

ERIN
MALLON

SHOWMANCING
THE BONE



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Cover and Interior Design by Qamber Media & Designs

Showmancing the Bone is a work of fiction and first appeared in *Smartasses*

–

a Sexy Nerd Rom Com Anthology. Any resemblance to actual events or people is entirely coincidental.

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To Keith: my husband, best friend, baby daddy
and brilliant brainstormer of soup names.

PROLOGUE

Nobody ever tells you just how bright stage lights are. When you're sitting happily in your theater seat, watching the performers up there acting and bowing and curtsying, you have no idea that their eyeballs are being incinerated.

What heroes.

Never in a million years did I expect to be up here experiencing the eyeball melting firsthand.

I shield my face from the light for a moment to look out over the audience. Shit, that's not part of the blocking. I'm supposed to pretend I'm looking out over a crystalline blue ocean.

I rest my arm back down by my side.

Right. It's an ocean. An ocean.

The words of this final monologue are steadily—and magically—coming out of my mouth, but all I can think about is that at any moment, my incredibly sexy co-star will wrap his arms around me from behind and say...

“Can I spoon-feed you my latest concoction?”

Eep. There he is, right on cue. Such an exacting and inspired performer.

Did I imagine that he stressed the “cock” syllable in the word concoction a little more than was necessary? I've watched him rehearse this play a dozen times, and I have never heard him pronounce it that way before.

It must have been my imagination.

His firm chest nestles against my back, and I want to sob. His stubbled cheek brushes my soft one, and I want to sing. One strong arm wraps around my middle, while the other sends a spoon tenderly toward my lips, and I want to tear off my clothes and do a damn jig.

Focus. You are a professional.

Oh, my God. This is it. This is the big moment.

Breathe, Wendy. Breathe.

Also... blink, Wendy, blink.

This is my cue to take a sip from the spoon, then toss it to the ground like the sassy siren my character is.

The trouble is, when I taste what he's made—what he's clearly made for *me*—my heart fills to overflowing, and my brain and body are no longer in communication. I fling that spoon out of his hand like a sonofabitch. It flies out into the audience and... beans a bald man at the center table.

Oops. I break the fourth wall for a millisecond and see that he's okay. I'll apologize to him after.

For now, stay in character, Wendy. Stay the fuck in character.

My mind flashes back to my stage management binder and the meticulous blocking notes I have documented there.

The Tenant says, "I've never tasted anything sweeter," then grabs his face and kisses the ever-loving soup out of him.

Can I do it? Can I kiss the ever-loving soup out of this incredible man for the very first time while an audience of over a hundred watches?

Hell yes, I can.

The question is: Tongue or no tongue?

At that moment, all knowledge of stage etiquette flies out of my mind, so I decide to follow the advice Liam gave in that first rehearsal so many weeks ago.

Put all of your attention on your scene partner.

And I get my answer.

By the look on my scene partner's face... we're going with tongue.

CHAPTER ONE

SIX WEEKS PRIOR

Let's back things up a bit.

I am not an actor.

I am the furthest thing from an actor.

I'm a receptionist. I'm a mother.

Right now, I am also a thirty-six-year-old woman ugly-crying in my station wagon, idling in the Warmington Library parking lot.

My phone blares with the ringtone assigned to the person I love most in the entire world.

"Hi, baby!" I say with as much cheer as I can.

"Mom," my daughter, Neen, gently scolds. "Are you crying?"

I swipe at my wet cheeks.

"Nope! Nope, nope, nope. Not crying." I stifle the sniffles I'm still trying to get under control and let out a telltale snort. "How are you doing? How's the dorm? How's the roommate? She was due to arrive last night, right? Did you get your statistics snafu worked out with your advisor?"

"Whoa, slow down, lady." She laughs. "The dorm is pretty good. Everyone is impressed with your Homegoods cinder-block chic. I'm the only one on the floor with a faux sheepskin rug and a Himalayan salt lamp."

"That's nice to hear. There's no reason an eighteen-year-old girl should spend nine months of the year in a beige cinder-block cell with fluorescent bars overhead. How can you study like that? You need some color, a few lamps with soft lighting, and comfy throw blankets and

pillows. You know—a little bit of cozy to have you feeling at home.” I don’t like the way that sounded coming out of my mouth. ”Not that school is your home! You know that, right, Neenie? Your home is always right here with me in Warmington, and you are welcome home any time you want. Any time.”

She sighs good-naturedly. “I know, Mom. Thanks.”

“And you can rest assured that I will *absolutely* be one of those moms who turns her daughter’s childhood bedroom into a shrine. I am not touching a thing! No craft room for me, baby! I mean, really, do that many women in their thirties and forties craft at such an alarming rate that their crocheting requires an entire room devoted to it?”

“Mom?”

“You won’t see me shove an exercise bike or elliptical in there either. No way, baby. That is your room, and it will stay your room until—”

“Mom!”

“Yeah, baby.” I finally take a breath.

Her voice softens. “Are you doing okay?”

“Of course! I’m great! Proudest mom on the planet!” I pause and sigh. “Just miss you is all.”

“Miss you too.” I hear her rustling around in her door room. “Listen, I’ll be home for Thanksgiving before you know it. In the meantime, though... maybe you should get out there.”

“Get out *there* where?”

“Anywhere.” She chuckles, but I know she’s serious. She’s been skating around this pep talk for months. “Try something new! Take a class, join a group, I don’t know! You’ve been an amazing mother for so long...”

“Hey! I am still your mother. Just because you’re a big college kid now doesn’t mean you don’t need your

mother.”

“Of course I still need you, Mom. Always will. But—oh fuck, I gotta go.”

“Oh fuck?” I parrot back. “Wait a damn minute, we say ‘oh fuck’ now?”

“Sorry, my boy- my um, my *friend* Mark is here to pick me up. We’re going to study at The Bean. Have fun at the library!”

“How do you know I’m at the—”

But she’s already hung up.

Well.

Looks like it’s time I get myself a life.

CHAPTER TWO

The minute the library opens, I haul ass through the double doors and head straight to the theater section for what's become my Saturday morning ritual: digging through the plays and finding a handful to take home with me for the week.

For as long as I can remember, I've been a complete and total theater nerd. And not because I ever wanted to be an actor. Hell no. I'd rather skydive over an alligator-infested lagoon, bungee jump off a rickety bridge with no safety check, or free climb over a pit of scorpions without a harness—I would do any one of those things ten times before I'd ever willingly step onstage in front of hundreds of humans. Yeah, no. That sounds like my personal version of hell.

My fascination with the theater has always been about what goes on behind the scenes.

My eyes get misty again, thinking about my days working at The Chestnut Theater downtown.

I started working there in high school as a box office assistant and worked as many hours as they'd have me. It was the perfect situation. Not only did I avoid my parents' constant arguing at home but I also got to save a decent amount of money and spend the majority of my time surrounded by my beloved theater. It was a win-win-win. By the time Neen arrived, I'd been promoted to head box office manager, and thankfully, they supported me through those early days of motherhood, letting me bring her along for every shift. At first, she napped in her little carrier by my feet while I worked. Later, she'd dole out tickets to patrons with her chubby little fingers right alongside me, then we'd sneak into a special box seat after the lights went down so we could watch the shows together. It was magic.

But kids grow up. Their needs change.

And parents need to adjust along with them.

Once I make my selections from the library shelves, I whip out my drama llama binder—yes, I have a drama llama binder—and turn to my log page. I write down today's date, the play titles I've selected, along with the name of the playwrights, the names of the original cast and crew, and the theater company where each play had its World Premiere. Eventually, I'll enter all my thoughts and impressions of each play in the appropriate color-coded sections, organized by genre, era, and themes. See? Organization geek.

But first, the best part... reading the plays.

A little buzz zips through me, knowing I'm diving into these imaginary worlds this week.

I don't know what my daughter is talking about. I have a life. A very zesty, organized, and color-coded life.

I approach the checkout desk, where a truly wild-looking older woman assists a guest. I've never seen her here before. Believe me, she would be difficult to miss. Talk about zesty. Her mostly white hair is streaked with a rainbow of colors. We're talking a literal rainbow here— a full-on R-O-Y-G-B-I-V situation happening on her head. The bold strands swirl up into a red butterfly clip fastened on top where crunchy curls spew out from her skull like a hair geyser. Stacks of plastic bracelets clang together on her wrists while she scans the books. The shiny purple blouse she's wearing screams 1970s discos, and the blue eye shadow smeared on her lids is all sorts of Madonna a la the 80s.

In short, she is incredible. And I instantly want to be her friend.

She's chatting with the gentleman in front of me about the latest Danielle Steel title and how movie versions are never as good as the book. He nods eagerly

at her recommendations, thanks her for her time, then one by one, he gathers his bounty of books to his chest. I do a double take at his selections. There are some seriously racy titles and a whole bunch of man chests adorning the covers.

“Romance novels aren’t just for women, you know,” he says when he catches me staring. Then he winks and shuffles toward the exit.

Well, isn’t that refreshing? You go, classy older gentleman!

When I place my books on the counter and reach for my library card, I hear a gasp and look up.

The eccentric librarian slaps her hand on my copy of *A Raisin in the Sun*, looks me dead in the eye, and shouts in my face, “It’s you!”

I whip my head to the left and peer over my shoulder, certain she’s speaking to somebody else. But nope, I’m the only person standing here.

“Uh, yeah. It’s... me.” I respond timidly. And much more quietly than her, I might add. Aren’t most librarians in the business of shushing people? Not this one, apparently.

“My fellow theater lover!” She squeals, leans over the counter, and smooshes me into her shiny purple bosom. The breath whooshes out of my lungs as I flop over the counter like a limp fish. “Hug me, girl!” she scolds. “It’s hugging time!”

“Okay, wow. It’s hugging time!” I try to turn my head away from her breasts, but my words just get muffled in her polyester armpit.

After a moment, I can’t help it, and I have to inhale. Hmm. She smells like... comfort. More specifically, she smells like plumeria body lotion from Bath & Body Works. I worked there as a teen, and the power of that smell never leaves you.

She finally releases me from the squeeze, and I find my feet again.

“So?! How long has it been!?” she asks, flashing me an open-mouthed, goofy grin. I spot a smattering of silver fillings on her molars.

“How long has *what* been?” I respond, a little dizzy and totally confused. I’m certain I would remember this woman if we’d ever met before.

“This secret dance we’ve been doing! It’s been years now, theater lover! I’m so thrilled to finally meet you!”

I open my mouth to respond, then immediately close it. I’ve got nothing.

She cups my cheeks with her warm, wrinkled hands. “Oh, look at your cute little guppy face! Not a clue what I’m talking about, huh? Alright, let’s start over. Hi, love. I’m Maude. Head librarian. Every Monday morning for the past, oh I don’t know... three years maybe, I come into this joint and look at the records of what’s been borrowed over the weekend. And every Monday, I see that a certain Wendy Finegan has checked out at least four plays on Saturday.”

“Oh. Is that unusual?”

“You bet your bippy it’s unusual! With the exception of an occasional eighth grader who wanders in asking for *The Crucible* or the Shakespearian bullcrap they’re always assigned for book reports, you are the absolute only person in this town who reads the plays.”

“Really? Then why do you have such a great selection? And why do you keep adding to it?” I spread my stash out on the counter and reveal plays by Caryl Churchill, Lauren Gunderson, and Katori Hall. “Most libraries just have a tiny little shelf in the back with a few plays written by old dead white men, but here there’s a whole—” I stop myself. “Oh. I’m sorry, was that rude?”

“Rude to whom?”

“To dead white men?”

She huffs. “I don’t know if it’s rude, but it’s certainly true! Listen.” She waves me closer and finally speaks in that classic librarian hush one would expect. “I have nothing against old dead white men—though given my druthers, I do prefer them *alive* if you know what I mean. They’re more fun that way.” She finger-waves to the fella with the romance books who is out in the parking lot now, giving her the call-me gesture before disappearing into his station wagon.

Maude’s eyes sparkle. “Aaaaand Mama’s still got it!” She punches me in the arm in what I’m guessing is an attempt at lady comradery.

“Ouch,” I say under my breath.

“Sorry, love. Don’t know my own strength sometimes. Hey, remind me to look up that gorgeous geezer’s digits in the system later, will ya? Anyway, what was I saying?”

“Uh, I think we were talking about plays?” I laugh.

“Oh yes, yes, yes. Listen, I have nothing against the classics—except for Willy Shakes, he can suck it—but it’s a new world! A world where we want to hear from everybody! The young, the old, the black, the white, the women, the men... let’s hear it all! And since Lady Maude is in charge of ordering the books, Lady Maude orders what she wants.”

“Well, thank you, Lady Maude.” I clear my throat. “Lady *Wendy* thanks you.”

“You’re very welcome, my dear. It’s good to finally put a face to the name of my theater buddy.”

“Same,” I say.

She hands me my stack of plays, then prints out my due date slip and slaps it into my palm. I immediately open my binder and meticulously place each play in its own clear pocket to keep them safe and separate.

I look up to find Maude studying me.

“Lordy, you’re organized! You have more colored tabs in that binder than I have colored hairs on my head. “

“Ha, yeah.” My cheeks get pink. “I like to keep things in order.”

“Nothing wrong with that.” She gets a funny look on her face like she’s considering something.

I place my binder in my shoulder bag and hoist it higher. “Well. See you next Saturday, I guess?”

“Oh, hell no, missy! Working weekends is for chumps! I’m just filling in for Sarah today while she’s at her grandson’s communion. No, ma’am, I love my job here, but my nights and weekends are reserved for play practice.”

“Play practice?” I cock my head to the side.

“Of course, love. I’m a famous actress!” She takes in the blank look on my face and gasps. “Don’t tell me you don’t recognize me!”

“Gosh, I’m sorry, Maude. I just—”

“Hahaha, I’m pulling your leg, dear. Unfortunately, I’m only famous in my own mind.” She sighs. “But! I am the longest-running member of the longest-running theater company in the county.”

Her eyebrows lift.

Oh, crap. Am I supposed to know what she’s talking about? Because I don’t.

“Warmington Community Players!” she shouts. “As a theater lover, surely you’ve seen us?”

I brace myself for disappointing her again. “I’m sorry to say, I haven’t, no.”

Maude’s face twists in displeasure.

I continue, “But that’s a ‘me problem’ not a ‘you

problem!' I don't get out much."

"No. You know what kind of problem this is?" she seethes. "This is a 'Sonny-Parker-Producer-and-Head-of-Marketing-is-a-Moron' problem. I'm telling you, that man couldn't market his way out of a paper bag. You know where his marketing savvy started going wrong?"

"Uh, no?" I look around the library, hoping another guest gets in line and gives me an easy way out of this interaction. No offense to Maude, but I'm eager to get home to my plays. One glance tells me the place is completely dead.

"When he let that Kevin Costner fella get in his brain with that sappy baseball movie back in '89. 'No. If you build it, they will *not* come, Sonny! They must be marketed to, ya damn nitwit!'" Maude's face is flaming. "Calm me down, Wendy. I need to be calmed down."

"Uh..." How do I soothe this woman I just met?

Maude plunks her elbow on the counter and rests her chin in her hand. "Tell me why a theater lover like you isn't going to see shows? Especially ones that I'm in."

I let my bag slide to the floor. Seems I'll be here a few minutes.

I exhale. "Well, up until a few weeks ago, I haven't had much free time on my hands. Single mom of a non-driving teenager. Lots of schlepping her to and from activities. But she just left for college. MIT. Full scholarship."

"Whoooo-eeeeee! You must be one proud mama."

My cheeks widen into the brightest grin. "Oh, I am. She's the light of my fucking life." Those words barely make it out of my mouth when I'm full-on snot-crying again. "I'm sorry. Why did I curse just now? And oh my God, why am I crying again?" I frantically paw at my already drenched cheeks.

Maude reaches into her ample cleavage and presents me with a damp handkerchief.

“Here you go, sweetheart.”

I fight a noticeable cringe. “I’m okay, thanks,” I say and shoo away her offering with a smile.

“Take it, take it!”

Not wanting to be rude, I accept the cloth and make a big show of jabbing at my cheeks with it, never once making actual contact.

I’m not exactly a germaphobe, but... ew.

I hand it back to her and back it goes between her breasts.

“Is your daughter okay?” Maude’s voice softens in concern.

“Oh yes. Yes, yes, she’s fantastic! She’s loving it! School doesn’t officially start until the end of August, but I drove her up there just after the Fourth of July because she has this really amazing, math-y internship this summer that I don’t really understand. I’ve never understood her brain, but I know this is an incredible opportunity for her. I just—ever since she’s left, I don’t quite know what to do with myself. I don’t know if you can tell, but I’m pretty young to have a kid in college. I’m only thirty-six, so...”

Man, I’m blubbering, but I can’t seem to make myself stop. I take in Maude’s surprised expression.

“Yeah, I had her as a teen, so we basically grew up together. My entire adult life has been all about her, and now that she’s gone, I can’t seem to... and I work at a school, so I’m off for the summer, and I’m not sure I know how to... dear God, please shut me up.”

“I have the most beautiful, inspired idea!” Maude cheers, her arms fully over her head like she’s at a football game. “But that should be a surprise to

absolutely no one. I'm Maude fucking Palmer. Inspiration is my bitch." She pauses. "Excuse my language. I'm excited."

At that, she reaches under the counter and pulls out a binder of her own. She plunks it down in front of me.

"What's this?" I ask, finally getting a hold of my breathing.

"This is Warmington Community Players 'latest and greatest.' We're interviewing for a new stage manager, and so far, I hate everyone we've seen. You, however. You, I like very much. We need someone equal parts passionate and organized. Between your adorable binder and the fact that you're incredibly well-read, I think you've got what it takes. Rehearsals start next week. You in?"

"Oh. Wow. Did you just offer me a job?"

"Yes. No. Sort of." She sighs. "As much as I'd like to be the sole decision maker, you do need to meet Sonny first. And you absolutely need to READ THE SCRIPT before accepting."

Something about the way she always sneers Sonny's name makes me think there is more to their story than simply being co-workers.

"What are you doing tomorrow morning?" Maude asks as she gets busy tapping at the computer screen. Her bangles clang on her wrists.

"A... whole lotta nothing." I chuckle.

"Fantastic. I'm pulling up your info right now in our system and emailing you the full job description. Look it over, READ THE SCRIPT, and meet me tomorrow at the theater. I'll email you the address. You'll meet Sonny, and we'll give you a tour of the space... It'll be great."

If I'm being honest with myself, this does sound like the perfect opportunity for me. I think I'd be a really good stage manager. And who knows? Maybe I could even

meet some new friends and develop some semblance of a social life.

“Thank you so much, Maude.” I gather the extra binder under my arm and move toward the exit. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning. This is really exciting.”

I’m almost to the door when she says, “Read the script before you get too excited, love.”

Hmm. That’s the third time she’s told me to read the script.

I give her a wave and shout, “Of course I’ll read it. I’m not worried, though. I’m sure the script is great.”

CHAPTER THREE

The. Script. Is. Awful.

Abysmal. We're talking claw-your-face-off-with-your-own-toenails terrible.

Believe me, I hated coming to this conclusion. I'm someone who tries to see the best in every person and in every situation. But after three—count 'em THREE—reads of the play, looking for any silver lining in this truly bizarre mishmash of a story, only one thing was clear to me.

There is no way I can take this job.

Yes, I love the theater. Yes, I believe I could stage manage the hell out of this show. And Lord knows I need something to take my mind off my new empty-nest lifestyle, but my theater nerd heart will die a thousand deaths if I have to read this drivel even one more time, let alone witness it being rehearsed and performed every night and weekend for the next six weeks straight.

I must tell Maude no.

Like the good, responsible girl I am, I still show up for our ten thirty meeting. Telling her my decision in person is the honorable thing to do.

Pulling up to a gray stucco-sided restaurant on Route 17, I put my car in park. I squint up at the white temporary-looking sign hanging over the entrance. "SLURPIN' THE BONE" is written in bold red bubble letters. A cartoon image of a man with a chef's hat stands proudly next to the words. He's holding a bone. And he's lifting it to his mouth like he is indeed...slurping it.

She said we were meeting at the theater, right? I pull out my phone and double-check the address she emailed me. Yup, this is the place.

I get out of the car and look around. There is a

smattering of other cars here. I spot a purple Mitsubishi that has a bumper sticker that says “Sleep with a Librarian. You’ll Learn Something.” I’d say there is a 99.9 percent chance that is Maude’s vehicle.

I walk into what is clearly a restaurant and see Maude immediately.

“Over here, sugar pie!” she hollers and gestures me over to the booth where she’s sitting with an older gentleman. His mustache is unusually dark, considering how white his hair is.

A mental light bulb goes off right as I reach their table. “Ohhhhhhhh. *This* is the theater. You’re producing the play here.”

All the bizarre cooking and eating ballets incorporated into the script suddenly make sense. Sort of.

“Site-specific dinner theater, baby!” the man says. “Here is your official stage manager binder with the cast and crew’s contact info, the script, the rehearsal schedule, the lighting plot, you name it. Welcome to the team, Wendy! Maude’s told me all about you! I’m Sonny.”

I take the binder he’s shoving my way and immediately try to give it back. “Thank you, though I’m not sure if I’m officially a member of the—”

Before I can get my entire sentence out, Sonny’s on his feet, grasping my shoulders and planting a wet kiss on my cheek.

“Sonny, no!” Maude scolds. “You do not slobber-kiss a young woman you’ve just met!”

He scoffs. “Slobber kiss? Who said it was a slobber kiss? Wendy, was it a slobber kiss?”

I hesitate but opt for telling the truth. “It was a *bit* of a slobber kiss.”

“Oh, dammit. I’m sorry.” Sonny rubs a hand over his head. “I’m an old man, and I’m having a hard time

navigating this new, emotionally touchy but you-better-not-physically-touch-anyone world. Not an excuse, of course, just an explanation.” He sighs. “I’ll get there. Until then, please accept my apologies.”

“Totally fine,” I say and offer him a handshake. He accepts it and gives a firm squeeze.

“It’s nice to meet you, Wendy,” he says, in full gentleman mode now.

“Likewise.” I smile.

“He gestures to the booth. Please. Have a seat.”

I stealthily wipe my cheek with my sleeve as I scoot into the booth next to Maude. Sonny takes his seat across from us.

“Alright, lovey,” Maude says. “Let’s get right to business. You’ve officially met Sonny, our esteemed playwright, so now let’s discuss all the particulars.”

“Wait a second. Playwright?” I ask. “I thought you said Sonny was producer and head of marketing?” I pull out the script and tap on the cover page. “Says here the play is written by... Morty McShane, yeah?”

Sonny beams at me. “My new pseudonym. Sexy, huh?” He grimaces. “Sorry. Not sexy. Not sexy at all.” He clears his throat and adopts a super-serious tone. “Professionally speaking, Miss Finegan, what do you think of my new pseudonym?”

“Morty McShane? It’s... fine. But can I ask why you *need* a pseudonym?”

“I know, I know. Why on earth would I want to hide the fact that I wrote this brilliant script?”

Maude jumps in. “Because A. Jury’s still out on how brilliant the play is, B. It’s a bit unorthodox to produce your OWN script, and C. Jury’s still out on how brilliant the play is.”

“You, um. You said the ‘jury’s out’ part twice,” I say softly.

“It bears repeating,” Maude snarks.

Sonny has steam coming out of his ears. “I’ll have you know that I wrote this play in a fit of the most beautiful inspiration! This is going to be a hit, Maudie! Just you wait!”

“Don’t call me Maudie,” she practically growls at him.

“It is going to bring Warmington Community Players all the subscribers and sales and accolades we’ve been dreaming of!”

“It better!” Maude bursts. “Because things certainly can’t get much worse!”

What does that mean?

Maude takes in the blank expression on my face and sighs. “Dollface, I apologize. I wasn’t one-hundred-percent transparent with you yesterday.”

“Here’s the scoop, sweetheart,” Sonny interrupts, but he’s cut off when Maude tosses the saltshaker at him.

“Cut the sweetheart stuff, Sonny!”

“What?” he squawks.” The girl’s been here two minutes, and you’ve already called her Sugarpie, Lovey, and Dollface.”

“That’s totally different, ya nitwit.”

“How is it different?” he hollers.

“SO WHAT’S GOOD HERE?!” I shout and finally silence them.

Geez, even if the script wasn’t objectively terrible, the constant squabbling between these two would certainly be reason enough for me to pass on the opportunity. I got enough of this energy growing up with my parents. I’m not exactly looking for a repeat.

Maude and Sonny are staring at me.

I lower my voice. "Sorry for shouting. I'm just..."

Tell them you're turning down the job and get the hell out of here.

Oh God, they look like little lost puppies, eyes wide and glassy, waiting on my next word.

"Hungry."

"Well, you came to the right place, baby love!" Maude says. She glares across the table at Sonny and corrects herself, "I mean, *Wendy*. Here, take a look at the menu."

She slides an oversized, colorful laminated card my way. I scan the options. "What are you two getting?"

"Soup, of course!" they say and giggle in unison, the first moment of comradery I've seen since I joined them.

"Soup for breakfast?"

"You betcha," Sonny says. "Soup for breakfast, lunch, appetizers, and dinner. They even have soup dessert!"

I take a closer look at the selections and see that he's right. I am apparently patronizing a soup restaurant. There is nothing on the menu but soup, soup, and more soup.

That is... really weird.

Just then, a server appears to take our orders.

"I'll have the David Lee Broth," Maude says with confidence, then leans toward me and confides, "Good for an actor's vocal health."

Sonny chimes in next. "It'll be the Split P Diddy Soup for me!"

All eyes turn to me. "I'll, um... I guess I'll have the, uh..." My fingers choose something at random. "The Chowderish Gambino."

"Excellent choice," Maude approves.

The server collects our menus and heads toward the kitchen.

Sonny gets his game face on and dives into the inevitable discussion.

“Tell me. What did you think of the script?” He rubs his hands together in glee, so sure I’m going to say I loved it.

I pause for what I know is way too long. Gosh, how can I let this sweet, enthusiastic man down gently?

I take a deep breath and shake my head. “All I can say is... wow. This script is... wow.”

“See?” Sonny pumps his arm in the air in triumph, narrowly missing knocking over his ice water. “I told you, Maudie, we have a winner here!”

“I do have some questions, though,” I interject before he gets too unnecessarily celebratory. I mean, why not engage with him about the play? I may be turning down the job, but I can’t help being utterly fascinated by how this monstrosity of a manuscript was born.

“Fire away, baby!” He shoots me an elaborate series of finger guns. Neither Maude nor I correct his use of the word “baby” this time.

“You said you wrote the play in a fit of beautiful inspiration. Tell me more about that.”

“Oh, sure! Here’s the fat and the skinny all wrapped up in one whinnie buh-minnie...”

Not a clue what that means, but okay.

“You’ve probably figured out by now that Warmington Community Players is deep in the shits, yeah?”

“I’ve definitely been picking up on some tension.” My eyes dart back and forth between the two of them.

“Oh, no.” Sonny shakes his head. “What you’re picking up between Maudie and me is just sex residue

from the early 80s.”

“Sonny’s never managed to get over me,” Maude chimes in with a smug smile.

“However,” Sonny continues, “in addition to the ever-present simmering, swirling sexual strain we suffer in each other’s presence, our company is also *deep* in the financial shits.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I say just as the server appears and places three steaming bowls of soup down on our table.

“Yeah, yeah.” He waves off my condolences and thanks the server. “I won’t bore you with all the particulars. The long and short of it is, we lost our beloved theater space.”

I look at Maude, and the tears in her eyes confirm it.

Sonny reaches over the table and cradles Maude’s hand in his. I’m surprised when she lets him. “But! Never fear, my dear! Sonny Parker is here! This here wonderful soup store opened up a few weeks ago and...”

Maude pulls her hand away. “It’s a restaurant, ya dummy, not a store.”

Sonny’s face turns red. “They have a whole to-go section up there at the counter, not to mention dried noodle and seasoning packs to cook at home! Therefore, I have every right to call it a soup store!” He takes a breath to gather himself, then speaks in a much calmer tone. “Plus, I am a sucker for alliteration—I’m sure you noticed that in the script, Wendy—and soup *store* sounds a hell of a lot better than soup *restaurant*.”

Maude and I silently sip our soup.

“Damn, this is delicious,” I say after my first spoonful.

“Exactly!” Sonny says. “So I stumbled upon this newly opened soup store several months ago and immediately fell in love with the place. And one afternoon while I was

enjoying a steaming bowl of Ramen Malek, the entire plotline of *The Souper* just fell into my head. Like a miracle! What do you think of the title, Wendy? Do you like the double entendre?”

“*The Souper?*”

“Yeah. You get it, right? Since he’s the building’s *superintendent*, but he’s also always cooking soup?”

“Sure, I get it,” I say between bites. “It’s... really clever.”

Maude snorts.

Sonny ignores her. “Great. I knew you would.” He shovels a few rapid-fire spoonfuls of the Split P Diddy into his mouth and continues. “So I whip out my notebook that day, and I write until my hands are raw. I’m serious! I spent that entire day here, ordering and slurping every single soup this place has to offer. Eventually, the nice young fella who runs the joint comes over to me and tells me he’s sorry, but they need to close for the night. He gets curious, though, ya know, due to seeing all the passion splattered all over my face. So he asks me what I’ve been writing all day. I pitch the idea to him, and he **LOVES** it. Tells me he’s always wanted to be an actor. Says if he can play the main role, we can hold the production right here! At no cost! What a miracle, huh? What an opportunity for us all!”

”So. You, um”—I clear my throat—“you cast someone in the main role with no idea if he can actually act?”

“He can act.” Sonny gives a definitive nod.

“How do you know?” I press.

“He’s got charisma! People with charisma can also act!”

“Bullshit,” Maude lets out on a cough.

Okay, that does it for me. I can’t lead them on any longer. I pull some bills from my wallet and place them on

the table.

“Put your money away, lady. It’s my treat.” Sonny pushes the bills back in my direction.

“That’s very kind of you, thank you,” I say and scrape the final bits of Chowderish Gambino onto my spoon. I relish the last bite. If it wouldn’t be seen as completely rude, I would lick this bowl clean.

“Sonny. Maude.” I adopt the kindest tone I can manage. “It’s been such a treat to meet you both. I really appreciate you considering me for this position. And listen, I would be happy to come see the show when you open, but I just don’t think I can—”

Before I can get the words out of my mouth, the kitchen door swings open, and out walks the most beautiful man I have ever seen in real life. He’s wearing jeans and a white chef’s coat that hugs him in all the right places. I wasn’t aware a chef’s coat was capable of hugging all of the places, but this one is working overtime. He saunters over to the woman working the counter and whispers something in her ear. Her face breaks out into a wide grin, and she slaps him playfully on the shoulder. He turns and grabs a few jars of sauce off the shelf, giving me a direct view of his jeans-clad butt. And it is glorious.

And... familiar.

It’s been years, but at one point, I got really accustomed to watching this man walk away.

“Wendy?” Sonny waves a hand in my face. “You were saying?”

“Who is that?” I whisper to Maude, just to make sure.

Sonny turns to peer over his shoulder. “Oh, that’s Duncan, our leading man!”

“I’ll take the job,” I say without another thought.

“Are you sure?” Maude asks, hope infusing her

words. “I know the pay isn’t great, and the script needs some work, but—”

“I’ll take the job.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“Fantastic,” Maude squeals and claps her hands. “I thought you were about to turn us down!”

Yeah, I thought I was too.

“Oh, I’m just thrilled,” Sonny says with a smile. “I knew you loved the piece. I knew it. Hey, Duncan!” he calls across the restaurant. “Duncan, come here. There’s someone I’d like you to meet!”

I *thought* it was him, but it’s been ages since I’ve seen him in the flesh—not that I ever saw his flesh. I mean in my fantasies, I saw plenty of his flesh, sure, but never in real life. No, in real life, I froze every single time I was in his presence.

Kind of like I’m doing right now.

Sonny yanks out paperwork for me to sign and says something about preparations for the first rehearsal, but my focus is completely taken by the beautiful man approaching our table.

“Wendy?” he says as he tucks a rag into his back pocket.

Holy crap, he remembers my name? I didn’t think he would remember my name!

I just nod, stuck in my own silence.

“You used to work the desk at Montgomery Math and Science, right?”

Oh, that voice is like butter.

“Uh, yeah,” I stammer. “I did.”

Still do. But he doesn’t need to know I’ve been at the same job for the better part of a decade.

I started working at Montgomery Math and Science when Neen was ten. She’d been showing all the early

signs of being exceptional when it came to math, and the teachers at her public school kept encouraging me to apply to MMS. There was no way I could afford the astronomical tuition on my single salary working at The Chestnut, but I had her take the entrance exam anyway. Just to see. She was accepted, and before I even had time to panic about the money, an admin position opened at the school—a position that waived tuition for the employee’s children. It felt like an opportunity handpicked for us. I applied for that job so fast it made my head spin, and when they hired me, it was like a huge weight lifted from my shoulders. I told myself at first that I could keep my job at The Chestnut on nights and weekends, but with Neen’s new mountains of homework, it quickly became clear that the days of her being my box office buddy were over. She needed to be home to focus, and I needed to be with her. So it was bye-bye theater, but hello to an awesome opportunity for my kid. And that is a trade-off I would make any day of the week.

“I thought that was you,” Sexy Soup Man says.

Ugh. I shouldn’t call him Sexy Soup Man. Even in my mind.

He continues, “I’m Duncan Sanford. I don’t expect you to remember me. My daughter Rebecca was at MMS until her sophomore year. She’s all grown up now, though. Last year of college. Just got her first big internship in New York City actually.”

Fatherly pride is written all over his face. The crinkles at the corners of his eyes tell me this is a guy who loves to laugh. Sonny wasn’t lying about the man’s charisma.

Shit, it’s my turn to speak.

“Good for her, that’s really—Okay, yeah, I thought you looked familiar.” I think I pull off sounding nonchalant. I *think*.

“Definitely a bit grayer these days,” he says as he

runs his fingers through thick, dark hair sprinkled with delicious strands of salt and pepper. “But hopefully, I don’t look too different.”

“You look, um. You look... great.”

He chuckles. “Thanks. You too. But then again, you always did.”

My cheeks fire up like furnaces.

“Why, um. Why did your daughter leave after her sophomore year?” I ask in hopes of drawing attention away from my flaming face.

Also, it was something I’d always wondered but never had the opportunity to ask. Because after seeing him at least once a week for an entire year, I never saw him again.

Until now.

“I got a job in the Crestview area, and the commute just became too much. More importantly, though, she decided she hated math with the fire of a thousand suns, so she chose to go to the local high school instead. Just because you’re good at something doesn’t mean you should spend your life doing it, right?”

“Right,” I say softly, his words resonating on a deeper level than he probably intended.

“You still there?” he asks.

I startle. “Here? Yup. I’m here. Here I am.”

He laughs. “Good to know. I meant at MMS, though. You still working there?”

“Oh. Hahaha. Yup!” I pause. “Well. Sort of? It’s summer break, so school is closed, of course. But in the fall—well, I’m not sure if I’m going to...”

My words drift off as I notice Maude and Sonny across the room from us. I’ve had my neck craned up to look at Duncan this whole time, so I didn’t even notice

when they scooted out from the booth. They're at the counter now, staring at us with cheesy smiles on their faces, whispering to each other and giving me a not-so-subtle thumbs-up. Thankfully, Duncan's back is to them, so he doesn't see their shenanigans.

I lock eyes with Duncan again, and at that moment, I make a decision.

"I won't be going back in September."

"Oh, no?"

"No," I say definitively. "It's time for a change."

"What will you be doing instead?" he asks.

"I'm a stage manager now." I lift the binder Sonny shoved at me earlier and show it to him. It says *The Souper* very clearly on the front. "I'm *your* stage manager."

He pauses, then breaks into a gorgeous grin. "Then I guess I'll see you Saturday for the first rehearsal."

"I guess you, uh—" I swallow. "I guess you will."

He moves like he's heading back to work but then seems to think better of it and backtracks.

He gets closer to me than before, taps my binder, and whispers, "Do you happen to have our company contact sheets in there yet?"

"Actually, I do. Yeah." Holy moly, I sound breathy.

"May I have mine now?"

"I don't see why not."

I find the sheet and place it in his hand.

"Thank you," he rumbles. "After waiting six whole years to get your number, I think it would have killed me to wait six more days."

With that, he gives me a wink and disappears into the kitchen.

Oh boy, am I in trouble.

CHAPTER FIVE

I'm shocked at how quickly I changed my tune about taking the job once Duncan was added to the equation.

Up until this point, my decisions have never been motivated by men.

Well... unless you count that time when I was a senior in high school and decided to have a one-night stand with a college freshman I met during the "Be a Bronc" fall weekend visit at Rider University. When I ended up pregnant, you better believe the "Ride-her University" jokes were prevalent wherever I went.

My parents wanted no part of the situation, so I was immediately on my own. But somehow, I finished high school, got a tiny apartment, had the baby that summer, and made it work.

When you're an eighteen-year-old single mom swimming in a constant sea of diapers, feedings, teething, working, and worrying, you have little time to consider dating. Though once Neen and I were a bit older, and I saw old high school friends settling down and creating families the "traditional" way, I drank the proverbial Kool-Aid. Meaning, I started believing I owed it to Neen to give her the nuclear family experience. You know, the one with two parents, maybe a sibling or two, a dog... the whole thing. So I tried. A few times. But after a handful of dates when it was abundantly clear the guy sitting across from me was the furthest thing from father material, I pretty much gave up on the idea altogether.

Honestly, it was a relief.

It was Neen and me against the world, and I was totally okay with that.

But one guy always made me wonder... what if?

And I'd be seeing that guy today at our first rehearsal.

The school where I work—or *worked* rather (holy crap, I can't believe I put in my resignation last night!)—is for kids fifth grade through twelfth grade. Driving-age students can head right to their homerooms when they arrive in the mornings. The younger kids must line up outside and enter as a group with their teachers. However, no matter how old you are, if you are late and miss the morning bell, a parent must accompany you inside and sign you in with the front desk. And for the past eight years, the front desk was synonymous with me.

Week after week, for one glorious school year, an adorable, harried father and his teenage daughter came sauntering in fifteen minutes after the bell. The way he ruffled her hair, called her “sweets,” and always made sure she had enough lunch money in her purse tugged at places in my heart I didn't even know existed. After he watched his daughter hurry down the hall toward homeroom, he'd always turn to me, sigh, and say the same thing: “Parenting. What a ride, huh?”

I'd respond with, “Ha. Yeah.” Or sometimes, “Don't I know it!” Or occasionally a “Whew! You're telling me!” So basically, a whole lotta nothing.

I always wanted to engage with him more, but the silver wedding ring on his finger was one hell of a deterrent. If I let myself say more, I thought he'd take one look at me and see my crush painted all over my face, which would be inappropriate on a hundred different levels.

So week after week, I let him walk on by, and eventually, he walked right out of my life.

It's Saturday morning, and I'm just about finished setting up the back room at Slurpin' the Bone for our first rehearsal. Binders for cast and crew? Check. Freshly sharpened pencils and a bulging box of highlighters? Check. Nerves out the wazoo about seeing Duncan again? Checkity check check check.

A nice guy on his staff let me in the building an hour ago and helped me carry all my boxes in from the car. I'm not sure why I assumed it would be Duncan opening the doors. He's not on chef duty today. Today, he's our leading man. I'm also not sure why when he made that comment about how "waiting six more days to get my number would have killed him," I thought that meant he planned on actually *using* that number.

Because guess what?

He did not.

And I did not check my phone incessantly for six days hoping he would.

That's a lie. I totally did.

I'm done with that now, though. I was too stunned on Sunday—by seeing him again and by my own bizarre reaction of quitting my damn job—to notice if that wedding ring was still on his finger. He certainly wasn't acting like a married man. But it doesn't matter. Wedding ring or not, Duncan is not an option. For the next six weeks, I am essentially the man's boss.

So a showmance is absolutely off-limits.

At ten o'clock on the dot, Duncan saunters into the room, followed by the rest of the cast and crew. I immediately notice two things. One, he is, in fact, not wearing a wedding ring anymore. And two, my heart is pounding like a sonofabitch.

Under my breath, I repeat to myself, "A showmance is absolutely off-limits."

CHAPTER SIX

“LET’S BEGIN WITH INTRODUCTIONS!” Liam, our twenty-year-old director, booms as we all sit around the massive table.

Several of us startle and cover our ears.

He chuckles and continues at a lower decibel. “Oh. Was I projecting too much? My apologies. But rest assured that everything I say and do is with an expressed purpose in mind for the benefit of our play. That there was your first lesson in working on the stage: YOU MUST PROJECT FOR THE BACK OF THE HOUSE AT ALL TIMES!”

Sonny places a hand on his great nephew’s shoulder and says, “Point well made, Liam, but we do have some older folks in the room, and you just about blew out my hearing aid.”

“Ah. My apologies again. I’ll take it down a vocal notch while we’re in this intimate rehearsal room, but ONCE WE’RE ONSTAGE—

“We get it,” Maude interjects. “Once we’re onstage, we’ll blow the roof off this joint. This isn’t anyone’s first rodeo, kid.”

Liam swallows his pride and nods.

Maude continues, “Hmm, now that I think of it, this may actually be Duncan’s first rodeo. Duncan, why don’t you go first? Here at Warmington Community Players, we like to go around and say what our role is in this production and one thing people might find surprising about us.”

He clears his throat. “Thank you, Maude. Hello, everyone, I’m Duncan. Yes, this is my first professional rodeo, though I acted in as many plays as I could in grade school and high school. So yeah. It’s been a while since

I've dusted off the ole thespian pipes. Thrilled to be a part of this and to have my restaurant serve as the setting for this special production." He looks to the left like he's passing the proverbial baton to the next person, then chuckles. "Oh! I am playing the titular role of The Souper..."

"Ha. Titular." Sonny snorts.

Maude smacks him. "Don't be a child."

"And one thing you might find surprising about me..."

He takes a breath in, then lets it out without speaking. His eyes go distant for a moment. What's going on with him? And why haven't we made eye contact yet since he entered the room?

"I, uh... I was going to say something sort of silly and trite like 'I can tie a cherry stem with my tongue'—Duncan laughs—"but ya know what? Life is short, and we're about to embark on a meaningful project together, so let's be real." He clears his throat. "You may find it surprising to know that seven years ago, I lost my wife to cancer, and I was suddenly a single dad to a teenage girl. Hardest time of my life. We had some real rough moments together, my daughter and I, but we made it through, and I couldn't be prouder of the relationship we have today. Today feels like a fresh start for me. My new restaurant up and running, I have this awesome chance to dive back into a hobby I truly loved once upon a time, and..." He finally makes direct eye contact with me and gives me the smallest, sweetest smile. "I'm really looking forward to having the opportunity to connect with new friends and collaborators. Thank you."

My jaw practically falls to the floor.

The room is silent.

Until the telltale sounds of sniffing come from my right.

I turn to see tears streaming down Liam's face. "That

was beautiful, Duncan. I'M SO SORRY FOR YOUR LOSS!" he chokes out.

"Thanks, but it's okay, pal. It's been quite a few years. I'm doing great now." Duncan gives him an encouraging thumbs-up.

"Good, good. I'm so glad to hear that." He works a moment to steady his breathing. "I almost apologized just now for my tears, but no! No! I am an artist, and emotional availability is a prerequisite for the work. Thank you for that reminder, Duncan." He wipes the last of his tears away. "My name is Liam. I am twenty years old, currently on summer break from my BFA program in Pittsburgh, where I am a double major in acting and directing. I came in here this morning prepared to wow you all with my directing prowess like an insecure director dick. Quite frankly, I was terrified you'd find out I got this job solely because I am Sonny's grandnephew, and I needed credits for my résumé. That being true, I will still shepherd the shit out of this piece, and I beg you all to bear with me as I figure out what the fuck I'm doing."

The room gives a collective nod.

"Oh, and I'm also playing the small but important role of The Paperboy." Liam looks at Sonny, who gives him the uncle nod of approval. "Laurel, would you like to go next?"

"I would." Whoa. The blond woman sitting next to Liam has a super seductive and deep voice, a la Kathleen Turner. "My name is Laurel Brodie, but I'm sure you all know that." She laughs.

No one laughs with her.

Utterly unfazed by her failed attempt at humor, she forges on with supreme confidence. "I've graced stages all over the country, playing all the greats: Gypsy Rose Lee in *Gypsy*, Kate in *Kiss Me Kate*, Annie in *Annie Get Your Gun*, Molly Brown in *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*,

Millie in *Thoroughly Modern Millie...*”

Dear God.

“Victor in *Victor Victoria*, Nanette in *No No Nanette...*”

Is no one going to stop this woman?

“Cinderella in *Cinderella*, Carmen in *Carmen*, Gigi in *Gigi*—”

“Wow, wow, WOW!” I shout with no small amount of sarcasm.

All eyes swing to me.

And Laurel. Looks. Pissed.

“I’m, uh... I’m sorry to interrupt you, Laurel,” I stammer and smile. “That was all so impressive. We’re very lucky to have you in the cast. I was just afraid if we listened to a full recitation of your résumé, we’d never get to the first read of the script.” I chuckle.

“And you are?” Laurel looks down her nose at me.

“Right.” I rush through my introduction. “Hi. Everyone. I’m Wendy Finegan. I’m the company stage manager. Something you may be surprised to learn about me? I named my daughter after my favorite character in my favorite musical of all time. Her name is Eponine.”

Laurel’s eyebrows pinch together. “You named your daughter after a dirty French street urchin who pines over unavailable men?”

“No,” I fire right back with as much sweetness and calm as I can muster. “I named her after a strong and determined young woman, who sings a soulful ballad about how even when we feel the most alone in the world, we are still connected to humanity through our inherent ability to love.”

“I have no idea what you just said.” Laurel scoffs.

Duncan clears his throat and looks right into my soul.

At least that's how it feels.

"I do," he says. "And I couldn't agree with the sentiment more. That's the beauty of what the theater can do, isn't it? It connects us. Makes us feel not quite so alone."

I get lost in his eyes for who knows how long before finally breathing out, "Exactly. Yeah. That's it exactly."

Maude eventually breaks the moment with a knowing smirk. "So whaddaya say, team? Shall we dive into the script?"

"But you and Sonny haven't done your introductions yet," I protest.

She waves me off and says at warp speed, "I'm Maude, this is Sonny, you all know us, the only thing surprising is that we're still speaking to each other after all these years." She whips open her script. "Let's do this thing."

CHAPTER SEVEN

We're halfway through the first read, and the general vibe is... terrible? Wonderful? It's hard to say.

Laurel is mid-monologue.

“Why? Why, why, whyyyyyyyyyyyy did I ever move into this building? I feel like the walllllllllllls are closing iiiiiiiiiin. I feel like the wiiiiiiindows are waaaaaaaatching meeeeeee. Every creak in the flooooooor startles meeeee and—”

“Laurel?” Liam cuts in. “I’m sorry to interrupt. I know this is just our first read... and you’re doing incredible work—”

“Thank you. I know.” She nods reverently.

“*However*, I can’t help but wonder about your choice to sing the lines instead of speak them. Also, we really do need to say the exact words that are on the page. No paraphrasing, please.”

“Ah, young man”—her tone drips with condescension —“a moment comes in every production when the emotions inside the characters are too big, too overwhelming for mere words to suffice. At those moments, the characters must sing. Also, what you call paraphrasing, I call collaborating. As the person embodying the role of The Tenant, I would think my improvements to the text would be welcomed.”

“Okay...” Liam stretches out the word. “I absolutely hear what you’re saying about heightened musical moments, when you are working in *musical* theater. But our esteemed playwright hasn’t written in any musical moments for us, so we need to honor what’s on the page. Moving forward, if you could refrain from singing your lines—or ‘improving’ upon them—I’d be most appreciative.”

Laurel purses her lips. "I'll try, but I'm not sure we agree on this approach."

"Understood, let's just try then. For now," Liam says in an honorable attempt at a compromise.

I chime in, "Great, let's pick it up from the knock on the door after Laurel's monologue."

Duncan raps his knuckles on the table and delivers his offstage line, "Super!"

"Why? Why, why, whyyyyyyy does this man insist on knocking on my door?" Laurel's eyes dart to Liam, and she hisses, "I'm trying, but the singing is just so ingrained in me."

Liam whispers, "It's fine. We'll address it later. Keep going."

I announce the stage direction, "The Tenant unbolts her door and opens it to once again find The Souper standing there, shirt unbuttoned, with another fresh pot of soup in hand."

"Good evening, ma'am," Duncan says. "I brought you some lobster bisque this evening."

There's no denying that Duncan is a natural. His accent work in scene five when The Souper delivers the French onion soup is terrible, but other than that? He's truly magnificent.

"Do you bring soup to all of your tenants?" Laurel manages to say without singing.

Liam gives her a proud thumbs-up.

"Only the beautiful ones," Duncan responds.

"I don't know whether I'm irritated or aroused," Laurel coos in character. Then she scoots her chair right next to Duncan and proceeds to nuzzle his neck, which is most certainly not in the stage directions.

I avert my eyes.

It's acting.

They're acting.

And what does it matter to me anyway?

"Can't we be both?" Duncan delivers his words with this delicious rumble in his voice that has me catching my breath.

Laurel too, it seems.

"Whew!" she says, fanning herself. "Sorry to break character, but geezuz is it hot in here? Or is it just me? Ordinarily, I'd assume it's me, but in this case, my Duncan Donut here is bringing all the warm sugar. Can we take five? This lady needs five."

I peek up at the clock and see we're just about due for a break, so what the hell. I'd be lying if I said I didn't need a break too.

"Sure," I say. "Let's take five."

The cast and crew scatter, but I stayed glued to the script. My opinions on the quality of this thing have not changed. I mean, what the hell is this thing? One second, it's a wacky comedy. The next? A thriller. And then it suddenly (and repeatedly) shifts into a sex farce. It's almost as if Sonny/Morty took every element he enjoys from every film, TV show, and theater production he's ever seen and smooshed them all together into this hodgepodge of a play.

I plunk my head down on the table.

"Hey, Wendy?"

I jolt upright at the sound of Duncan's voice right next to me.

"Yeah? What? Hi. Nice work in the read," I rattle off. Gah, I'm always so nervous around him.

"Thanks. Listen, I was working on getting off book last night..."

“Sorry, what? Did you say you were”—I lower my voice—“*getting off* last night?”

“Off-book!” he practically shouts and looks to his left and his right. “I was getting off *book*! You know, memorizing?”

“Oh. Yes, yes, yes. Getting off book, yes,” I sputter.

God bless the man; he keeps speaking and saves me from prolonged humiliation.

“But I’m having trouble with these lines. For some reason, they don’t exactly roll off the tongue.”

I try not to think about how much I would like to roll off his tongue. Or rather *on* his tongue. On or off his tongue, it doesn’t matter. If his tongue is involved, I am interested.

Get it together, Wendy.

“It’s not your fault,” I say. “Between you and me?” I lower my voice. “It’s a challenging script. But hey, when I used to help my daughter memorize speeches for her forensics team, we always found that writing the lines down every morning longhand helped get the words into her body. Maybe try that!”

I grab my purse and dart toward the door. We still have a minute or two left on our break, and I could really benefit from some fresh air.

Duncan’s voice stops me.

“I was actually hoping... maybe you could help me tomorrow morning before rehearsal. Maybe ping pong the lines with me a bit over breakfast?”

“Umm...” I hesitate.

“For the good of the show, of course.”

I sigh, but I can’t help the small smile that breaks through. “I see what you’re doing. If it’s for the good of the show, then how can I say no, right?”

“I mean, you *could* say no”—he laughs—“but then you’ll just have to deal with me calling ‘line’ every second in every rehearsal over the next six weeks, which will take your attention off the million other details you need to be juggling as the stage manager.”

“So I guess when you look at it that way, *you* are actually doing *me* the favor, huh?”

“I like the way you think.” He smiles. “Great. I know just the place. Fun little joint just a few blocks from The Bone. Meet me here tomorrow morning at eight, and we’ll walk over together. Sound good?”

I hesitate again. He notices.

“Or I could pick you up if you prefer,” he offers.

“No! No, definitely don’t pick me up.”

He laughs. “That’s what I thought. So... see you tomorrow at eight?”

I take a deep breath.

Fuck it.

“Sure. Yeah,” I say. “See you tomorrow at eight.”

“Excellent.”

With that, the rest of the team files back into the room, and I plop back into my seat.

The break is over.

As Duncan saunters back to his own seat, he whispers in my ear, “Oh, and make sure you wear your pajamas.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The following morning, I'm standing in front of Slurpin' the Bone at seven forty-five sharp because on time is late in my book.

A bead of sweat is forming between my shoulder blades. Am I sweating because I'm nervous? Or because I'm wearing adult fleece footie pajamas on an eighty-degree summer day? Hard to say.

I don't expect Duncan to appear for at least another ten minutes, but as soon as I sit down on the bench next to the entrance, the door opens, and there he is. Wearing... a pale-blue linen bathrobe.

My heart rate immediately picks up.

I knew this was a terrible idea.

I jolt to my feet to greet him, which is apparently the exact amount of momentum that tiny bead of sweat needs to roll down my spine and land in its destination between my butt cheeks.

I squirm at the sensation.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Fine, yeah. You? You're looking... bathrobe-y this morning."

He laughs. "Yeah. Liam gave it to me as a possible costume choice to try out at today's rehearsal. Plus, it's perfect for our breakfast venue."

"Perfect, yeah," I breathe.

"Don't worry," he says. "I have another layer underneath."

At that, he whips his robe open to reveal a tight black tank and gray boxer briefs.

"You can, uh..." I stumble over my words and shield

my eyes. “You can close up shop, sir. I wasn’t worried.”

“Ha-ha, good.” He closes the sides of his robe again and ties the belt around his waist. “I know keeping things professional is a top priority for you, so I wanted to be sure you’re comfortable. Shall we?”

He gestures to the sidewalk.

“Sure, yes. Lead the way.”

We walk down Route 17, side by side, my fluffy yellow duck slippers punctuating every step.

And I do mean that literally.

“Quacking duck slippers and duck footie pajamas?” he says, a warm smile in his voice. “You don’t do anything half-assed, do ya?”

“I try not to.” I shrug. “My daughter bought these for me as a going away present. We have this mother duck joke thing we do.” I almost explain it but decide not to bore him. “Full disclosure, though? I didn’t consider the walk when I selected the slippers this morning. I have a change of clothes and shoes in the car for rehearsal.” I stop walking and gesture back to the parking lot. “I can grab my sneakers instead if the noise bothers you.”

“Hell no. It’s delightful. Quack on, bright angel.”

“Ha. Okay.”

We resume our pace, the quacks the only sound between us for a block or two.

“I’ve been meaning to say something to you since the introductions at the table read yesterday,” I say.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah, but I couldn’t really find the words.”

“The words for what?” he asks and guides us down a side street.

“All those years ago, when I’d see you and your

daughter at school... I had no idea what you were going through.”

“How could you have?”

“Well, when I look back on it now, through the lens of you losing your wife, certain things make more sense.”

“Like what?”

“How you were often running late, the sad and sweet look that was always in your eyes, and the way you always seemed so worried about your daughter... You were grieving and looking for a connection, and I was way too distracted by your stifling sex appeal and the wedding ring on your finger to read between the lines and offer you anything other than canned pleasantries.”

“Stifling, huh?” He laughs. “Tell me, Wendy, do you still find my sex appeal stifling?”

“One hundred percent.”

“Good to know.” He gently bumps me with his shoulder. “Because the feeling is beyond mutual.”

I have no idea how to respond to that, so I just quack along beside him.

He continues, “She’d been gone for months at that point. Just took me a long while to take off my ring. Felt disrespectful to her somehow, ya know?”

“Sure,” I say softly.

“She was an incredible mom to Rebecca, and I miss her every damn day, but I’d be lying to you if I said we were the right match for each other. She’d be the first one to tell you that. We had a kid when we were still kids ourselves and stayed together for her. Not that it was any kind of hardship. She was my best friend, and we had a great life together. But after the first few years, that’s as far as things went.”

“I see.”

“Not that you asked for all of that information.” He chuckles, and I think it’s the first time I see a tiny shred of self-consciousness come over him.

“I appreciate you sharing that with me,” I say.

“Don’t mention it.”

His steps slow, and he comes to a stop on the sidewalk.

Thankfully, so do my quacking slippers.

He takes both of my hands in his. “Maybe one day, you’ll feel safe to tell me your story too.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Something comes over me at that moment. I don’t know if it’s the earnest look in his eyes, the feel of his calloused palms holding mine, or the fact that I didn’t know such honest, open-hearted men existed in this world until now, but I lean forward to kiss him, right here in broad daylight while I’m wearing flannel footie pajamas in eighty-degree weather.

You can imagine my surprise, when right before making contact, *he stops me*.

“Wendy...” he says kindly.

“It’s okay!” I chirp. “I get it!”

“No,” he says. “I don’t think you do. I’d give anything to kiss you right now, but I want it to be right. And right now, you’re still worried about the fact that..”

“That I’m your boss, yeah,” I finish his sentence for him.

“Hm. Would you say you’re my boss, though?” He tilts his head to the side.

“I absolutely would, yes! The stage manager is the boss!” I give him a playful slap on the shoulder.

“Alright, alright! Damn, woman!” He cups his shoulder

like I actually hurt him. “So for the next six weeks, you are my boss. But after that... watch out, woman. Because I’m coming for ya. Okay?”

A wave of heat rushes to my cheeks. And a few other places.

“Okay,” I manage to get out.

“Until then... friends?”

He offers me a handshake.

I take it.

“Absolutely friends.”

“Excellent,” he says and turns toward the building I’m only just realizing we’ve been standing in front of. “Now let’s go enjoy some serial killers.”

Surely, I heard him wrong.

Right?

CHAPTER NINE

When we enter the building, a few things become clear: 1. I did not hear him wrong. He most definitely said “Let’s enjoy some serial killers,” though in this case, “serial” is actually spelled C-E-R-E-A-L. And 2. Duncan could not be more fun.

An attractive guy about Duncan’s age spots us as soon as we walk in and hurries over to give Duncan a hug. “My man! You finally made it! How the hell are ya?”

“Couldn’t be better, bud,” Duncan says and slaps the guy on the back. “Wendy, this is Sebastian, the owner of this esteemed establishment. Sebastian, this is my—” He hesitates. “This is Wendy Finegan.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say and shake his hand.

“Likewise,” Sebastian says. “You know, in high school, I knew a girl named Colleen Finegan.” He breaks into song. “She had whiskers on her—”

“Don’t! Please!” I half laugh, half yell. “That nursery rhyme plagued me for my entire childhood. Every morning, I woke up terrified that when I looked in the mirror, there would in fact be whiskers on my ‘chinnigan.’ And oh God, the number of times I heard ‘Poor old Wendy Finegan Begin Again’ on loop after I said something? It was torture.”

“Damn,” Sebastian says with a good-natured shrug. “And here I thought I was original.”

One look around his restaurant and it’s clear this guy is as original as it gets.

Sebastian whips his head around at the sound of the order bell dingling from the serving window. “Sit wherever you like and enjoy your meal, guys. I’m thrilled you’re here.”

“So,” Duncan says as he guides me to a booth. “As you can see, Cereal Killerz is an amazing all-you-can-eat gourmet cereal restaurant where the waitstaff—and playful patrons such as yourself— wear their pajamas all day.”

I scan the room in awe as we take our seats.

“Wow. The art in this place is bizarre and brilliant. Toucan Son of Sam and the Son of Sam.” I point at the wall behind Duncan.

He turns and nods. “It’s oddly magical, isn’t it? Though I think my favorite combo is that one over there.”

He points toward the cash register.

“Holy crap!” I gasp in delight. “It’s Apple Jack the Ripper!”

A server in a SpongeBob nightshirt approaches our table with a steaming carafe of coffee and two menus. “Morning, lovebirds,” he mumbles and gestures to our empty mugs.

“Yes, please,” we say in unison, neither one of us correcting his “lovebirds” comment.

I suppose when two people enter an establishment together at eight in the morning dressed in their pajamas, it’s usually safe to assume they are, in fact, lovebirds.

Unfortunately, not in this case.

After the server pours and moves on to the next table, I say, “So what’s up with these restaurants that only serve one thing? You with the soup, this place with the cereal... Is this something I should expect to see more of?”

“I think everybody is niche-ing down these days,” Duncan says. “Becoming experts in the basics. I can tell you from my experience with The Bone, it’s a blast exploring all the varieties of one thing. It’s never, ever boring. I love the challenge of making one thing specific

and special to people. And I think patrons find comfort in knowing what they're going to get but also anticipating that little twist on the dish that makes it feel like an adventure. It's not unlike monogamy, yeah? You can be with only one person for years—decades even—and if it's the right person and you're both brave enough to show all your colors, it can be a vibrant feast neither of you ever wants to finish. At least, I hope that's what it can be like. Comfort with a side of adventure. An unbeatable combo if you ask me."

This guy. Where the hell did he come from?

"So." He changes the subject dramatically. "SEASONZOFLUV@aol.com?"

My cheeks heat. "Yeah." I chuckle. "I was a huge *Rent*-head as a kid. *Seasons of Love* knocked me out every single time I saw it."

"I've never seen *Rent*. Stephen Sondheim, right?"

"No!" My head almost explodes. "*Rent* was written by Jonathan Larson—God rest his soul! Stephen Sondheim—God rest his soul—wrote *A Little Night Music*, *Into the Woods*—with book by James Lapine—*Company*, *Sunday in the Park with George*—again with book by James Lapine—*Sweeney Todd*, *Pacific Overtures*—"

"Whoa, holy musical theater geek!" Duncan laughs.

"You better believe it, buddy. And what the hell kind of theater person are you not knowing that very basic information?" I huff, only half-serious.

"I've always been more of a play person." He shrugs. "Quiz me any day on the ins and outs of Ionesco, Churchill, Shepard, or Shaw, and you'll find me in full theater-nerd mode. But musicals have never been my thing. Except *Les Miz* of course. *Les Miz* rocked ten-year-old Duncan's fuckin' world."

"*Les Miz* rocked eight-year-old Wendy's world too!" I shout just as the server returns and looks at us

expectantly for our orders.

“I’ll have the Honey Nut Charles Manson Cheerios with extra Dahmer drizzle please,” Duncan says.

“Honey Bunches of Throats with Teddy Bundy Grahams on the side for me, thanks.”

The server slaps some oversized silver spoons on the table and heads to the kitchen.

“Alright.” Duncan drums his palms on the table. “Tell me your *Les Miz* story. Go.”

“Okay. Like I said, I was eight years old. My mom took me downtown to see a touring production of *Les Misérables*. From the moment we got into our seats, I was hooked. The sounds of the orchestra warming up below gave me goose bumps. I was exhilarated each and every time I saw the conductor’s baton lift high over his head when the music reached a crescendo. And oh God, I was out-of-my-mind enchanted by the spotlight that tore through the air whenever there was a single performer onstage. I’ll never forget when everyone else in the audience was crying, watching Fantine cutting her hair, I was craning my neck behind me and waving at the spotlight operator, hoping against hope that he would wave back at me.”

Our bowls are plunked down in front of us. Guess it doesn’t take long to assemble fancy bowls of cereal. I dig in without missing a beat of my story.

“When we left that performance, I clutched the playbill to my chest like a bible. It made absolutely no sense to me that the actors were the only ones who bowed at the end and got the applause. I mean, they were amazing, of course, but what about all the designers? The producers? The dressers? That brave spotlight guy hanging from the ceiling weaving all that light magic for me? If they weren’t going to get a curtain call, I figured the very least I could do was memorize their

names and contributions to the show. The very next day, I got my drama llama binder, and I've been keeping track of all the shows I've seen and plays I've read ever since."

Duncan wipes his mouth as some milk drips down his chin. It's damn adorable.

"A stage manager from the start, huh?"

"I never thought of it that way. But, yeah, I guess. Had to take a decade or two of a detour to get here, though."

"Well, I sure am glad you're here now," he says and lifts his spoon in my direction.

I lift mine as well, and we clink, then dig back into our bowls.

"PS," Duncan continues, his mouth full. "What are the chances I could see this drama llama binder of yours someday?"

"The chances are looking good, Duncan. They're looking really, really good."

CHAPTER TEN

We arrive back at Duncan's restaurant fifteen minutes before rehearsal is set to start.

As we walk up the front pathway, he says, "You know, we never did work on memorizing those lines."

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry!" I say. I was having so much fun just talking with him that I'd completely forgotten.

"I'm not." He smiles and looks so deep into my eyes I have to turn away.

I gaze up at his restaurant sign instead.

"So. Slurpin' the Bone, huh?" I chuckle.

"Yeah..." He draws out the word. "What do you think?"

"Well, it's certainly... provocative."

"Too provocative?" He tips his head to the side.

"I mean, I guess it depends on what you're trying to sell."

"I'm trying to sell soup."

"Sure." I laugh. "I get that. But soup isn't necessarily..."

"Sexy?" He finishes my sentence for me.

"Yeah," I say, a bit breathless.

Duncan takes a step closer. "Wendy, if you don't think soup is sexy, then I'm sorry to say you've never been properly served."

Serve me, serve me, dear God, I want this man to serve me.

"HEY, GUYS!" Liam breaks our moment, zooming right between us and heading toward the door. "Nice jams, Wendy!"

“Um. I was just about to change,” I say, embarrassed.

“Don’t change on my account! Who doesn’t love footie pajamas?” he says as the front door slams behind him. Then he immediately pops his head back out. “Plus, we’re starting with intimacy choreography this morning. Fluffy duck jammies will keep the energy in the room playful and light!” He slams the door again.

That guy is a whirlwind.

“Shall we?” Duncan gestures to the entrance.

I look at my car, which holds my change of clothes, then down at my current outfit. I good-naturedly throw up my hands. “What the hell. Yeah.”

“My daughter actually came up with the name,” Duncan says, returning to our previous conversation as we enter the restaurant together.

“Your *daughter* came up with Slurpin’ the Bone?”

He laughs. “She did, yeah.”

“And how does her *father* feel about that?”

“Proud, actually.”

I’m sure I’m giving him a confused stank face.

“Relax,” he says. “She’s almost twenty-three now, remember? Just graduated with a marketing degree from NYU. I think it’s important she see her work and ideas taking flight right away. So when she came to me, super stoked about the concept, how could I say no?” He grabs a menu as we walk by and flashes me another look at the logo before placing it back on the counter. “Personally, I love it.”

“I love it too,” I say. “You’re a great dad.”

We pause just outside the rehearsal room door. “Thanks, Wendy. That’s the greatest compliment you could ever give me.”

There were plenty of other compliments I could give him. I could tell him his blue eyes make me woozy whenever he looks at me. I could tell him he smells like heaven and looks like a dream. I could tell him that his deep voice gives me goose bumps, his smile makes me swoon, and that I'm starting to think it's possible he really did hang the moon.

But none of those things are appropriate in our current situation.

So instead, I say, "Rehearsal awaits."

I enter ahead of him, and what I see stops me in my tracks.

Not only does rehearsal await us, but Laurel awaits us too.

Or rather, Laurel awaits Duncan.

Wearing what can only be described as a lacy teddy and lounging on a divan, she looks right at him and says, "It's time for some intimacy, baby."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I spend the next ninety minutes facilitating a private rehearsal completely centered on the mechanics of Duncan and Laurel kissing—while they don attractive bedroom clothes sourced by our costume designer, and I sport a fluffy onesie better suited for a toddler.

It is excruciating.

And—in my mind, at least—completely inappropriate.

Never in my life have I been more excited about shouting the words, “Fifteen-minute break!”

“Nice work, lover,” Laurel purrs to Duncan as she dismounts his lap and sashays over to the water fountain we brought in for rehearsals.

Duncan looks rattled. He juts his thumb out the door toward the rest of the restaurant. “I’m gonna check on the staff real quick,” he says to me like he needs my permission or something.

“Of course, yeah!” I say as breezily as I can. “It’s your break. You can do whatever you like.”

I take a second to gather my wits.

I know I am new to this process, but I am fairly certain what happened here just now is bananas.

Laurel is still in the room, so I pull Liam to the side and give him a look.

“How’d you think that went?” he asks, hope in his eyes.

“Um... awful?!” I whisper-yell.

“Oh shit, really?” He winces. “In school, we have an intimacy director for kissing scenes and stuff, but obviously, there’s no budget for that here, so I did my best.”

“Where are you training, Liam? Porn school???”

“You heard me say ‘no tongue,’ right? I’m pretty sure I told them it’s industry standard to withhold tongue.”

“Uh, yeah. You mentioned that, but it certainly didn’t keep Laurel from inserting hers into Duncan’s—”

“What did Laurel insert where?” Laurel is suddenly beside us and speaking in third person with a knowing smile on her face.

“Laurel, you’re on break,” I grumble. “Your director and I are in a private production meeting.”

“Look, Wendy”—she continues to smirk—“I can’t help it if my co-star always falls in love with me. It’s a part of the process.”

“No, it is *not* a part of the process,” I respond. “Nor is it a part of the process to give dirty looks to the stage manager at every opportunity you get.” I almost end the conversation there but find I’m too fired up to stop. “You know what I’m allergic to, Laurel?”

“Certainly not polyester/cotton blends,” she sneers as she scans my damn pajamas.

I ignore her slight and carry on. “I’m allergic to the idea that women must be pitted against each other simply because we’re women. I came in here for our first rehearsal, fully prepared to like you, champion you, and give you whatever support I can as your stage manager. You, however—for whatever reason—decided the moment you saw me that you didn’t like me, and that there was some sort of competition to be won between us. Excuse me for saying so, but that there is some bullshit. We are on the same team. We are here to create something beautiful together. Whether or not that is possible with this abomination of a script remains to be seen, but goddamnit, we can at least try, can’t we?”

I cover my mouth, shocked I let that all out.

“I’m... gonna leave you two ladies alone,” Liam says and gets the hell out of there.

Panic immediately sets in, and I exhale. “Oh, thank God Sonny isn’t here yet. Can we please not repeat what I just said about the script?” I beg.

Laurel is silent and staring at me.

“I didn’t mean that. I’m really grateful to be a part of this project. I’m just feeling—oh, who cares. It doesn’t matter what I’m feeling.” I peek at the time. “We have ten minutes left in our break. I apologize for my outburst, Laurel. Let’s just—”

Then Laurel shocks the hell out of me when she says, “No. I am the one who should apologize.”

I wait.

She scoffs. “I said I *should*. That doesn’t mean I will.” She clears her throat and gives her head a little shake. “Perhaps apologizing is something I’m allergic to.”

“Fair enough,” I say and turn my back to her.

Clearly, this is not a conversation that will be wrapped up in a nice little bow.

I settle down with my script and scribble down my notes for the last bit of blocking we just staged.

I think Laurel’s left the room too, but I look up to see her still standing in the doorway. “It’s not an excuse for my behavior,” she murmurs as if it pains her to continue speaking to me. “Though I will say that I am wholly unaccustomed to feeling unseen by my scene partner.”

“What do you mean by that?” I ask.

She nods out the door, where we can both see Duncan laughing with one of his cooks.

“That man only has eyes for you.”

With that, she finally leaves me in peace.

Ugh. If I'm going to get through this process with any semblance of professionalism, I know what I need to do.

And it is going to royally suck.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I avoid direct contact with Duncan as much as I can during the rest of that rehearsal. And the next one. And the one after that.

After an entire week of weirdness between us, my phone rings while I'm whipping up a late-night post-rehearsal snack.

I've programmed the whole cast and crew into my phone, so when the words "Duncan Sanford" flash on the screen, it's not a total surprise, though still a bit jarring.

"Duncan," I answer.

"Wendy," he responds. I can hear his smile in that one word. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Other than calling instead of texting like any other self-respecting millennial would do?" I attempt to joke.

"Color me old-fashioned, I guess," he says. "Though in fairness, I believe I'm what you'd call an 'elder millennial.' I'm right up there on the cusp of Gen X."

"I guess you'd have to be, huh? With a daughter who's almost twenty-three? How old are you?"

"I'm forty-one years old."

"Wait. So you had your daughter at eighteen?"

"I did indeed."

"Same as me," I marvel.

"Not an easy road," he says.

"Holy understatement, Batman." I laugh.

"True. No regrets on my end, though."

"Me neither."

There's silence between us for a moment.

“You didn’t answer my question, Wendy. Did I do something wrong?”

Here goes nothing.

“I like you, Duncan.”

“I like you too.”

“But we can’t do this.”

“Can’t do what?” he asks.

“We can’t go back to your restaurant after hours, running and giggling into the kitchen where not another soul is around. We can’t snuggle up next to each other by the burners while you stir soup, your forearms all bulgy and your apron strings all dangly, tempting me to pull so I can see what’s underneath. We can’t blow on the soup to cool things off a bit—because Lord knows we need to cool things off a bit—and then proceed to spoon-feed it to each other mouthful by mouthful, watching each other swallow and wishing to God we were swallowing something else.” I finally take a breath. “No offense to your soups, of course, which are unequivocally delicious.”

I hear him stifling a laugh from the other end of the phone.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, Wendy, but we haven’t done any of those things.”

“I know.” I pause. “But I want to.”

“Me too,” he responds so earnestly it gives me a shiver.

“Here’s what we’re going to do.” I get my stage manager voice on. “I know we said we’d do the ‘friend’ thing until the show is over, but that’s just not working for me. So for the next seven weeks—that’s five more weeks of rehearsal and two weeks of performances—we are going to steer clear of each other as much as possible while on the job. Let people think we hate each other, I don’t care. It’s better than them thinking I’m an

unprofessional ass who lets my um—my um—my... *desire* for you get in the way of my work ethic. Because I will not let that happen. I will not allow this production to be anything short of a five-star success, and in order to do that, I need to keep my head on straight, and that means keeping my physical distance from you.”

“Your *desire* for me, huh?” he says after all that.

“Shut up.”

“Alright, alright.” He chuckles and adopts a professional tone of his own. “Let me just double-check and make sure I understand the parameters here. “For the next seven weeks, you need me to keep my *physical* distance from you. That means before, during, and after rehearsals.”

“That is correct, sir.”

“Understood, madam. How about this, though?”

“How about what?”

“What we’re doing right now. Can I call you?” he asks. “Are phone calls allowed? I think you’ll have to agree there is quite a lot of physical distance happening right now. I mean, I’m clear across town.”

“True...” I think for a moment. “I guess... this would be fine. If that’s... something you want to do, sir.” I have no idea if I’m able to hide the sound of the huge smile on my face right now.

“It’s what I want to do,” he says. “Very well, miss. I will plan on seeing you at rehearsal tomorrow night then—from a distance of course.”

“Of course.”

“And you can expect a call from me afterward during your late-night snack time.”

“I look forward to it.” I’m just about to hang up before saying, “Wait. How did you know this is my late-night

snack time?”

“I’ve shared a meal with you, miss. I know how you nibble. Have a good night.”

“Have a good night.”

He hangs up.

I dip my hand back in my bowl of chocolate-covered pretzels and nibble away, feeling utterly content for the first time in months.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

For five long weeks, Duncan and I keep our promise to maintain physical distance at every rehearsal.

And after every rehearsal, he keeps his promise to call and share a late-night snack with me over the phone.

It's quickly become my favorite part of the day: sharing stories with him, talking about our dreams, helping him memorize his lines... We're getting very little sleep, but neither of us seems to mind.

When I stepped out of my house this morning to grab the newspaper, I was surprised and delighted to find a basket on my stoop with a little sign in his handwriting that said, "open me."

Inside was what appeared to be ingredients for a meal: dried noodles, herbs, celery stalks, carrots, a chicken breast... and bones. A whole lotta bones.

I smiled wide when I pulled out a little red envelope and read the invitation inside.

You are invited to a Night-Before-Opening Cooking Party

Where: Your Kitchen (and Mine)

When: After Dress Rehearsal Tonight

***What to Wear: An Apron... and Nothing Else
(Kidding. Dress comfortably)***

***How to RSVP: Have your bone broth prepped and ready to go
(Directions below)***

What to Expect: A "Showmancing the Bone" Tutorial

xoxo

Duncan

Um. Count me in.

I follow Duncan's directions for making bone broth that morning, and by the time I get home from dress rehearsal at eleven o'clock that night, it's been simmering

on my stovetop over low heat for over ten hours.

Not unlike the way my body simmers every damn time I'm near him.

My house couldn't smell more delicious. I change into some cozy yoga pants and a soft tee, then line up the rest of my ingredients on the kitchen counter while waiting for his call.

At eleven thirty on the dot, he rings.

"A *Showmancing the Bone* tutorial?" That is the way I answer the phone.

"It's just a little recipe I put together for you," he responds. "Several weeks ago, a certain someone told me that soup isn't sexy. I wanted a chance to prove her wrong."

"You are incredibly sweet. Thank you for this," I say. "But the timing of this... tutorial is a little premature, don't you think? Opening night is tomorrow, and we still have two weeks of performances before anything can, um"—I clear my throat—"happen between us. Because as we've discussed several times, showmances are between *actors*, not the leading man and the company stage manager. I don't make up the rules. IT's practically a tradition. There's a long line of showmances before us: Ryan and Rachel, Jen and Ben, Brad and Angelina, Bradley and Lady Gaga... I could go on and on."

"So, by your logic, I should be dating Laurel?"

"No!" I say a bit too emphatically.

He laughs.

"Oh, did I tell you what she said to me the other day?" I ask. "She comes up to me during break and says, 'Looks like I was wrong about you and Sexy Soup Man, huh?'"

"Nice Laurel impression! You're a natural. Get this woman on the stage!"

“When hell freezes over, sir. So I say to her—”

“Sorry to interrupt, but Laurel calls me Sexy Soup Man?”

“I’m pretty sure everyone calls you Sexy Soup Man.” I laugh.

“Who knew?” he marvels.

“May I continue my story, please?”

“Absolutely.”

“So I say to her, ‘Whatever do you mean, Laurel?’ and she’s like, ‘Well, I thought I was picking up on some serious vibes between you two early on, but he’s been avoiding you like the plague for weeks now. Looks like I’ve still got a chance!’”

“She does *not* have a chance. But hold up, I need to address the horrible showmantic examples you just rattled off. Those people have absolutely nothing to do with us.”

“And why is that?”

“For starters, you are way more attractive than Angelina Jolie—”

“Are you kidding me?” I laugh. “*No one* is way more attractive than Angelina Jolie!”

“I don’t think you have the proper perspective on this. Unlike me, you don’t have the pleasure of seeing you across the rehearsal room every day.”

My God, he is impossibly sweet.

“Secondly,” he goes on. “Every couple you mentioned eventually broke up—with the exception of Bradley and Lady Gaga, whose romantic entanglement was never confirmed, and all current signs point to them *still* being and *only* ever being friends. And I guarantee you, Wendy, if or when I’m lucky enough to truly be let into your life? There is no way on this earth I’m letting you

go. And we sure as hell aren't ever going back to just being friends."

I change the subject. Because apparently, that's what I do when I'm at a loss for words.

"Tonight's dress rehearsal was pretty great."

"Yeah," he agrees. "Everything seemed to go off without a hitch."

"Which worries me," I say.

"Why?"

"Because of the dress rehearsal superstition!" I say like it should be obvious. "Do you not know it?"

"I do not."

I explain, "The belief is that a terrible dress rehearsal is a good omen for a successful opening. So with things going so well tonight..."

"We better hold on to our hats tomorrow?" he finishes the thought for me.

"Exactly."

"I don't know," he says. "With someone like you steering our ship, I think we'll do just fine."

"Here's hoping," I sigh.

"Alright, milady. You ready to rock?"

I look down at all these gorgeous ingredients laid out in front of me, and a lump forms in my throat.

"Duncan?"

"Yeah?"

"This is..." I exhale. "No one has done anything like this for me in—"

Damn, why can't I find the words?

"I don't think I can fully express what this means to

me.”

“Maybe... try?” he says slowly and with so much kindness in his voice, I could cry.

I take a deep breath and decide to try.

“My parents fought a lot when I was a kid. And I do mean a *lot*. They were so wrapped up in each other and whatever drama they had going between them that they generally paid me very little attention. I learned early on to stay out of their way as much as I could. I tried to be good, ya know? The happy kid who did all her homework without being asked. The girl who completed all her assignments a week early and aced all her tests. But I had this nervous stomach constantly churning underneath it all. I was usually fine and hid it well enough, but occasionally things would come to a head, and I couldn’t handle the idea of getting out of bed and going to school. I was just... frozen in place. On those days, my mom would stay home with me and make me soup.”

“What kind?” he asks softly.

“Green Tea Chickpea.”

“Whoa.” He chuckles. “Didn’t see that one coming.”

“Ha, I know.” I laugh lightly with him. “She made it once on a whim, and it settled all my nerves. After that, every time I froze again in the future, she got to work on another pot, and somehow everything felt better. I don’t know if it was something in the actual recipe, or if it was simply the fact that she slowed things down and really spent *time* with me. But I felt... cared for. When I had Neen and was on my own with her, I started making it for us whenever it seemed like she or I needed some extra comfort.”

He doesn’t say anything.

All I hear is the soft sound of his breathing, his listening.

I continue, "And this, tonight. This feels a bit like that. So... thank you."

"Well, thank *you* for letting me," he says.

"Alright, enough of that." I chuckle.

I pick up my spoon.

"Teach me."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Opening night is awful.

And wonderful.

An absolute clusterfuck.

And a glorious triumph.

If I'm learning anything about the theater—and life in general for that matter—it's that the ups can't exist without the downs. The lefts can't exist without the rights.

For example, we have piss-poor attendance: literally three people in the audience.

However, those three people seemed to have the time of their lives. They laughed their asses off throughout the entire show (while ingesting a hell of a lot of soup). I wasn't always sure if they were laughing *at* us or *with* us, but if they had fun and they tell all their friends, does it ultimately matter?

I will say that from my perch in the stage manager booth, I really couldn't have been prouder.

I hit most of my lighting and sound cues but miss plenty of others.

Laurel manages not to paraphrase her lines. Though she does sing the majority of them. Personally, I think it's a nervous habit, but Lord knows a woman that proud will never admit to nerves. She also manages to keep her tongue in her own mouth while stage kissing Duncan, which, personally, I very much appreciate.

Liam struts his director stuff around the theater during the pre-show and intermission, schmoozing our three guests to the best of his ability, then when it's time, he gives a loud and proud performance as *The Paperboy*.

And I have to say, Maude is masterful. Whenever she's onstage, I can't take my eyes off her. Neither can

my booth buddy, Sonny, who surprises me by sobbing tears of joy throughout the entire three-and-a-half-hour performance. I get misty-eyed myself seeing his vision come to life for him.

Did I mention that it is a THREE-AND-A-HALF-HOUR performance?

And... who am I forgetting?

Just kidding.

I may be biased, but Duncan is a revelation. He holds those three audience members in the proverbial palm of his hand all night.

He holds me there too.

And although I could watch him up there a thousand times more and never get bored, a huge part of me is ready to wrap up this experience.

I'm ready to see what things could be like between us when we are free to get... unprofessional.

It's an hour before curtain for performance number two, and I'm sitting in the makeshift company dressing room—which was our makeshift rehearsal room before this, and the restaurant's storage area before that—going over my cues for what must be the hundredth time today. I'm determined to get them all right tonight.

Here's another theater superstition: the second performance is always the trickiest. The cast and crew are often riding high on the wave of excitement from the first performance. Everyone remembers the audience's energy from the first night, and they're easily thrown during performance two if this new audience is a completely different animal, which of course it will be.

So I'm already on edge and expecting the unexpected tonight.

But I certainly did not expect what happens next.

Sonny bursts into the room, waving a single sheet of old-school printer paper over his head.

“Ladies and gentlemen! We have a sold-out show tonight and a waitlist forming down the block! I have to think it’s thanks to this review in the Warmington Warbler!”

Gasps echo around the room.

“What’s the Warmington Warbler?” I ask.

“It’s the Facebook group Arthur Simmons put together last year when the Acme flooded, and no one could redeem their two-for-one Tuesday coupons,” Maude informs me. “It’s where the over-eighty crowd shares any and all intel, including theater and movie reviews.”

“Gather round, team! Let’s read it together!” Sonny is positively giddy.

I pull him to the side and speak in a hushed voice, “Sonny, I don’t mean to overstep. I know you’ve been in this business far longer than I have, but do you think it’s wise to read a review to the cast right before a performance?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Well,” I continue in a near whisper. “There’s a good chance something that’s said could rattle their confidence.”

Laurel breezes by on her way to the costume rack and leans way too close to my ear for my liking. “Wendy, Wendy, Wendy, you should know by now that nothing rattles my confidence.” She takes that opportunity to send a wink in Duncan’s direction.

“That being the case,” I say with clenched teeth and a smile, “I still don’t think it’s the best idea.”

“But it’s five stars!” Sonny shouts. “I didn’t read it yet. I just saw those stars and printed this sucker as fast as I

could.”

“Five stars???” Maude squeaks and stands from her makeup mirror.

“FIVE STARS! HOLY SHIT, I GOTTA CALL MY MOM!” Liam comes rushing into the dressing room and immediately puts his mom on speakerphone.

“Gather round everybody, gather round!” Sonny says.

In a matter of seconds, we’re all assembled. Butterflies swarm in my belly.

Sonny gives me a look as if asking for permission to continue.

“Well, who can argue with five stars?” I nearly squeal.

“Exactly! Here we go.” Sonny launches into the review with gusto. “Morty McShane’s ‘The Souper’ currently running at Slurpin’ the Bone on Route 17 is a wonder.” Sonny breaks and reaches for Maude. “You hear that, Maudie? It’s a wonder!”

“I heard, baby, I heard.” Maude takes his hand in hers. “Keep going!”

She called him baby.

Oh, my heart.

Duncan was right. Look at how the theater can bring people together.

“It’s a wonder what made anyone decide to produce this drivel in the first place.” Sonny’s face falls for a split second but then immediately perks back up. “But thank God they did! This play is one of those rare and beautiful cases when something is so bad it’s good!”

“The only aspect of the show that is objectively awful is the casting of Ms. Laurel Brodie in the role of The Tenant,” Sonny continues in a cheery voice.

My stomach drops. I nudge Sonny and frantically

whisper, “Skip that part, skip that part,” but he is on a roll and doesn’t take the hint.

“The woman couldn’t act her way out of a milk carton if the spout was wide open and a straw was shoved in as a rescue pole.”

“Hmm,” Maude says. “Who knew Arthur had such a way with words?”

Sonny finally catches up with his own excitement and realizes what he’s done.

Laurel’s face goes stark white.

Then bright red.

She stomps over to her dressing mirror, crashes all her belongings into her rolling suitcase with one swipe of her forearm, then turns and makes deliberate eye contact with each one of us.

“Good luck doing the show without me, assholes.”

With that, she’s out the door.

“Maude!” I shout. “Maude, go after her! She listens to you!”

“Sonny, you idiot!” Maude scolds and tears after Laurel as fast as she can.

Forty-five minutes later, with only fifteen minutes until our sold-out show begins, we are—as Sonny would say—deep in the shits. Maude couldn’t catch Laurel before she drove off, and all attempts to reach her by phone, text, and even a frantic visit to her house courtesy of Liam have failed.

Duncan keeps our agreement about distance and simply locks eyes with me from across the room.

Sonny slumps into a chair and places his head in his hands. “What are we going to do?” he moans.

It takes everything in me not to vomit.

Because I know what we're going to do.

In the case of an absent actor and no understudies,
the stage manager assumes the role.

God help me.

It looks like I'm going on stage tonight.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

In a matter of minutes, I am buttoned—and safety-pinned—into Laurel’s negligee costume, and I’m literally shaking behind the curtain listening to the crowd getting antsy in their seats.

Duncan sidles next to me and places his warm hand on my lower back.

I startle. “Where have you been?”

“I had to take care of something,” he says, completely calm like he doesn’t have a care in the world.

“We’ve been holding the curtain for you!” I scold. “Do you know what it’s like to lose both your leads right before a sold-out show? What am I supposed to do, go on for everybody? At this point, should I just get up there and do a one-woman show?!”

“Shhh, shhh,” he tries to soothe. “Everything is okay.”

“Inaccurate,” I say. “Nothing is okay, Duncan. NOTHING IS OKAY!”

“Okay, take a deep breath.”

He coaches me, and I find myself mirroring his deep inhales and exhales without conscious thought.

“You know this play forward and backward. Inside and out. You know every line, every bit of blocking, every entrance and exit.”

A wave of calm washes over me.

“You can do this.”

I realize he’s right.

And... he’s really close.

“You’re, um. You’re touching me.”

“Yeah, well—I’m not sure if you’ve noticed...” He gets

even closer and whispers in my ear, “But our situation has changed.”

“What do you mean?” I whisper back, so close to him now that I can feel his stubble brushing my cheek.

“As of forty-five minutes ago, you’re no longer my boss,” his deep voice rumbles over my skin.

I shiver. And not from the cold. Though you better believe it’s drafty as hell when you’re backstage wearing nothing but a negligee.

“I suppose that’s true,” I say, so softly I’m not sure I managed to speak the words aloud.

He proceeds to nuzzle his nose into my neck. “Sonny is our new stage manager. And no offense to Sonny, but he’s not really my type.”

“No offense taken,” I moan as his warm hand slides up my back and his fingers gather in my hair. “For Sonny, I mean.”

“Besides, a very smart woman of the theater once told me ‘showmances are for the actors.’” He cups my face in his hands. “And Wendy?”

“Yeah?” I’m putty in his hands.

“Tonight’s your debut.”

He lands the softest kiss imaginable on my forehead raining tingles down the entire length of my body.

“Break a leg,” I whisper as he slips around the curtain to the other side of the stage.

I peel back the curtain the tiniest bit, make eye contact with Sonny perched up in my booth, and give him the signal.

“Places, everybody,” I whisper more for myself than anybody else.

The opening music plays.

The curtain rises.

I step onto the stage.

And somehow, minute by minute, step by step, I weave my way throughout this three-and-a-half-hour monster of a show. Duncan was right. After six weeks of steering this ship from my seat, this play has become a part of me. I know every line, every cue, every exit and entrance.

I am almost certain my acting—if you can call it acting... in this case, it can only be called *surviving*—is mediocre at best, but I'll be damned if I don't feel like a Broadway star there.

Whenever I feel lost or afraid, I lock eyes with Duncan, and his energy guides me back to the moment. Miraculously, I make it through... all the way to the big ending scene where Laurel—or I, rather—stand at the lip of the stage, gazing out over the audience at what is supposed to be a sparkling sea. My character is thinking of all she's been through and how far she's come, how disconnected and alone she's been and how she's finally ready for more.

And then I hear him approaching me from behind.

“Can I spoon-feed you my latest concoction?” he asks right on cue.

I turn and allow him to dip the spoon in my mouth.

When the green tea and chickpea flavor lands on my tongue, the tears that come to The Tenant's eyes are real.

I deliver my line. “I've never tasted anything sweeter.”

And finally, *finally*, we kiss to our hearts' content.

Show over.

Cue the applause.

EPILOGUE

Cereal Killerz is packed that night for an impromptu after-hours cast party.

Duncan's friend Sebastian was in our sold-out audience tonight, and with all the excitement of my last-minute stage debut, he decided to open his doors to us for a celebration.

The party started hours ago, but with all the excitement over my surprise stage debut, I've yet to see Duncan. It's been a constant swarm of people congratulating me and asking me questions. Arthur Simmons, our 5-star reviewer from the Warmington Warbler even asked to do a spur-of-the-moment interview with me.

After hours of fielding well-wishes, I finally spot Duncan across the room.

We move toward each other in what feels like slow motion.

When he reaches me, he slips his arms around my waist like they were always meant to be there.

"So. That final scene. That was one hell of a kiss," he says with a sly smile.

"That was one hell of a soup," I say. "How did you pull that off?"

"I thought you could use something to calm your nerves. Whipped it up as fast as I could before the curtain went up."

I shake my head with wonder at this man.

He brushes a strand of hair off my forehead. "I just wanted you to feel safe up there with me. Taken care of." He pauses. "Did it work?"

"It worked," I say on a half cry, half laugh.

“We’re calling it ‘Wendy Finegan Begin Again Soup.’ I’m thinking of putting it on the menu. Permanently.” He takes a deep breath. “If Wendy will have me.”

“Oh, she’ll have you,” I say with absolute confidence, then wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him for all he’s worth.

The entire room breaks out in thunderous applause.

I place my forehead against his and revel in the moment. We sway to the music we can just barely hear over all the merriment in the room.

“Word on the street is Sonny and Maude are looking to retire,” he says.

“Really?”

“Yeah. They still plan to be creatively involved but want to step down from daily theater operations.”

“That makes sense,” I say and smile, seeing them slow dancing together across the room, looking so happy and content.

“So... they’re looking for someone to take over.”

“Well, I’m sure they’ll find somebody,” I say. “They’ve built something really wonderful with this place.”

“How about you?”

“How about me what?”

He leans back slightly so he can look me directly in the eyes. “How about you take over?”

I freeze.

“Me? Run a theater?” I breathe. “By myself? Are you crazy?”

“What if you had a partner?” He gives me a knowing smile. “What do you say? Want to run a theater with me? A little comfort with a side of adventure?”

I look around the room at all the smiling faces, all the

joy, all the connection, and I say the only thing I can.

“Oh, hell yes.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ERIN MALLON is a romantic comedy author, an award-winning narrator of nearly 600 audiobooks and an accomplished playwright and producer in New York City. She has written over 40 plays, which have been produced Off-Broadway and all over the country. Erin lives in a little yellow house on the outskirts of NYC with her husband and Three J's.

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