

JANICE THOMPSON



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Janice Thompson, A Bouquet of Love Revell Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2014. Used by permission. (Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group) To the real Patti-Lou.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!



Strike Up the Band

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

ou 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

I'd fallen in love with so far were the flowers. Galveston was loaded with them, and they took my breath away.

Imagine my joy as I glanced out our window that first Tuesday in May, my gaze landing on a colorful trolley clangclanging its way up the Strand. On the side of the brightly painted car was an advertisement for a local flower shop. Patti-Lou's Petals, along with the words "Help Wanted" and a phone number: 1-800-PETALS4U.

Hello, possibilities!

I started humming the melody to one of my favorite Judy Garland songs—the one about the trolley—and pondered my dilemma. Working with flowers was my dream job. Definitely the ribbon on my proverbial bouquet. But Babbas would never allow it. Like every Greek daughter, I would remain tied to his apron strings until the day I married. Not that I had any prospects, especially now. What kind of a Southern gentleman would brave a relationship with a girl whose father ran around in a superhero cape and matching tights to promote his business? No, I'd be single forever. Might as well get used to the idea.

My gaze shifted from the sign on the side of the trolley to a handsome fellow seated inside. For a moment our eyes met. Fate! Kismet! Then, just as quickly, his attention shifted to a pizza joint across the street from our place. Just my luck. Still, this gave me a lovely glimpse of his gorgeous, wavy dark hair from the back. Be still, my heart! But his hair didn't hold a candle to those smoldering eyes I'd caught a glimpse of. Yummy.

The familiar Judy Garland melody soon made its way from my heart to my lips as the trolley clang-clanged on by. How could I help myself? My dreams would soon come true! I 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.

I turned to the open boxes at my feet and spent the next few minutes pulling things out and trying to find a home for them. With the room in such a chaotic state, who could guess where anything went? How we would be ready to open by Saturday, I couldn't imagine.

When boredom set in, my gaze shifted out of the plateglass window once again. This time my sights fell on the ever-growing lunch crowd at the pizza restaurant across the street. Must be a popular place. I shifted my angle to read the sign above the store. Parma John's. Cool name.

Something about the place drew me like the Pied Piper playing his merry little tune. I stepped outside onto the sidewalk and caught a whiff of pepperoni. Yum. I could almost taste the spicy goodness now, could picture it oozing with reams of melted mozzarella. What I wouldn't give to have a thick, gooey slice of pizza. But I couldn't. My father would kill me.

Still, it might be worth the risk.

Or not.

I sensed the presence of someone standing behind me and turned to discover my father had joined me. Oops. So much for daydreaming about pizza.

His thick salt-and-pepper brows furrowed into a perfect unibrow as he watched the crowd coming and going from Parma John's. "Looks like they have some sort of lunch special going on." My father's eyes filled with concern. The tone of his voice grew more serious. "But just you wait. Those customers will be mine. Soon."

"We don't open for a few days, Babbas." My little sister's voice sounded from the open doorway. I turned to give little Gina a smile. The precocious six-year-old skipped our way wearing mismatched clothes, as always, her loose ponytail

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."

Sounded like an expensive plan. I hoped it would pay off, for the whole family's sake. As far as the promotional stuff went, I didn't mind the shop's logo being seen by others, as long as Babbas didn't put a picture of himself in that ridiculous superhero costume again. Really? What grown man, especially one as hairy as my dad, wore spandex for fun? I still hadn't lived down the shame of the first time he'd shown up at my junior high in Santa Cruz dressed in that goofy getup.

Then again, my father seemed to thrive on humiliating his children. I mean, what other dad named his children according to the letters of the alphabet? Andreas, Basil, Cassia (yours truly), Darian, Eva, Filip, and our little mismatched monkey, Gina. Mama called her an afterthought.

I gave Parma John's another wistful look. So, Babbas had his eye on that place already, and not in a good way. He planned to give them a run for their money. When my father set his mind to something, well, he usually succeeded, or he plowed over a couple dozen people while trying. I couldn't help but wonder why. Couldn't we all just get along? Play nice? Eat together? Share a little Italian and Greek food across a common table?

Not while Babbas lived and breathed, judging from the scowl on his face.

"Helena!" he called out. "Come and see this! See what we're up against."

My mother appeared moments later, her makeup melting in the heat of the day. Miniature teal rivers trickled down from each eye, covering up the cotton candy—pink rouge, which had been applied with a heavy hand. Oy. If only she could see herself in a mirror.

"What is it, Niko? Yia Yia and I are busy setting up the

kitchen. I can't leave her by herself for long. You know how your mother is. She'll put everything in the wrong place." With a swipe of the back of her hand to her moist forehead, Mama completely obliterated her painted-on brows. Well, mostly. Half of the right one remained, but not exactly in its original position.

"Never mind that." His nose wrinkled as he stared across the busy street. "We need to get busy out here before these Italians beat us at our own game. Help me come up with a plan."

"A plan?" My mother's eyes widened, drawing even more attention to the eyebrow situation. She sniffed the air. "For dinner, you mean? Smells good. What is that? Pizza?" Mama took a step toward the street but stopped when Babbas cleared his throat.

"No cavorting with the enemy, Helena."

Mama snorted and waved her hand in the air. "I've never cavorted a day in my life, Niko. You know that." She used her apron to dab the perspiration from her face, and most of what was left of her right eyebrow came off in the process, thank goodness.

Babbas's face turned nearly as pink as Mama's cheeks. Nearly. "No one in the Pappas family will ever eat pizza from that place while I'm alive!" he spouted, his right hand raised high as if making a proclamation.

"We have to wait until you die to eat pizza, Babbas?" Gina's lip quivered. "That's going to take too long. I'm hungry for it now."

Filip and Eva joined us, both commenting on the yummy smells coming from across the street. Babbas turned red in the face as he waggled his finger in the air. "As far as we are 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.

Okav 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, eves 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?"

"They are *busy* people," he responded. "They own half the businesses on the island."

"Oh, wow." That certainly piqued my interest.

"It's the same family that owns the big wedding facility on Broadway." My brother shifted the laptop from one arm to the other. "Club Wedding, or something like that. And they've got their fingers in a couple of other pies too." His brow furrowed, and for a moment he looked just like our father. Minus the unibrow. "We'll have to look out for them, Babbas," Darian said. "They're trouble."

"Wait...Club Wed?" We'd only been on the island a couple of weeks, but I'd already seen the traffic outside of that place on the weekends. I'd read about it in bridal magazines too.

"So they're in the wedding biz *and* the pizza biz." My brother closed his laptop and shrugged. "Sounds like an odd combination."

"Maybe." My father leaned down, his words now a strained whisper. "Or maybe that so-called pizza parlor is a front for something else entirely."

"Something else?" Darian and I spoke in unison.

"Did you ever think of that? Maybe *that's* why they're so busy. It's all a ruse." Babbas waggled his thick brows. "I saw *The Godfather*. I know how this goes. One minute you're nibbling on a slice of pizza, the next minute they're fishing your body out of the Gulf of Mexico."

"Babbas!" I slapped myself on the head. "That's ridiculous. The pizza parlor is just that—a pizza parlor. So don't worry about . . ."

I found myself distracted as a stretch limo pulled up to Parma John's. An older gentleman in a dark suit got out. He carried a large case of some sort in his hands. Odd.

"See?" My father pointed at the fellow. "Just as I suspected." "Babbas, are you saying he's a bad man?" Gina hid behind the lamppost.

"Well, what do you suppose he's got in that case there?" Babbas lowered his voice, his words now laced with concern.

Gina's eyes grew wide. "What, Babbas? What?"

"A machine gun, that's what." My father gave an abrupt nod, as if that settled the issue once and for all.

"M-m-machine gun?" Gina ran back inside Super-Gyros, her shrill voice ringing out, "Mama!"

"You really think they're mobsters? I'm outta here." Darian shoved his laptop under his arm and scooted back inside the door, muttering something about how he wanted to go back to California, where people were normal.

Didn't we all.

Babbas followed him, but I lingered on the sidewalk, convinced we weren't dealing with mobsters. No, most of the people in the crowd looked just like us—perfectly normal. Not that anyone in the Pappas family could be called normal, but whatever.

The strains of a Dean Martin song drifted through the air as the door to Parma John's opened once again. I watched as a young woman not much older than me, judging from the looks of things, stepped outside. She carried a toddler on one hip, and a little boy ran ahead of her on the sidewalk.

She called out a name, D.J., and then waved at a man—Wow! Real Texas cowboy material!—who ambled her direction, his pointed cowboy boots clicking along the cobblestone road. The handsome stranger pulled off his Stetson and swept the young woman into his arms, brushed her dark curls out of her face, and then planted kisses on her lips. Okay then.

Must be a couple. And judging from the way he tousled the boy's hair and then slipped the toddler onto his shoulders, he was the father of the kiddos. I was looking at a picture postcard of a true Texas family. Wow.

Maybe the great state of Texas wouldn't be so bad after all, not if all the fellas looked like this guy. Maybe he had a brother. Or a cousin. One could hope, anyway.

The young woman glanced my way before walking back into Parma John's with the cowboy and children. She squinted as the clouds above shifted and a bright, sunny sky caused a glare. Then she offered a welcoming smile and a little wave, which I returned.

See, Babbas? No mobsters here. Just friendly Texans.

"Cassia?" My father's stern voice sounded from the open doorway. "Your mama and Yia Yia need help setting up the kitchen. Besides, it's not safe out there. You don't know what those people are up to."

The smell of pizza drifted across the road once again, and I fought the temptation one last time. I knew what they were up to, all right. Delicious pizza. Smelled good. Really, really good. But I knew better than to risk losing my inheritance—not that I really had one—over a deluxe pepperoni with extra cheese. Babbas would disown me in a hurry should I step foot over the invisible line he'd painted down the cobblestone street. No, I'd stay on the Super-Gyros side, where good Greek girls belonged.

Just when I thought I couldn't stand the temptation one moment longer, my grandmother joined me on the sidewalk. The midday sun gave her thinning white hair an angelic glow and made the soft, tissue-paper wrinkles on her cheeks even more pronounced. Standing against the oversize door of the

shop, she looked disproportionately petite. Yet she always commanded respect, tiny or not.

"Babbas wants you inside, Cassia," Yia Yia's words were more instruction than suggestion. "Come, child."

I cringed at the word *child* and fought the temptation to respond with, "He always wants me *somewhere*." No point in hurting my grandmother's feelings. She'd given birth to the man, after all.

I stepped inside the shop and closed the door behind me. There would be plenty of time later to ponder the realities of pizza parlors and mobsters, flower shops and handsome guys on trolleys. Right now I had work to do. And when a good Greek daughter had work to do, well, she didn't waste any time smelling the flowers. She got right to it.