



A Romantic Comedy

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The Show Must Go On (Excerpt)

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*To my fellow musical theater geeks, nerds, and lovers.
Sing out, Louise!*

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“Let Me Entertain You” –Gypsy

It's second nature to project my voice so that it fills every inch of the theater.

Admittedly, that's a bit tricky in this space—a majestic old movie theater that was closed down and left to rot three decades ago. Now it's an in-progress restoration project. Tarps cover chairs. Scaffolding climbs the walls. And a fine layer of sawdust coats every surface. Luckily, the construction crew gave us the space today, so we don't have to battle the whirl and clatter of saws and hammers. But even with those obstacles removed, the combination of soaring domed ceilings and touchy sound system presents a unique challenge.

Still, so long as I control my breath and keep my words crisp, I know that once people are in these empty seats, everyone will hear me just fine.

Being loud has never been a problem for me.

I do, however, occasionally, sporadically interspersed, without quite meaning too, overpower my fellow performers. Sometimes I just can't help it. The joy of the music and the words and the movement all come together and burst out of me—with the same volume intensity as a foghorn.

Today though, that sense of joy eludes me. Or maybe it's being *sucked* out of me by my apathetic castmates. It's funny. We're in the middle of a group number, but the only voice I hear is my own.

“Sing out, Louise!” I hiss from the side of my mouth as I chassé across the stage.

“Who’s Louise?” one of the girls asks, her face scrunched up in confusion.

That’s all I can take. There are some theater references that everyone should know. “Sing out, Louise!” from *Gypsy* is one of them.

“Cut the music! Cut, please, cut.”

After a moment the music stops. Silence fills the room. The cast stares at me in bewilderment. Taking a deep breath, I remind myself they’re theater newbies and I need to be gentle with them.

“Ladies, I hate to say this, but that wasn’t very good. We’re forgetting lines. We’re falling behind the music. We’re holding our voices in, when we need to be projecting them out to the audience.” I fling both arms wide, indicating the correct direction.

The girl playing Molly raises her hand. I can’t remember her actual name. Honestly, I can rarely remember anyone’s name. But for some reason character names tend to stick with me.

“Yes?” I nod at Molly, ready for a question about proper breathing techniques or what vocal warm-ups I’d recommend.

“Does this mean we have to do it again?”

I put a hand over my mouth, hoping they mistake my smothered moan for indigestion. “Yes. We’re gonna take it from the top and this time really give it our all. Okay?”

“Ugh.”

“No-ohhhh.”

“Not againnnnnn!”

My castmates, grown adults all of them, were in no way forced to be part of this community theater production of *Annie*. And yet they act like they’re doing hard time in a Russian gulag. Sadly, it’s the best acting on this stage so far.

“Yes, againnnn. And again and again and again until we all get it right.”

This does not go over well. A sea of sullen faces stare back at me.

Well, okay, I probably could've delivered that message in a better way. Tried to relate to them. “Hey, guys, I know it sucks spending your whole afternoon in a stuffy theater. I have other things I'd rather be doing too.” That's not true though. The theater is my very most favorite place—even when I'm sharing it with castmates on the verge of mutiny. But maybe great leadership means occasionally lying your face off? I don't know. I have no fucking clue at all. That's the problem here. As co-director, I'm in charge, and my every decision is making everything that's already bad, even worse.

And yet the show must go on.

“Mr. Conductor?” I force myself to look down into the nearly empty orchestra pit. Due to budget constraints, instead of musicians and their instruments packed tightly together, we have a dude in cargo shorts and a stained T-shirt. And his boom box. The last time I peered down there, he was clipping his toenails.

Now he gives me a lazy salute, which seems nice...until I notice his middle finger extended. Clearly he's pissed this rehearsal has run two hours over schedule. No surprise there—everyone is pissed. Adding in an extra rehearsal had seemed like a no-brainer, especially considering how underprepared we are for an opening night that's five days away.

Instead it was—cue the minor chord progression—yet another wrong decision.

Turning back to the cast, I clap my hands. “Places, everyone. And let's remember, this is our big opening number. We need to grab the audience or risk losing them entirely. So let's sing out and give it our all. Okay?”

Half-hearted nods and shrugs are all I get in response. After twelve weeks of rehearsal, excitement levels are supposed to be at a fever pitch. The “OMG this is it!” nerves should be spreading like a bad case of the flu. Instead, the prevailing sentiment seems to be a whole lot of meh with a side of the whatever's.

I don't get their attitude. For me theater is more than a hobby. It's more like my baby. I love it beyond reason. I can't imagine life without

it. I insist on bringing it up at all times, even when it's unwelcome or inappropriate. Just ask the mechanic at Wally's Auto Lube. Last week I spontaneously serenaded him with "Greased Lightning" while he rotated my tires.

Sure, I understand that non-theater people, like the Wally's Auto Lube mechanic who asked me to "please, knock it off already," may not feel the same way about my baby. But theater people are supposed to get it. We share a secret language. And yeah, this is their first musical for most of them, so I get they're not fluent yet, but every time I translate, they look at me in this sort of dead-eyed way. Which makes it pretty obvious.

They all think my baby is ugly, and they have no idea how to break it to me.

Yet somehow I keep hoping I might still win them over.

Holding in a sigh of despair, I glance back down to the pit.

"Okay, Conductor, hit it."

Frozen in our places, we wait out a long moment of silence. Or there should be silence—except someone's phone goes off. Most people would quickly silence it and apologize. Instead I hear a soft, "Hey, I can't really talk right now."

"No phones on stage!" I screech the words like someone just barely holding on to the last shreds of their sanity.

"Wow. Lose it much?" someone whispers to my left. A chorus of giggles follow.

Here's another problem. These people make me feel old. *Old* like my tenth-grade music teacher, Mrs. Phazo, who was only a few years away from retirement and used to constantly mutter, "I don't understand any of you."

Of course I'm not old. Yeah, I turned thirty a few months back. But thirty isn't old. It's not, because I'm not old. Old people have mortgages and children and other things I don't even know enough about to list because of my extreme youthfulness.

But...the cast is *exceptionally* young. Twenty-two is the median age.

Our Daddy Warbucks just turned twenty. At the little party we had for him, one of the girls pulled me aside to drunkenly whisper, “Not sure if you know, but he totally has a thing for older women.” It didn’t even occur to me that *I* was the older women, until she squealed, “He’s so into you!”

Damn it. Why is there no music?

“CONDUCTOR!”

Pop. Crackle.

“It’s the Hard Knock Life” begins to play.

What happens next is ugly. Like the opening sequence to *Saving Private Ryan*, it’s horrifying and disorientating. The choreography seems to have been taken more as a general suggestion of how one might wish to move their body. I have to dodge and weave like a prize fighter just to keep from getting knocked out by one girl’s unpredictable twirling broom and another’s series of kickboxing moves.

As the last note fades, it’s all I can do not to throw my head back and howl. Unclenching my jaw, I force a smile onto my face instead. A smile full of warmth and genuine affection.

It’s fake. Of course it’s fake.

But it looks real, and that’s because I am a professional actress. Well, a professional amateur. As professional as someone who never gets paid can be.

Not many people can claim to have performed in community theater shows in seventeen of the fifty states and in forty-one cities. Okay, *cities* may be generous. Towns. Villages. Once I was Fannie Brice in a production put on by the County Line Theater Company. So I’ve run the gamut.

Some of those shows were bad. None were as awful as this. Somehow I landed myself in an actual shit show. But when you’re sorta the director, you can’t say that. So I turn the smile up a few notches instead.

“Great job, everyone. Let’s take five.”

Retreating backstage, I pull two ibuprofen and my cell phone from the back pocket of my jeans. Almost immediately the phone rumbles.

Two more missed calls from my mom since the last time I checked, and one text message delivered in her usual low-key way:

JENNA! CALL ME! IT'S IMPORTANT!! LOVE YOU! MOM!

My mother's idea of important is debatable. As just a recent example: *JENNA! WE GOTTA TALK ASAP ABOUT THIS NEW SEXTING THING THE KIDS ARE DOING. SPOILER ALERT. US OLD PEOPLE CAN DO IT TOO! ;)*

I stash my phone away again. Whatever Mom wants, it can wait.

If only this day was so easily dismissed.

I jerk my wig off and massage my aching scalp, my fingertips searching out the spaces between the bobby pins, trying to convince the headache that started behind my eyes to, if not retreat, then at least slow its advance. I'm tempted to find a corner and grab a three-minute standing nap. Years of chronic sleep problems have made me a pioneer in a field I've dubbed *extreme catnapping*.

Instead I step off the stage and stride up the aisle, past the empty rows of plush red seats. I glance up at the curving edge of the balcony, struck anew by the size and grandeur of this place. It's not often I get to play a house this big.

Reaching the back, I turn around. There's that classic proscenium arch framing the empty stage, all lit up and waiting for someone—me—to walk across it, find their mark, and sing.

Even after years and years of doing this, my chest goes tight. The dopamine hit fades quickly though, leaving behind a bone-deep weariness. And with it the question that won't leave me alone.

Is the show shit because of me? Have I lost it? Did I ever even have it?

Trying to shake it off, I push open the double doors that lead to the lobby.

Stella, the producer and other half of our co-directing team, is pacing back and forth on the black-and-white tiled floor, cell phone pressed to her ear as she hollers into it. "I'm gonna call the ACLU. Have you ever heard of freedom of speech? Have you, huh? What about artistic expression? Is that a new one for you too? Well, you better look 'em up, because we're not going down without a fight."

Seeing me, Stella puts her hand over the mouthpiece of the phone. “I got ’em on the ropes here. How’s it going on your end?”

“Great!” I lie. What else can I say to the person who considers this show her grand musical theater vision? I can’t say, “Why did you ever drag me into this mess?”

Although she did.

Eight months ago I was in Mississippi finishing up a run of *The Sound of Music*, when Stella called.

“Aren’t you sick of the same old, same old?” she’d asked. “I mean, how many times now have you done good old *Sound of Music*?”

Seven times playing Maria and singing “Do Re Mi.” That’s how many. Of course, every production was different. In theory. In reality, some directors played things so straight and by the book that it felt less like art and more like completing a paint-by-numbers set.

Then Stella said the magic words. “Annie meets *Fifty Shades of Grey*.”

It was so wrong. And ridiculous. I couldn’t help but be intrigued. In retrospect, I should’ve immediately said no. Instead, I heard the word “maybe” come out of my mouth.

Truthfully, my big 3-0 milestone had a part in it. Aging out of my twenties made me want...something. I wasn’t sure what.

That “maybe” was all the opening Stella needed. “Oh, Jenna, please say yes. I didn’t want to get into this, but things with Brian aren’t going great. Also, the theater group is trying to force me out, and well, I could really use an ally. Someone who’s on my side one hundred percent.” Her voice cracked on that last word.

Due to my nomadic existence, I don’t have a lot of close friends...or really any besides Stella. Still, you don’t need twenty BFFs to know the rules, the simplest of which is when a friend asks for a favor, you better have a good reason to say no.

“When do you need me there?” I’d asked.

It was only after I’d arrived and unpacked that Stella informed me (in the same tone you might use to tell someone they’d won the lottery) that she’d not only given me the lead part but made me her co-director

as well.

I'd never directed anything before. Never wanted to either. But Stella gave me the big boo-boo eyes as she reminded me, "Jenna, I really need you. Puh-puh-please."

I caved.

And now it's tech week, a.k.a. the week before the show opens, when you practice with lights and sound cues and costumes, and all the five hundred things that can go wrong, do go wrong. But instead of five hundred things going wrong, we're closer to five million, and the whole damn production is balancing on the brink of disaster.

"Goddamn it, don't you dare put me on hold again!" Stella returns to her phone conversation, which doesn't seem to be going well.

She's chatting with the fine folks at Musical Theater USA, the company we paid for the rights to put *Annie* on stage. Somehow they got wind of all the shades of gray Stella added to the show, and they are not happy. In fact, they're demanding we close it down. Immediately.

As Stella starts to threaten once more, I decide to get some fresh air. Head pounding more insistently than ever, I step outside, desperate for some sun on my face—and nearly walk right into a sign reading, *SAY NO TO ONSTAGE PORN*.

Ah hell. I'd forgotten about the protestors. They've been coming round ever since an anonymous editorial accusing the show of "sexualizing girlhood" came out in the local paper. The next day a dozen people were out front chanting "Keep Annie clean!" Now as they catch sight of me, several rush over waving bars of soap.

Keeping my head down, I push past them and then, as they refuse to give way, start to run. Luckily, no one follows when I duck into the side alley, and I'm able to lean against the stage door at the back of the building, catching my breath and letting my heartbeat slow before finally heading inside.

As the door clunks shut behind me, I take a deep breath in. Slowly exhaling, I try to let go of all the things going wrong and focus on what's going right.

I get to play Annie, a part I’d thought my advanced age made impossible for me to cross off my bucket list. And while the show is a mess, it’s definitely not boring. Finally...

I search for a third good thing as I pull my wig back on and return to the stage. Carefully, I step over my castmates littered across the floor until finding center stage, I plant myself there.

This space right here. This is my third thing. My home. My safe space. My own personal center that only needs a spotlight to complete it.

Getting to stand up here is the reward.

But first I have to earn it.

“Hey.” I clap my hands to get everyone’s attention. A few wan nods and rolled eyes are all the encouragement I get. “Let’s work out the curtain call. Once that’s solid, everyone can take a break until we meet again tonight for the dress rehearsal.”

Actual groans meet this announcement.

“What’s the point?” Molly asks. “They wanna shut the show down. I don’t care what Stella says about refusing to wave the white flag—whatever that even means. They don’t want us to add flags to the show, do they?”

“No, they are not asking for white flags,” I patiently explain. “They don’t like that Annie and Daddy Warbucks have a sloppy kiss at the end of the show. They also want us to stop stripping during ‘You’re Never Fully Dressed without a Smile.’”

“Oh, c’mon.” The flexible blond girl playing Pepper joins in the discussion. “That is definitely a stripper song. Maybe in a more wink wink sort of way than we do it, but still, it’s clearly about getting naked. Am I right or am I right?”

The other girls hoot and holler in agreement. And they’d know. Most of them work at Topaz, the strip club out by the interstate. After we lost half the original cast at the first table read, Stella was desperate for anyone with stage experience. So she went out to Topaz and sold being part of our musical as a mix between a blowout party with top-shelf liquor and a day at Disneyland.

Frankly, I was tempted to drop out too. Once Stella fully articulated her vision, I couldn't help but think it sounded more crass than clever.

"Girls kissing girls kissing boys kissing girls! It's the Great Depression and everyone wants to get laid!"

The words "I quit" were on the tip of my tongue, but remembering I was there to support Stella, I swallowed them down and replaced them with "The show must go on."

Those five words have a near mystical quality to motivate me. I've gone on with bronchitis. Sunburn so bad it left blisters up and down my arms. And even a broken foot. That last was during *My Fair Lady*. With the long dress (mostly) covering the big clunky cast, I didn't just go on, I convinced everyone looking at me that I really could've danced all night.

Now I search for some way to transfer even a bit of that never-say-die feeling to this group of people who are mostly here for fun. As a way to pass the time.

I close my eyes. My head pounds even louder. And then—at last—in-spiration strikes.

"Happy hour at the Wishing Well before the next rehearsal! First round of drinks on me!" I announce.

And finally I'm greeted with cheers instead of jeers. Making a mental note to remember my credit card, I circulate around the stage as everyone peels themselves off the floor.

"Great job on that final number."

"Loved your energy in the first act."

"Good recovery after losing your line."

I drop words of encouragement here and there, hoping between that and the promise of free booze we can pull this thing across the line.

As the three stripper poles are moved downstage, I explain how immediately following the final number, everyone needs to gather in the wings. At that point the music for "Tomorrow" will start. I organize the cast in the order they'll come out, in threes, with each swinging round the stripper poles before taking their bow.

“All right, let’s do it!”

Everyone stares at me until I clap my hands, and then they scatter into the wings. Again, I point to our conductor. He sighs loudly before pressing Play.

The opening notes to “Tomorrow” begin, and I join the cast backstage. As the lead, my bow is last. Right before me, Mrs. Hannigan and Daddy Warbucks will come out and do their spins round the pole, and then the whole cast will turn upstage and I’ll enter stage center.

In theory this should be easy.

But first they forget the order. Then one girl takes too long on the pole, launching into her whole routine from Topaz. The guy playing President Roosevelt stops the whole thing to argue that his character would not use a stripper pole, seeing as how he’s in a wheelchair. I explain it’s okay to break character for the bows, and he goes off on a ten-minute rant about kids today not respecting history, while I struggle not to roll my eyes because this is already our third Roosevelt and I doubt we’ll be able to dig up another. Finally, we compromise. The Boylan sisters will help him out of his wheelchair, and then he’ll take a go on the pole.

We run through it six times and not once do we make it to my bow.

As “Tomorrow” starts up again, I can’t stand to watch. Hating myself for doing it—especially after my earlier freak-out—I pull out my cell phone.

There are several more texts from my mom, mostly consisting of scared cat emojis and exclamation marks. I can’t even begin to guess what they might mean. Below those is a short text from my niece, Maxi. As a teenager she instinctively knows how to compose an attention-grabbing text without resorting to all caps.

Grams really wants to talk with you. I think somebody died or something.

My heart stutters and then stops. Somebody died or something.

I peek between the curtains and see Mrs. Hannigan and Daddy Warbucks preparing to step onstage. Mind racing, I watch as Mrs. Hannigan completes her rotation round the stripper pole. Daddy Warbucks follows. It’s my turn to step onstage, but instead my thumbs

are rapidly typing out a text to my mother.

IS IT DANNY?

I need to move. They finally did the curtain call perfectly, and I'm screwing it up. But I can't go on, and neither can the show—not until I get an answer.

It comes at last.

HOW DID YOU KNOW? CALL ME. OK?

My phone slips from my hand. I don't bother to pick it up as I step onstage, singing along with the rest of the cast, the words coming automatically.

Danny. Dead.

Oh, Danny.

Suddenly my throat is too tight to sing.

I reach the stripper pole and wrap both hands around it. Instinctually I turn my smile up a notch, sending it out to the empty seats as my legs bend, prepping for my turn. There's someone out there at the back of the theater, half in shadow.

I recognize him instantly despite all the years that have gone by.

Danny. It's Danny. Or his ghost.

I am spinning while also twisting awkwardly to look over my shoulder, to see him again. My hands, suddenly clammy, slip. Then I'm flying. And falling. As my head thumps against the hard boards of the stage, I am not thinking about how no one is singing or that we'll have to do the curtain call again or any of the things that have been tying me into knots today.

There's only one thought in my mind. And it's this:

Danny is dead, and it's all my fault.

“Mother’s Gonna Make Things Fine” –A New Brain

I’m only out for a minute, which frankly is disappointing.

When I open my eyes, Stella’s face hovers over mine. She looks tragic. Big tears brim, threatening to overflow. At first, my scrambled brain thinks she’s crying about Danny. But then I remember—she doesn’t know anything about him.

“Don’t cry. I’m fine.” I scoot away from her and then carefully touch the bump at the back of my head.

“No, you’re not!” Stella counters with a wrenching wail. Tears fall. “You’re hurt, and you’ve worked so hard, and you moved all the way here, and now it doesn’t even matter. It’s over, Jenna. They’re shutting us down.”

“Oh.” It’s an insufficient response, but all I can muster. Honestly, five minutes ago I would’ve been upset. I would’ve been wailing right alongside Stella. But none of that matters right now.

Sitting up, I look out into the audience. Of course Danny’s not there anymore. If he ever was. What’s worse—being haunted by an ex-boyfriend or hallucinating his surprise appearance?

I guess most people have that one ex-boyfriend they can’t forget because of how he was in a coma the last time they saw him.

Right? No? Just me? Okay then.

I sat by his bed for a year. Then I bailed. That was over ten years ago. Nearly twelve, to be exact. I can't believe it's been that long. But I'm thirty...so yeah, the math works out.

Persistent vegetative state. That's what they call it. And all this time Danny has been incredibly persistent.

Except it seems he's finally given up the fight.

"Where's my phone?" For the first time in my life, I have an uncontrollable urge to call my mother. Remembering it slipping from my hand, I crawl across the stage on all fours. Finally, I push the curtain aside, and there it is, right where I left it. I spin back toward Stella, who is in her own world, methodically cursing out all the small-minded, puritanical, overzealous copyright holders who wouldn't know art if it bit them on the arse.

"Hey." I gently break into her diatribe. "I gotta go."

"What? No!" She springs to her feet. "You might have a concussion. And we're all going out for drinks to celebrate a battle well fought."

I shake my head, but Stella slips her arm into mine. "How about this? You go home. Rest. Don't sleep—you might fall into a coma."

At the word "coma," I startle so hard I actually levitate for a moment. Stella frowns. Puts a hand to my forehead. "Maybe I should take you home—"

"No." I step away from her before she can fold me into a hug. I don't need a hug. I need to find out what's going on with Danny. But most of all I need some time alone to process. "You're right. I should rest."

"Fine. I'll give you two hours, but then I'm having whoever I convince to be the designated driver pick you up. Just in time for happy hour, right?" Stella grins in the slightly manic and totally irrepressible way she has. I nod and agree before stumbling out to my truck.

Climbing up into the driver's seat, I turn the engine to get the air conditioning blowing, but I don't go anywhere. Instead, taking a deep breath, I call my mother.

"Oooooooooooooooooohh J-J-J-Jeeeeennnaa," Mom sobs in greeting.

Immediately I tremble. Mom continues weeping, and I'm surprised to notice wetness on my cheeks, to realize I can still cry for Danny even though, for all intents and purposes, I'd done my mourning a long time ago.

Danny is at peace. After lingering in a coma, hovering indecisively between the living and the dead, he's finally given in and passed away. Which is sad and tragic and all that. I mean, of course it is. *But* it also means that no one will expect me to come home and hold his hand.

"I'll send flowers," I say at last.

Mom's grief abruptly cuts off. "Flowers? But Jenna, *baby*, he asked for you."

"His dad, you mean?" That seems unlikely. But possible, I suppose. Danny's father hadn't exactly liked me, but he didn't hate me the way Danny's mother did. "Look, if they want me to sing at the funeral or something, I'm just...I'm sorry, but I don't feel up to it."

"Funeral?" she says in the exact way she'd said *flowers*. In a way that finally alerts me—

I have the wrong end of the stick here.

She confirms it. "But, baby, Danny's alive. He woke up. And he asked for you."

I stab the little button on my screen that will end the call. Even after the connection is dead, I keep poking it.

Danny isn't dead. I didn't see his ghost.

This is good. This is great.

And yet for some reason, I lay myself across the front seat of my truck and sob.

It's been so long since I've let myself think about Danny. The real Danny. Not the boy silent and still, wasting away in a hospital bed. That Danny haunts me. But the Danny who insisted on rubbing my feet, not minding the calluses or the prickly hair on my ankles from not shaving in three days. I'd forgotten that Danny. Purposely locked him away.

But now he's tickling me, the same way he did then.

I've always hated anyone touching my feet. Too many years spent in

tap shoes a size too small because Mom couldn't afford a new pair.

But there was Danny kissing my ugly big toe. When I accused him of having a secret foot fetish, he tickled me until I laughed so hard it hurt. In retaliation, I tickled him behind his ears (he was weirdly sensitive there), and then we were on the ground, all twisted around each other. Exhausted, my head rested against Danny's chest, and I listened to his heart energetically thumping away.

I remember thinking, *This sound is my future.*

It felt terrifying and comforting and inescapable all at once. I was eighteen and pregnant and certain—the kind of certain that only exists when you haven't yet had life smash all your plans to bits—that Danny was my future.

Twenty-four hours later I was sitting in one of those molded plastic chairs they have in hospital waiting rooms. My hands were clasped together in prayer as I begged God for a redo. “Oh, please please please tell me this isn't happening.”

I'm tempted to give that prayer another try today. Not that I wish Danny was dead. Or still comatose. No, he's awake, and I'm thrilled for him. Godspeed and good luck to him. The part I object to is him asking for me. I'm the last person he should want to see. The only call I should be getting is one telling me to stay far, far away.

Speaking of calls, my phone is blowing up. “Don't Rain on My Parade”—my ringtone—plays. Insistently. After blowing my nose with a fast-food napkin, I finally give in and answer.

“Oh, Jenna baby,” Mom says.

She does not mention my hanging up on her. I am her baby, and my older sister, Allie, is her angel. In her eyes we can do no wrong. This has, of course, fucked us up in ways both large and small.

“Mom,” I say, my voice small and tired.

She *oh babys* me again, and then, “Where are you sweetie?”

“In my truck.”

“Oh no. You can't drive all the way home.”

“I'm not driving home.”

“Oh good. So you’re on your way to the airport? Do you need help paying for your ticket?”

“Mom!” Exasperated, I can’t stop myself from snapping at her. This is the rhythm of our conversations since the beginning of time. She is nutty but well meaning and desperate to be helpful, until finally, snap. I sigh. “It’s tech week.” I fail to add the tiny yet somewhat significant detail about how the show has just been cancelled.

“Oh dear. Tech week, huh?” I’ve been doing theater since I was eight years old, so Mom knows the sacrosanct nature of tech week. “Well, as you theater people say, isn’t that a kick in the pants.”

“Yeah, Mom, all the theater people say that,” I agree, because to do otherwise would lead to a twenty-minute explanation of the many people—well beloved and known within the theater community—who have used that phrase throughout the years. She’d probably wrap it up by quoting Shakespeare’s famous line, “To be kicked in thee pants or not to be kicked in thee pants. That is the question.”

“And I’m not only the lead. I’m co-directing too,” I add. “So I can’t just leave. You know?”

Of course she does. “Well, I’ll talk to Danny’s family,” Mom says. “I’m sure they’ll understand.”

I roll my eyes at this but don’t bother to disagree.

“And when your show is over...”

“Mom, let’s take it one week at a time. I mean, his family won’t even want me there by then. They’ll realize I’m nothing more than an old ex-girlfriend.”

“Oh, honey, you’re not *that* old.”

“I meant *old* as in *past tense*. Girlfriend no longer.”

“But you said ex-girlfriend, sweetheart, which already means that. So the old—”

I cut her off. “Whatever! I’m not old. The relationship is. Like ancient history.”

Mom is quiet for a moment, and then softly, “But you were more than his girlfriend. You were practically married.”

“Mo-om.” It’s half warning, half plea. Please do not go there.

She goes there. Straight toward it as if nothing on earth could keep her away. “You know, after we found out you were pregnant, I took Danny aside and asked him what his intentions were. He looked at me, straight at me with those bright-blue eyes of his. You remember those eyes, the way they sorta glowed. Like an alien almost, but the handsome kind you wouldn’t mind being abducted by. And he said to me, so sincere—not sarcastic like you always were at that age—he says, ‘I’m gonna marry Jenna. I knew it from the moment I first saw her. This baby moved it up a little, that’s all.’ Now, I never told you this story before—”

I can’t take it anymore. “Mom, you’ve literally told me this story a thousand times. And that’s a conservative estimate.”

“Oh fine, I’ve told it, but you never *hear* it. You roll your eyes or make like the whole thing was a hallucination. I want you to understand the heart of this story. Danny, he wasn’t like your father, who ran out and left me with two kids. Or that boy who got Allie knocked up and swore up and down it wasn’t his. No, Danny was different. He meant it when he said he was going to marry you and be a father to your child.”

I swallow and realize suddenly how dry my mouth is. “But, Mom, there is no baby now.”

“But if Danny is awake and he’s asking for you—”

Again I interrupt. “Then what, Mom? We pick up where we left off?”

“Well...” She lets that linger, and I think I’ve gotten through. But no. “Why not? All these years later and you’re still single. And *he’s* still single.”

“Of course he’s still single! He’s been unconscious. That gets in the way of a person’s social life. And now, who knows. He could be brain damaged. Maybe he was trying to ask for more Jell-O and accidentally said my name instead.”

The words explode out of me. Ugly. Mean.

This is what family does to me.

The worst part is, Mom doesn’t even know she’s doing it. She’s got no idea that Danny is like a broken bone that never healed right. It doesn’t

just hurt—it's ugly too. I can't stand having anyone look at it, touch it, or talk about it.

This is why I stay away.

On the other end of the line, Mom is silent, but I can imagine the way she's shaking her head. "Mom, I really gotta get to rehearsal now. I'm running late, and my costume takes forever to get it on just right."

"Oh! But your sister wanted to say hi!"

"No, Mom, no."

It's too late. Angry and loud enough to bruise my eardrum, Allie jumps in. "So you're really not coming home, huh? A guy wakes up from a coma and asks for you specifically by name, and you're gonna be all, 'Nope. Sorry. I gotta stand up on a stage and pretend I'm someone important.'"

I sigh. "Did you just want to bitch at me?"

"Mostly," Allie admits. "But also to say, you know, it wouldn't suck to see your face. Like in person, I mean, if you decided to come home. Nadine and I are talking about getting married, but I've already told her it will have to be a destination wedding because you've got this weird hang-up about coming home."

Nadine is Allie's girlfriend. They've been together for almost five years, which is still difficult to believe. When she first started seeing Nadine, I figured it was a phase. Or that Allie had run through every loser guy in the area and had no choice but to move on to the loser women. But no, Nadine was and still is gainfully employed as a lawyer. As time's gone on, it's become clear—they're the real deal.

"Wow, marriage." And this is the part where I'm supposed to add, "Of course I'd come home for your wedding." But I don't. "Well, a destination wedding *would* be nice. I'll go anywhere you pick. What about New Orleans? Culture, great food, and the beach. You know we all love the beach."

"Yeah, I know. The last time I saw you—what was it, seven years ago now?—we met at Virginia Beach cause you were doing a show nearby."

It was eight years ago, but I don't correct her.

“You coming home could also help Mom and me,” Allie continues. “You remember we’re trying to get our business off the ground?”

“Oh yeah.” I try to recall what exactly this latest scheme is. Mom collects social security, and Allie’s been on disability ever since she injured her back a few years ago, but they’re always trying to find different ways to make a little extra money. And now that Allie’s daughter, Maxine, is sixteen, they’ve been roping her into their sideshow too. “It’s the soap thing, right?”

“Homemade, all-natural bathing blocks,” Allie corrects me.

“So...soap.”

Allie ignores me again. “There’s gonna be a lot of press around Danny. It’s not every day someone wakes up after over a decade in a coma. Do you know what kind of free advertising we could get if you put one of our bathing blocks in his hand?”

“You’re kidding, right? It’s possible he won’t even be able to hold something in his hand.”

“Jenna, don’t be so literal. It could be on his bedside table. Or sitting in his lap. Even poking out a shirt pocket.”

“Balance it on top of his head,” I interject.

“Hilarious.” Allie sneers. “But seriously, Jenna, could you think about someone other than yourself for once? I’ve been telling you for years, Mom is losing it, so she’s not exactly a stable business partner.”

“Allie angel, I’m still standing here,” Mom chirps in the background.

“Mom, I know. I’m looking right at you,” Allie responds in this “you see what I’m talking about” tone. “And if that doesn’t bother you, think of Maxi. Your niece, in the basement every day after school, making the blocks. Selling them is pretty much her only hope of being able to afford college.”

I close my eyes, exhaustion finding me. Allie often has that effect. “Maybe she should put that time into studying instead.”

It’s the wrong thing to say. I knew it even as the words came out. Anytime I comment on anything to do with Maxi, Allie takes it as some sort of judgment on her parenting skills.

Of course, she's sensitive about it since she had Maxi when she was fifteen. A few years later when I got knocked up too, Allie was thrilled to have me follow in her footsteps. Like I'd done it on purpose 'cause I'd seen how well teenage motherhood had worked out for her. I miscarried soon after Danny became all distant and comatose. Allie's never forgiven me.

Sure enough Allie drops ten metric tons of sarcasm on me. "Oh wonderful. Here we go. Jenna's parenting tips. Please go on. I'd love to hear more."

Personally, I believe sarcasm should be underplayed. You don't want every word coming out of your mouth like its italicized. But Allie doesn't under anything. Not underplayed, understated, or understanding.

So I apologize. The phone finally gets passed back to Mom so she can tell me to "Break a leg, but not really!" before we all say goodbye, and I promise to let them know if I change my mind.

After getting rid of them, I want to lie down again, but instead I text Maxi.

What's the deal with this whole soap scheme?

No matter what time I text Maxi, she always responds seconds later. I'm pretty sure she has a phone surgically connected to her body.

You mean the bathing blocks?

She adds a winking emoticon to reassure me that she hasn't been completely brainwashed.

Hilarious, I text back. But seriously WTF?

Well mom found out I don't always remember to take my birth control. I stare at this incongruous response, and before I can text another WTF, Maxi adds, So she said I couldn't date anymore until I was better about it.

Okay, I could see where this was going. I may not agree with Allie on most things, but her crusade to make sure teen pregnancy stops being part of our family legacy is one I'm happy to support. Well mostly. Sometimes her methods are batshit insane. She put Maxi on the pill a week after she got her period the first time. She gives the sex talk to every boy Maxi brings home. And one time Maxi called me sobbing,

begging me to intervene. She was puking her brains out after a batch of bad grocery store sushi. The whole time she had her head hanging in the toilet, Allie was waving a pregnancy test at her, demanding she pee on the stick right that minute.

And now this.

But she lets Zane come over to help me make soap. Another text pops up followed by an emoticon with a great big shit-eating grin. And then, *So we're making soap.*

OMG. Please tell me you're using protection.

Thumbs-up is her only response.

Okay, I left home because of the whole Danny thing. And I stayed away because of him too.

But if I'd come from a different type of family, the staying away might've been more difficult. Might've felt more like a loss and less like relief.

“Out Tonight” -Rent

Once inside my little apartment, I head straight for the couch, only pausing to kick off my shoes before flopping onto the cushions with my favorite faux-fur blanket. Usually I’m a world-class napper, no sleep aids necessary, thank you very much. You get good at napping when you’re bad at sleeping the way people usually do—in long chunks during the darkest hours of the night.

At this moment though, it’s not happening. My blanket’s bunched. The pillow’s flat. The girl across the hall is practicing her fucking clarinet, and it sounds like a goose being butchered.

And then there’s Danny. Not just nibbling at the edges of my consciousness like he usually does. Instead he’s set up camp at the center of my brain, infiltrating every thought.

Desperate, I reach for my phone, needing my most soothing tool. I only deploy it when the tension has my shoulders ratcheted up to the tips of my ears.

This definitely qualifies.

No one, not a single person on the planet, knows I do this. It is my secret shame. Secret and shameful because I am watching the 1997 Brendan Fraser movie, *George of the Jungle*. I’ve seen it so often I have almost every word memorized.

It’s not the dialogue or plotting that keeps me coming back. My interest is much more shallow. I am absolutely mesmerized by Brendan

Fraser's abs. From the beginning of the movie to the end, they are amazing and glistening and on full display.

The truth is, I'm a little in love with George. Not, let me be clear, Brendan Fraser, but George. George George George of the Jungle.

And this is why no one must ever know.

For the moment though, it is just me. And George. I can actually feel my blood pressure lowering as I sink into the couch—

Eventually my eyes close and the phone slips out of my hand. I wake to a dark apartment and someone knocking. Groggy, I reach for my phone. It's dead. Remembering Stella's promise to send over a designated driver, I stumble to my feet.

"Hold on a minute," I call as whoever it is knocks again. Pausing by my purse, I dig through it until I find my tin of Altoids. I toss a few in my mouth and quickly crunch them up, not wanting to blast the driver with my nap breath. Then I flip the bolt and open the door.

"Sorry," I say preemptively. "I just woke up. You're gonna have to give me ten minutes to get—"

I stop. This is not the stooge Stella convinced to be the designated driver.

This is Danny.

Not his ghost, but the actual Danny.

His dark hair. His broad shoulders. His bright eyes looking right back at me.

Holy shit.

Danny.

Danny who is standing at my door, opens his mouth to say something—

I slam the door shut. Bolt it. Then run to the bathroom and lock myself inside.

I crank the water in both the sink and shower, wanting to drown out everything.

All the while I gasp for air. I can't get enough. My heart is hammering away at my chest, beating so hard it hurts. The pounding headache that

had finally receded comes back with a vengeance.

This is what dying feels like. I am dying.

No. The voice of reason chimes in, soft and calm as always. This is what a panic attack feels like.

Or at least that’s what the emergency room doctor told me a few years ago. That same doctor recommended I find a therapist, maybe start taking some anti-anxiety medication. Instead, I went home and Googled “panic attack.”

Now following the good advice of Dr. Google, I sit on the edge of the bathtub and put my head between my knees. Deep breathe in through the nose. Hold it. And out through the mouth. Repeat again and again until the act of breathing no longer feels more complicated than conjugating French verbs.

With the oxygen flowing once more, my brain starts working again. It occurs to me I might have overreacted just a wee bit.

I totter out of the bathroom on shaky legs, feeling all wrung out. I make it all of two steps when there’s another knock on the door. Before I can retreat back to the bathroom, I hear Stella’s voice interspersed with the knocking.

“Jenna! Wake up! Do not go into the light! C’mon, Jenna! I’m sorry. Damn it. I never should’ve let you go home alone with a head injury.”

I rush to the door, relief flowing through me, and throw it open.

“Thank gawd you’re not dead!” Arms opened wide, Stella flings herself at me.

I am not a hugger. Stella is. But until this moment she’s respected my stance and has stopped herself from going full boa constrictor on me. But apparently the shackles are off. Both arms wrap around me, and her manic curls tickle my chin.

I’m an average-sized person, but Stella is tiny. She reminds me of an ant. She has the industriousness of one. Always moving about from here to there. Stella is also, like an ant, impressively strong for her small size, so when her arms close around me, it’s clear I’m not getting away without a struggle.

“Something’s wrong and you need a hug. I can tell.” Her hot breath hits my neck in an incredibly unpleasant way.

“Nothing’s wrong. Everything is awesome,” I lie while holding my body stiff and my arms at my sides in the universal signal of “Please let me go. This is not a hug—it’s assault.”

Instead of releasing me, Stella squeezes tighter, as if she can extract the truth that way. “Jenna, we’re friends. Talk to me. Let me in. Whatever it is can’t be that bad.”

And even though I hate this, something about her wiry little arms squeezing all the air out of my chest while her head practically rests against my breasts is almost...comforting. Or maybe it’s just so weird and awful that it’s causing all the feelings to bubble up and out. Either way, I’m cracking.

“It is that bad.” I barely get the last word out as my throat tightens.

And those apparently are the magic words, because Stella lets go and takes a step back. The moment I’m free, I peer around Stella, out into the hallway. Across the hall, two garbage bags and a whole army of flies sit outside my neighbor’s door. Besides that, though, the hall is empty. No sign of Danny.

I turn to Stella. “Was there someone out here? A guy? Tall. Handsome. Maybe a little sleepy looking, like he just woke up from a long nap?”

Stella tilts her head, examining me carefully. “This isn’t about the show, is it? This is something else.”

“Stella. Did you see anyone?”

She frowns, and I can see her thinking, realizing this question is important. Finally, she shrugs. “There might’ve been a guy walking across the parking lot when I pulled in. I didn’t get a good look at him.”

“Okay.” I nod, unsure what to do with this information now that I have it.

“Oh, honey, you’re trembling. C’mon. Let’s get you inside.” Taking charge, Stella steers me toward the couch.

I relax a little bit. The guy, who may or may not have been Danny, was walking away. And Stella is here now. Stella, my friend for over

ten years now, ever since we met on the plane that took me away from Danny’s bedside. Us being seated side by side in seats 11A and 11B was kismet, as if the universe said, “We’ve given you a lot of shit recently, so here’s one on us.”

Stella had been on her way to Miami to meet a guy she’d met on the internet. “Supposedly he’s really interested in creating avant-garde art pieces with me, but it’s also possible he wants to get into my pants.” She’d seemed open to either possibility, until she met him in person and found out he was a thirteen-year-old boy who didn’t even understand what the hell avant-garde art was. We ended up looking for a rental apartment together, and when I auditioned for my first show, she came along just for fun. She was chorus, I was one of the leads, and we had a great time. When it was over, I got itchy and moved on. Stella stayed and got involved with another company whose shows were more experimental.

And that would’ve been the end of that, but she made the effort to stay in touch and even came to see me and hang out a few times. Stella was one of those people, when after not seeing her for months or even years, we could pick up where we’d left off and have a great time.

In a weird and sorta sad way, she’s my best friend. The last time I’d had one of those was way back in high school when my musical theater costar and bestie, Eli Wallace, and I decided to co-write *Mean Girls, the Musical*. Sadly, after one songwriting session, we realized we were no young Sondheims in the making. Still it was so much fun trying.

Now being around Stella, and for the first time in a long time having a friend in my daily life, has made me realize how alone I’ve been. Not lonely exactly, just adjacent to it.

And it’s that thought that makes me finally say it aloud. “My ex-boyfriend came out of a coma after almost twelve years. It happened today. Or possibly yesterday. I’m actually not sure. But I heard about it today. Sooo...”

That last word trails off. I’m not certain what else to say. This is the first time I’ve told anyone about my tragic history. Despite hundreds

of times trading war stories with other theater friends, the words had always stayed trapped behind my teeth.

Stella stares at me open mouthed. “Wow. That makes so much sense.”

“Yes, exactly, that’s—” I freeze mid-nod as I realize Stella’s shocked expression doesn’t match her words. “Wait. What do you mean, that makes so much sense?”

“Oh, c’mon, Jenna. Look at your life. You move constantly. You’ve got your sit-home-in-your-pajamas customer service job, where they keep trying to promote you and you keep refusing.”

“It’s a lot of responsibility!”

“You’ve never had a long-term relationship.”

“What are you, my mother? And Thomas and I were together for nearly a year.”

Stella negates this with a swift shake of her head. “Seven months is not a year.”

I throw my hands up. “Okay, I’m a mess of a human being. A failure in all the ways that count. Is that the point you’re trying to make?”

“Not quite. You’re really not that much of a mess. You’re in shows all the time that require a ton of time and dedication. Also even though you move all the time, you do it with amazing precision. When I helped you unpack last time, the way some of those boxes were packed, it was like a work of art. I had tears in my eyes. So no, you’re not a mess. It’s more like...you’re stuck. Take your thirtieth birthday—”

“Oh, c’mon,” I interrupt, feeling increasingly betrayed. “Everyone hates getting older.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t seem upset so much as shocked that it was happening. Like you kept expecting a dispensation to arrive in the mail, giving you permission to remain twenty forever.”

I cross my arms over my chest and say nothing. But Stella keeps going, oblivious to the “I am displeased” body language.

“So yeah, I’ve realized for a while now that there must have been something pretty major in your past that totally messed you up. Of course, I always figured you were escaping a polygamist marriage.”

"You...what?!"

"Or that you'd gotten thrown out of a convent for sleeping with one of the priests."

"You're insane. Why didn't you just ask me?"

"Ha!" Stella wags a finger at me. "I did. In every possible way, and you stonewalled. Like a secret agent holding on to state secrets. Which was another theory of mine. I had a notebook with at least twenty possibilities, but strangely not one of them was ex-boyfriend in a coma."

"Guess you're not as clever as you thought," I grumble.

Stella's hand settles on my back. "I'm sorry, Jenna. I think ex-boyfriend in a coma is the worst of any of them. It must've been awful for you."

And that, right there, is what I need. Immediately my annoyance evaporates and my throat closes up. "Actually," I say as I lean into Stella, "he was sorta my husband."

"What?" Stella rears back. "You are not fucking married."

"Well, technically no. Or actually, technically yes. We were kids. Barely legal. And we only did it because I was pregnant."

"Knocked up? Holy shit, don't tell me you have a secret baby stashed away somewhere too."

This wrings a laugh out of me. "No, sorry to disappoint. The baby didn't take." The glee fades from Stella's face, and I can see an "oh no, so sorry" coming. I head it off. "It's okay. Teen mom was never part of my plan. Neither was teen wife, but Danny thought it was some magic bullet, like it'd make everything better. Including us."

My heart clenches suddenly as I remember Danny down on one knee. "Marry me, Jenna." He held out the ring he'd gotten at Walmart, the \$59.99 price tag still attached. A "just for now ring," he promised, until he could afford something better. I still have that ring. I keep it balled up in a pair of old socks at the back of my underwear drawer. Not so I can look at it or try it on. Mostly I forget it even exists. But whenever I move, I double-check to make it's safely packed.

Some things you can't just throw away.

"What are you gonna do?" Stella asks, breaking into my thoughts.

"I'm not going back," I hear myself say. "I can't." And that right there is the truth. My chest goes tight at the very thought of coming face to face with Danny again. "I told my mom I can't go home because of the show opening this weekend."

"You mean the show we're not doing anymore?"

I nod.

"Right." Stella nods too, then she goes quiet. Just as I'm getting worried, her eyes light up. "Okay, I've got it. The perfect solution. Hold on a minute. I need to run out to my car for some stuff. I'll be right back!"

Before I can reply, she's off the couch and out the door. A few minutes later she returns, surrounded by a pack of dogs and with a bucket of margarita mix in her hand.

"Look," she calls, holding the mix above her head. "I brought the party to you! And I just texted the whole cast to get their butts over here. It's time to turn it up! What!"

I plant myself in the doorway, definitely not feeling this plan.

"Stella, how are your nine dogs and tequila the perfect solution?"

"My nine *furbabies*." I make a face, and Stella smiles in her ingratiating way. "The dogs aren't technically part of the solution. They've been missing me, so I couldn't just leave them at home. Anyway, everyone knows dogs are comforting and good for the soul. Like chicken soup but with fur."

"No," I start to say, but Stella talks over me.

"I won't have them here long. I promise. Let me just make you a drink first so you can experience the healing qualities of a good strong margarita."

As it turns out, Stella's bucket of margarita mix, when combined with a good deal of tequila, does indeed become magical anxiety-destroying stuff. I drink one after another as cast members fill my apartment and our toe-clipping conductor shows up to blast his boom box. The dogs

bark madly with each new arrival. By the time it becomes clear that Stella will not be taking the dogs home anytime soon, I am way past caring about that, or anything else.

Someone plugs the toilet, and I laugh. The little dog steals food, then barfs it back out, and it seems like a delightful party trick. Stella suggests we move to Florida again, and I agree that it’s the best idea ever and we should definitely do it immediately. We pinky swear to have our bags packed by the end of the week. The guy who plays Daddy Warbucks—the one who loves “older women”—tells me his favorite part of the show is kissing me, and I give him one last kiss to remember me by.

One kiss that turns into an epic make-out session with a guy who’s barely twenty, works as a DJ at Topaz, and despite having a decent tenor voice, has a lot of trouble staying on pitch.

Of course, this isn’t the first time I’ve hooked up with a fellow cast member. When I first started this itinerant community theater thing, part of the fun was picking someone in the show to get involved with. But after a few years and several relationships, one tenor began to look like another. I got pickier, and my relationships became fewer and farther between.

Sure I could have branched out beyond the theater community and tried my luck on Tinder. But between the day job and night rehearsals, squeezing someone else in would’ve been difficult. It just didn’t seem worth the effort.

Except right now kissing Daddy Warbucks requires no effort at all. He’s here. He’s warm. He’s eager. He’s...

Passed out next to me in my bed.

Afterword

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for reading this sample of *The Show Must Go On!* I hope you'll consider pre-ordering so you can enjoy the full book when it releases on April 16th. *The Show Must Go On* will also be available through Kindle Unlimited. [Click here for the Amazon link.](#)

Also, if you haven't already done so, make sure to sign up for my [newsletter](#) in order to get the latest updates, exclusive content, and giveaways.

Best,

Kate

About the Author

Kate Karyus Quinn is an avid reader and menthol chapstick addict with a BFA in theater and an MFA in film and television production. She lives in Buffalo, New York with her husband, three children, and one enormous dog.

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Also by Kate Karyus Quinn

Down With The Shine

When Lennie brings a few jars of her uncles' moonshine to Michaela Gordon's party, she has everyone who drinks it make a wish. It's tradition. So is the toast her uncles taught her: "May all your wishes come true, or at least just this one."

The thing is, those words aren't just a tradition. The next morning, every wish—no matter how crazy—comes true. And most of them turn out bad. But once granted, a wish can't be unmade . . .

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(Don't You) Forget About Me

Gardnerville seems like a paradise. But every four years, a strange madness compels the town's teenagers to commit terrible crimes. Four years ago, Skylar's sister, Piper, led her classmates on a midnight death march into a watery grave. Now Piper is gone. And to get her back, Skylar must find a way to end Gardnerville's murderous cycle.

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Another Little Piece

On a cool autumn night, Annaliese Rose Gordon stumbled out of the woods and into a high school party. She was screaming. Drenched in blood. Then she vanished.

A year later, Annaliese is found wandering down a road hundreds of miles away. She doesn't know who she is. She doesn't know how she got there. She only knows one thing: She is not the real Annaliese Rose Gordon.

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