

I'M STANDING IN THE PRODUCE SECTION squeezing every avocado in the bin. I can't help but think about the silver haired woman I keep seeing around town and hoping she'll walk through the doorway in front of me.

The glass doors slide open, and I'm disappointed because it's not her. Lately, it's felt like we're on the same schedule even though we're complete strangers. In the last week, we've run into each other at the BMV, the library, and even the dentist's office. It's like fate is in a hurry and pushing us together at every turn. I pick up one more avocado and find it's almost ripe.

The doors slide open again. I look up, and there she is. For just a moment, our eyes lock. My heart quickens. There's a flicker of recognition before she looks away. She grabs a basket and glances back at me. She has the most mesmerizing deep blue eyes I've ever seen. She tilts her head, and her hair falls across her cheek. She smiles. I turn to make sure no one is behind me, so I can know if she's smiling at me. She is. I toss the avocado in my palm and fumble the catch. She giggles and looks away. Feeling a little embarrassed, I pick up the fruit and toss it into my basket and walk over to the tomatoes.

As she makes her way through the produce, I notice she's in a pair of jeans covered in paint splatter, a loose-fitting t-shirt, and ballet flats. With each step, she exudes a sense of kindness and confidence. Whenever I see her around town, I feel drawn to her. I imagine a lot of people feel the same way. There's something beyond her beauty that I hope I'm lucky enough to get to know. All I have to do is muster the courage to ask her out, and hopefully, my instinct are correct, and she'll say yes.

She picks up a lemon, smells it, and puts it in her basket. She does the same for a bundle of fresh herbs. I squeeze a few Roma tomatoes and add a vine's worth on top of the avocados. She slides a bunch of asparagus into a bag before glancing over at me again. I quickly look at my feet then back up.

She moves onto the olive bar, and I wonder if she likes Mediterranean food. I wonder if she'd like to join me for dinner at Fresco's. She looks around maybe to check for anyone watching before she pops an olive into her mouth. She knows I'm watching, but it seems like she's daring me to follow, so I pop a cherry tomato

off its vine, throw it up in the air, and catch it in my mouth. It nearly chokes me. I cough, then bite down. The juices squirt out of my mouth. Smooth move, I think.

An older gentleman in a store apron clears his throat, "Sir, you need to pay for your fruit before consuming. These tomatoes are sold by the weight."

As I'm apologizing, I can hear her laughing.

It seems like everywhere fate has us meeting up we find new ways to flirt from a distance. Maybe we're pre-gaming, or better pre-dating. She gives a little wave and then makes her way to the checkout.

Today's the day. Today I'm going to ask her out. I haven't been on a first date in over thirty years. Maybe that's why I'm so jittery.

As she reaches the checkout, she glances back and searches the aisles until she spots me. Her eyes widen. I'm almost positive she's just as interested as I am. My heart continues to race, and even though I just ate that tomato, my mouth has turned dry. I try to swallow, but I can't. My mouth is as dry as a three-day-old baguette. I look away and head down the next aisle, hoping to find a bottle of water.

I stop by the organic chips and salsa and try to summon a fragment of the courage I had when I was young. I bite my lower lip and think, salt and vinegar chips. My mouth begins to water, a trick I learned in speech class many years ago. It's just eight words. Do. You. Want. To. Go. Out. With. Me.

I picture movies from the eighties where jr. high kids write notes to each other with the same sentiment and yes and no boxes for the recipient to check. Maybe I should just pass her a note. I shake my head. No. I need to find the words. I'm confident she's worth the effort.

There aren't many women in this town who allow their faces to wrinkle and their hair to gray, unless they're widowed and wealthy. I appreciate a person who allows themselves to age naturally. The wrinkles and sunspots tell a story of someone who was gifted a long life.

I gather myself and head back to the checkout, but she's gone. I pay for my groceries and exit the store.

I'm putting my bags in the car when I see her out of the corner of my eye. My heart picks up speed again. I keep my head down and breathe deeply, trying to slow the thudding in my chest.

"Excuse me," she says.

Oh, God. I look up. Don't be so cliché and get lost swimming in her eyes. "Ah--hello." My voice actually cracks. I don't think it's made that sound since I was fifteen.

She presses her lips together while the corners of her eyes crinkle. She looks like she's trying not to laugh. She reaches out, "I'm Daisy."

I shake her hand. It's soft and petite and spotted with bright fuchsia and lime green. I wonder what she's been painting. "Jack," I say. I open my mouth expecting more words to come out, but they don't.

I let go of her hand and move to twist my wedding ring, something I've always done when I'm nervous, but my ring isn't there anymore. I stuff my hands into my pockets. I want to speak, but the words won't form, not even in my head.

"Hello, Jack. It's nice to finally meet you."

She's breaking the ice. Thank God. I smile a nervous toothy grin and hold my breath. I wonder if she notices how nervous I am. I say, "I'm sorry. I'm having a hard time speaking." I take a deep breath and let it out. She watches me, and somehow, this calms me. "I've wanted to ask you out, but damn, forming a complete sentence around you is proving difficult."

She adjusts the grocery bag strap on her shoulder and looks into my eyes. I think she might appreciate my blunt honesty. Hopefully anyway.

She says, "I was hoping you would make the first move, but after so many run-ins without a word, I figured I needed to be the one to ask."

I adjust my glasses. "Are you asking me out?"

She looks at me, considering. "I guess I am." She tilts her head, and the corners of her mouth curve up. Her smile feels genuine and warm like a fire built for smores. "Jack, would you like to grab a cup of coffee with me?"

"Yes. Yes. I would like that. Very much. Yes. Sorry. Still nervous."

She's still smiling. "I'm free now if you are."

"I am." I lock up my car and gesture towards Luca's, the café next door. "Have you tried their peppermint mocha or even their regular mocha? Did you know they roast their own beans, coffee and cocoa?"

She pauses. "I didn't know that. I've been in a few times, but I've never tried any of their chocolate drinks."

"I highly recommend them. That is if you like chocolate."

"I love chocolate. So much that I'm convinced that people who don't are insane. Or allergic. An allergy is a valid excuse."

"The only excuse," I add.

She pauses and looks back at my car. "You don't have anything that'll spoil in there, do you?"

"No. Just a few avocados that need to ripen. The heat will do them well."

"Taco Tuesday?"

"How'd you guess?"

She looks at her watch. "It's Tuesday."

"Right." God, I hope I can sound smarter than I sound right now. "I'm not dumb, I swear. I'm just nervous."

"It's cute," she says.

Cute? Hmmm, not what I was going for, but I'll take it.

As we walk toward the cafe, I focus on my breathing. I'm fifty-five. I've been down this road before. So why in the world are my palms still sweating? I feel like that brace-face kid in jr. high who asks the girl to the dance in front of all his buddies while they snicker behind him.

I hold open the door. "After you." I know this gesture is a tricky one in today's world. I don't want to seem too gentlemanly or not enough.

"Thank you," she says.

Yes. I made the right call. She glances up at me as she walks by. I can't help but notice she smells like baby powder.

"Have you been here before?" I ask. "Did I already ask you that?"

"You did. I've been here a few times, but I usually brew my own coffee at home. I don't roast my beans, but maybe I'll start buying them from Luca."

We walk up to the counter.

Will, the barista is finishing up an order. Without looking up, he says, "Be right with you."

I look up at the menu then at her reflection on the mirrored wall behind the counter. "You can have anything. My treat."

She looks me up and down. "Anything?"

I blush. Then she blushes. We both laugh.

"I'm sorry," she says. "That was so inappropriate. My daughter tells me all the time to stop being a cougar."

I laugh at this. "Cougar?" She's obviously younger than I am. "Really? Can I ask, how old you are?"

She doesn't hesitate. "Sixty. You?"

"Fifty-five."

"Just a baby," she says.

"Hey, Jack." The barista says as he dries his hands on a towel. He looks at my date and winks at me. "What can I get you today?"

"I'll take a peppermint mocha," she says.

"Hot or cold?"

She looks at me. "I like it hot."

The barista snarfs and quickly covers his mouth. "Sorry. So sorry. Can I get a name on that?"

"It's okay, hun. I don't waste anyone's time. You can call me Daisy."

She puts her hand on my wrist. "I'm going to run to the restroom. Do you mind finding us a seat?"

"Would you prefer inside or out?"

"Let's sit out back, near the fountain. In the shade?"

"You got it."

As I watch her walk away, I think she must be part angel because I swear her feet aren't touching the ground. As I listen to my thoughts, I also swear I'm retuning to my college years. That was one of my best pick up lines. It was so cheesy, it made women laugh every time. I learned early on a good sense of humor can make most situations better.

"Wow, Jack. She's a knockout. How'd you score her?" Will teases. "I might have to offer up a little competition."

"She could be your grandmother, Will."

"Dude, haven't you heard? Age is just a number."

I laugh because when I was twenty-one, that's how I felt when I met Clara. Even though she was ten years my senior, she was the love of my life. I can't help but wonder if this is too soon. I take ahold of the pendant around my neck, a simple silver St. Agatha medal, bring it to my lips, and kiss it.

"Clara?" Will asks.

I take a deep breath and nod.

"She'd want you to be happy, Jack. And she'd even want you to have fun."

"I know, kid. I know." I wipe my eyes and smile. "I'll take a regular mocha."

"Coming right up."

I head out to the veranda and find the place empty. A tiny vase sits on the center of each table. The mouths are only wide enough to hold two tulips. I pick the best seat in the house, the corner table, the one that doesn't wobble, and I lean back under the wisteria vines. For a moment, I breathe in their scent then I sit up and watch for the door to open.