

Weddings by Design, #4

A Bouquet
of Love

A NOVEL

JANICE
THOMPSON


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Janice Thompson, *A Bouquet of Love*
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To the real Patti-Lou.
This is all your fault.



In memory of the awe-inspiring Judy Garland. She helped shape my life and my desire for the stage as a child, and she continues to inspire me as an adult. What fun to use her films and songs as chapter titles!

1

Strike Up the Band

You know you're Greek when you can't understand why McDonald's rejected your idea for the McFeta sandwich.

You know that old saying about how you should stop and smell the roses? Well, in my world, you would have to sniff your way past the garlic, cumin, and roasted lamb before you could pick up the scent of flowers. At Super-Gyros—my family's sandwich shop—we're known for drawing the customers in with both their noses and their eyes. So smelling the flowers is out. Sniffing the shish kebabs and freshly baked pitas is in.

What do flowers have to do with Greek food? To the average Joe, nothing. To a girl like me, everything. I can't think of one without the other. In my heart, I see myself owning a

florist shop, arranging lovely bouquets, and bringing smiles to the faces of my customers. In reality, I see myself slapping together sandwiches, whipping up tzatziki sauce, washing dishes, and doing whatever else it takes to please my father.

Babbas. The best Greek papa on the planet. If you don't believe it, just ask him. He'll tell you, using a wide assortment of descriptions from the Old Country. Not that he's ever actually been to Greece, mind you. Nor is he likely to go anytime soon. The man never stops working long enough to ponder a vacation. He's far too busy trying to open our new shop on Galveston Island.

I'm still not sure how the Pappas family ended up in Texas, to be honest. Just five weeks ago we were doing our normal thing in Santa Cruz, California, where we enjoyed a relatively boring existence, one that focused on our family-run sandwich shop on the boardwalk. Then suddenly, in a day, everything changed. Out with the old, in with the new. Goodbye, Santa Cruz. Hello, Texas. Crazy.

When Babbas makes an impulsive decision—say, moving the family a couple thousand miles to the humid south to open a second shop—he does so without consulting anyone. Except the Lord, of course. Babbas never moves without the Almighty's approval, so this trek to Galveston Island must've received a high five from heaven.

I don't usually argue with heavenly plans, but this move . . . well, it put me in a not-so-heavenly frame of mind. For one thing, the murky brown waters of the Gulf of Mexico don't come close to the Pacific. Did I mention that we lived in Santa Cruz, home of the world-famous boardwalk, nestled against the white-sand beaches of the mighty blue Pacific? What could Galveston, Texas, possibly have to compare? The only thing

whispered the phone number “1-800-PETALS4U” and did my best to commit it to memory. Maybe I would work up the courage to apply for the job. Wouldn’t that be something? The very idea put me in a remarkable frame of mind. I pondered the possibilities of my new life as I unloaded boxes, my heart now singing.

“You’re humming again, Cassia.”

I turned and looked beyond the stack of half-emptied boxes, bins, and cooking utensils until I located Mama. She stood off in the distance, her upswept hair falling loose in damp ringlets around her neck.

“I am?” Oops. Caught again.

She swept beads of perspiration from her brow and smiled, lighting up her overly painted face. The ruby-red lipstick might’ve looked better if she’d colored inside the lines, but Mama was never one for confines. In some ways, I appreciated that about her. The eye shadow—a theatrical shade of teal—came into full view as her eyes narrowed. “Yes. I love it that you’re so musical.” Mama retied her frayed Super-Gyros apron, which had come loose around her plump midsection. “I think you came out of the womb singing.” She pulled up the ragged bottom of the apron and dabbed her upper lip, which caused the apron to come loose all over again.

“You think?” A little sigh worked its way out, much as I fought to keep it inside. “I just love those old show tunes. Did you ever see that Judy Garland movie, the one with the trolley—”

“Helena, I need you!” Babbas’s voice sounded from the kitchen and Mama scurried out of the room to do his bidding, as always, still fussing with the temperamental apron. So much for finishing my sentence. Or my song.

waving in the breeze. She turned a couple of cartwheels on the sidewalk before squealing in glee. “But I love it here already.”

“Stop that, Gina,” Babbas scolded. “You’re not a monkey, you’re a—” He stopped midsentence as a carload of teenagers pulled up to Parma John’s and got out. “Hmm.”

“I’m a superhero just like you, Babbas!” Gina struck a funny pose, one meant to show off the muscles in her upper arms, and I laughed. That wacky kid always made things better, even with her thick black hair in a never-ending state of messiness.

Babbas crossed his arms at his chest, his gaze never leaving Parma John’s. “Then put your superhero powers to work, kiddo, and help me come up with a plan.”

“A plan?” Gina did another cartwheel. “What sort of plan?”

“A savvy businessman is always thinking ahead.” Babbas leaned against the streetlamp, his gaze never leaving the customers going in the pizza shop. “By the time Super-Gyros opens this weekend, everyone in Galveston will recognize our logo. We’ll be the talk of the island. You know your Babbas, always making his presence known.”

I knew, all right. No telling what he had up his sleeve this time. I had a suspicion it would embarrass us all, one way or another.

His eyes lit up with a familiar gleam. “I’ve hired a photographer to do a big photo shoot. She’s just a couple of doors down.” He gestured to a shop with the words “Picture Perfect” on the marquee. “We’re going to use the photos to do a big splash in the local paper this week. And I’m making ten thousand flyers with the logo, offering free gyros to our first twenty-five customers.”

concerned, pizza is the devil's food!" He went off on a tangent about the demonic origins of pepperoni, but I tuned him out, distracted by the flavorful aroma coming from Parma John's. If pizza was the devil's food, someone had better hand me a pitchfork and tail.

"Calm down, Niko, before you have a stroke." Mama shook a dishrag at him. "Working so hard has made you a grumpy old man."

"I am *not* grumpy!" Off he went on another tangent, ranting about his calm demeanor. Mama just patted him on his hairy arm and rolled her eyes.

Okay then.

She planted a tender kiss on his cheek, then snapped his bottom with the dishrag. "If you don't get in here and help me set up this kitchen, I'll show you what grumpy really looks like. I can't handle Yia Yia on my own, you know. Not when I'm setting up house, anyway."

Mama made her way back inside, muttering something about how my grandmother was going to be the death of her, if Babbas didn't kill her first. Not that my father appeared to notice or care. He stood in silence, eyes narrowed as he watched the crowd going into Parma John's.

My younger brother Darian joined us on the sidewalk, an open laptop in hand. He glanced up long enough to get my father's attention. "I did the research you wanted, Babbas. Parma John's is owned by the Rossi family, just as you suspected."

"Rossi." My father grunted. "I knew it. This is not good news."

"Who are the Rossis, Babbas?" Gina asked. "Are they bad people?"

