’d like to try.”

“I’d like that too.”

They smiled at each other, twin bonfires burning in their eyes.

Without realizing it, she’d already waded in deeper than she ever had before. She was treading water, heart racing, as the solid ground receded beneath her.

Quick, she needed a safe subject.

“So, you said you’re hungry. What sounds good?”

“Isn’t the kitchen closed?”

“Well, the cooks are gone, but I know where everything is. We can make whatever we want.”

His eyes lit up and she led him back to the kitchen to rummage around, only barely able to focus on the task at hand.

In the end, they settled on BLTs on sourdough, potato salad made fresh that morning, assorted fresh melon chunks, cranberry-white chocolate cookies, and chamomile tea. She showed him how to balance everything on a serving tray and spotted him all the way to the table.

“Well done,” she said as they unloaded the tray. “If you ever need another career to fall back on, I can vouch for you.”

“Just don’t make me do it in costume,” he said. “Wait, who are you supposed to be today?”

“Phoebe Buffay.”

“Who?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never watched Friends .”

“Oh, the one with those Chester and Jimmy guys or whoever?”

Oh boy, she had so much work to do.

“Chandler and Joey,” she laughed. “You were probably way too smart to watch tv.”

“Nah, I was just more of a Seinfeld guy.”

Donna snapped her fingers.

“That’s one I haven’t thought of! I could come to work as Elaine one day.”

“I have to see that,” he said, taking a bite of his BLT. “No guarantee I’ll be able to keep my hands off you though.”

“Deal,” she teased through a mouthful of melon, and his eyes seemed to spark in response to her flirting. The intensity of their eye contact sent a delicious heat spiraling through her midsection.

“So Elaine, huh? The gentleman prefers brunettes?” Donna said and immediately wanted to take her words back when she pictured Trynn’s dark tresses. Come to think of it, Trynn was petite like Elaine too.

“Lately I’m into blondes,” Jack said with a wink that somehow didn’t seem smarmy, coming from him. Some guys could not pull off a wink. Jack Gentry could.

“I just always thought she was so cute, even as a kid watching with my parents,” he added.

There was that word again.

“Cute? I thought most guys were into ‘beautiful,’ or ‘hot’, or ‘sexy.’ Not merely ‘cute.’”

“Not me. I love cute. Cute is my favorite.”

“Really?” she leaned forward. “You think cute is better than beautiful?”

“Oh, absolutely. One hundred percent. Every day of the week.”

“Okay then, define ‘cute.’”

“Well, to me, ‘cute’ is attractive but also fun. Cute doesn’t take itself too seriously. You want to cuddle with cute. Laugh with cute. You never get sick of cute. Cute can be silly and even a little dorky sometimes, in an adorable way. Beautiful, on the other hand, puts itself on a pedestal. It’s all about being admired and appreciated, but kind of from a distance.”

“Interesting,” Donna said. “I think I’d rather be cute then.”

“Oh, you are,” he said. “The cutest.”

She grinned in embarrassment.

“Sorry, I wasn’t fishing for a compliment,” she said.

“I know. If you were, I would have been physically unable to offer you one.”

“You rebel, you.”

“I’m going to regret telling you about my rebellious streak.”

“You probably will.”

His grin warmed Donna like the sun. She wanted to capture it in a bottle and carry it around in her pocket.

He scooted an inch toward her.

She scooted an inch toward him.

Then two inches.

Then three.

Then their pinkie fingers brushed against each other. He lifted his and hooked it around hers. Her heart swelled. She could tell from the catch in his breath that his probably did too.

The sun sank further in the horizon, bathing the cafe in golden light. The cafe was silent apart from the hum of the refrigerators and the muffled sounds of traffic outside.

“So what now?” she asked.

“I didn’t really think beyond getting here, to be honest.”

“That doesn’t sound like you.”

“It’s something new I’m trying. Listening to my heart instead of my head.”

“And what is it saying?”

“It’s terrified.”

“Perfect. Mine is too.”

Sitting in the booth in the empty cafe, pinkies still intertwined, he leaned over and

kissed her.

This kiss felt different.

Because Donna let herself believe in this kiss.

He'd told her every way he could—in words and in actions—that there was something drawing him to her. In fact, he'd been drawn to many different versions of her, without knowing it. That should tell her something. And she'd felt it too, from that very first electric kiss on the cheek. Who cares if he couldn't explain it? She couldn't either.

Some things didn't need to be explained.

They just needed to be experienced.

And Donna Mary Gable was ready to experience it all.

“Wow,” he said when he finally broke away.

She smiled against his lips.

“Wow yourself,” she said back.

After being a bridesmaid in four weddings in four years, love was finally in the air for Donna Mary Gable. The middle child. The loud one. The fun one. The blonde one. The curvy one. And as Dr. Jack Gentry loved to remind her, the cute one.

Coming from him, that was a label she could definitely live with.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

EPILOGUE

Donna cradled the tiny, perfect head against her chest. Babies weren't supposed to be capable of eye contact this young, but she could have sworn they shared a moment of connection. Of recognition. She was in heaven.

Dr. Jack Gentry poked his head around the corner, looking dashing as ever in his white lab coat.

"How are mama and baby doing?"

"Beautiful," she said. "Come on, come hold her."

"I only have a few minutes before my shift starts."

"That's enough time."

He came closer and pressed a kiss on Donna's forehead before gently picking up the little angel and tucking her under his chin. Donna's heart grew another two sizes.

"She looks just like her Mama," he said.

"I still can't believe you missed the birth," she accused.

"I was working! Besides, what could I have done?"

“Hold my hand, at least.”

“Like that would have made any difference. Your whole family was there. You didn’t need me.”

“I always need you.”

She stood and walked over to him, kissing him full on the mouth with the baby tucked between them.

The door opened.

“Now that’s a picture I want to frame,” Audrey said, shuffling through the door in her hospital gown, holding onto Ty for support with one hand, holding Hudson’s chubby little hand with the other. They’d taken a required walk around the ward.

“Well done, Audrey,” Jack said. “She’s perfect.”

“Isn’t she?” Audrey said, climbing back into her bed with a sigh. Jack gently handed Jayne Carolina Westerbrook to her mother, then stepped back and slipped his arm around Donna again.

“So Donna,” Audrey asked. “Have you decided what you’re wearing to the Emmys yet?”

“Ugh, no,” Donna said. “I’ve got it narrowed down to six options, though.”

“Six?”

“I know which one’s my favorite,” Jack said.

“That one is a big, fat NO,” Donna said. “Much too revealing.”

“Says who?” Jack said.

Donna rolled her eyes.

“I’ve gotta keep it classy,” Donna said. “I’m lucky I’m even going. I’ve only been working with Camila for a couple of months.”

“What about you, Jack?” Ty asked. “Got your outfit all picked out?”

“Yes, pajamas,” Jack joked.

“Only the lead costumers get to bring a date,” Donna explained. “I will be hanging out with my fellow lowly peons.”

“Pee on! Pee on! Pee on!” chanted Hudson, then he noticed Jack looking at him, and he hid behind his dad’s legs, peering up at Jack suspiciously. The white lab coat always brought out this reaction. Donna wondered if Jack would ever be fully forgiven for the alligator eyeball incident.

“You two sure looked cozy when we came back in the room,” Audrey said. “Babies look good on you.”

“I was just giving him a hard time about missing the birth again,” Donna told Audrey, wrapping her arms around Jack’s waist.

“You’re the only family I know who all gather in the waiting room during the entirety of the delivery,” Jack said.

“Good thing Audrey’s labors always go so fast,” Donna said.

“You won’t think it’s fast when it’s your turn,” Audrey said, grimacing slightly as she readjusted to get more comfortable.

“Still, I was sitting there with Mom and Dad, Betty and Gavin, and Cat and Liam, all snuggled next to each other, holding hands. And I was by myself with Elizabeth and the twins. Again. What’s the point of even having a boyfriend if he’s not there to hold your hand during the defining moments of life?”

“This was a defining moment for you? ”

“The birth of my very first niece? Of course it was.”

“With a family this size, there are going to be a lot of defining moments,” Jack said, eyes wide with alarm.

“You have no idea,” Ty muttered good-naturedly.

“But don’t you want to find out?” Donna said, smiling up at Jack in full dimple mode.

Jack’s bottomless blue eyes met Donna’s, and she felt the whole world melt away.

“You know what? I think I do,” he said.