

ELEKTRA

Drew was in the school theater, having just confirmed arrangements with his brother for a meeting they were going to that night. As he was about to leave, she came in the stage door, carrying a precarious stack of props. Leo, one of the actors, walking backward and talking to someone, plowed right into her, scattering the props all over the backstage. “Damn! Why don’t you watch where you’re going!” she exclaimed.

“Sorry! I’m really sorry—I just wasn’t paying attention,” said Leo. “Here, I’ll pick it up for you.” They were both on their hands and knees, picking up silverware, sweaters, and a lot of other items she was taking to the set for the rehearsal. Drew came over to help. Then they were standing, their arms full of props, and Drew was looking into the greenest eyes with the longest eyelashes he had ever seen. He dropped the football he’d just picked up.

“You’ve bent my lamp, Leo!” she said. “And the vase is broken! What a pain!”

“Hey, I can bend the lamp back in shape,” said Drew, taking the lamp from her.

Leo said, “I’ll get you another vase—they have thousands at Value Village.”

“I know that, you idiot, where do you think I got all this stuff?” she huffed.

She was pissed off. “We’re already behind schedule, and now I have to mess with *this*! Just put that stuff over there on the table,” she told Leo and Drew, who had finished bending the lampshade holder back into shape. She pointed with her chin. “OK, everyone, let’s run the third scene blocking,” she told the actors who were gathering on the stage. She dropped her jumble of props on the table and began conferring with the lighting tech. Drew left the lamp on the table and tiptoed off the stage.

He was back at six forty-five, early to meet Paul, and hoping to score points with Whoever She Was, balanced at the top of a twelve-foot ladder, adjusting a spotlight. She had a dancer’s body—long and slender, the kind of body that looked really good in skinny black jeans and a black turtleneck. A nose ring and curly black hair in a ponytail that spouted out the top of her head like a fountain contributed to her aura of “don’t mess with me.”

Ms. Dawson, the drama coach, called out, “OK, folks, nice job. See you tomorrow.” The actors were chatting, gathering their coats and books, and leaving in twos and threes. Paul was talking with his leading lady, so Drew went over to the ladder. “Hey, I brought you a new vase. Will this do?” He’d taken one from his mom’s back porch collection, hoping it wasn’t anything special that she’d miss.

“Yeah, that’ll do. Thanks,” she said, gruffly. He steadied the ladder as she climbed down.

“Who are you, anyway?” she asked.

“Drew Emory, Paul’s brother. Who are you?”

“I’m the stage manager, Elektra Stephanopolis. And I don’t like smart-ass comments about my name.”

“I like your name; it has lots of . . . energy. It suits you,” he said, grinning at her.

“Well, that’s a new one! Guess I should be glad they didn’t name me Windy.”

“Or worse, Coal or Nuclear.” She couldn’t help laughing.

“I was wondering if you’d like to go out for coffee,” said Drew. He noticed that the top of her head was about even with his chin.

A look of surprise passed quickly over her face, but she said, “Sure. Would you mind taking me to Bing’s, down in Madison Park? I always take the bus down there after rehearsals and have dinner.”

“No problem. We can just drop Paul off at a meeting, and I’ll pick him up later.”

While she got her coat and books, Drew told Paul about the change of plans. “Cover for me, Bro. This chick is outta sight. I’m not passing up a chance to get to know her. You can sign me up for whatever they need help with.”

“Watch it—she really comes on strong,” said Paul. “But underneath she’s kind of sweet. She brings cookies for the cast, after she bullies us through the rehearsals. But she really knows her stuff.” They walked backstage to meet Elektra. “She’s been doing theater since she was little—took a lot of classes at the Seattle Children’s Theatre. We’re lucky to have her. You’ll have your hands full with this one! Hey! What a great pun—I can hardly ever do that.” He pretended to leer at his brother, who grinned back.

“Thanks for the intelligence. I’m sure I can impress her with my ignorance of the theater.”

Elektra talked; he listened, nodding or shaking his head or laughing. She was intelligent, funny, very intense. He was glad she'd chosen a table, so he could sit adjacent to her; their knees bumped. She had beautiful hands, which she waved around while talking. He couldn't believe how so slender a girl could eat so much! While he ate a piece of apple pie with ice cream, she had a double hamburger, a huge pile of french fries, a salad, and a chocolate sundae for dessert. "Hey, it's eight forty-five. Don't you have to pick up your brother or something?"

"Oh yeah, guess I have to hit the road. Let me get the check, and then I can take you home."

"Not necessary. They'll just put it on my tab. I eat here a lot," she said, getting up and waving at the hostess. "And I just live a couple of blocks from here, so I'll walk home. It'll be fine. Go ahead and pick up Paul."

"No, no, I'll walk you home first." They went out into the damp February cold. She lived in a big house on Lake Washington, not far from the little Madison Park shopping area. All the lights in the house seemed to be on. "Looks like my mom's back from Athens. She and Papa travel a lot." They stopped on her doorstep. "Well, thanks for the ride and the company, and for walking me home. See you around."

"I hear you bake cookies. Would you like to come over to my house and I'll help you make some, maybe Sunday night?"

She considered. "Sure—sounds like fun."

"OK, I'll pick you up about seven thirty. See you soon."

On the way home, Drew realized he was, as his grandmother would say, "smitten." Elektra was fascinating—and those green eyes! He could hardly wait for Sunday evening. He almost forgot to pick up Paul. When they got home, they walked into the living room where his folks were reading. "I've invited someone over to bake cookies Sunday night. Have we got everything we'll need, Mom?"

"Yes, unless you want something exotic, we've got the basics, including chocolate chips and raisins. Who's coming?"

"Her name is Elektra. Paul knows her better than I do. She's the stage manager for the theater program. I just took her out for dinner. She's really neat—you'll like her."

"He neglected to mention that she's really hot," added Paul, poking his brother. "She looks a little Goth at first, but she's not really. Elektra's very serious about drama. She's on your case if she thinks you're just messing around and not working hard." He plopped down on the sofa. "There's something kind of funny about her though. Sometimes it's like she's just run out of energy or something. Gets quiet, acts like her mind's a million miles away. Then, after a while, she's her usual high-energy self."

Drew was impatient for Sunday evening. It seemed like months before he could go pick her up. She took him into the living room to meet her mother, a statuesque woman with dark hair and eyes, not pretty but very attractive. She too was dressed in black, casual but elegant slacks and a very soft-looking sweater. She was polite, but seemed to Drew a little bland, or like she wasn't quite there. He couldn't put his finger on what it was. "I'll be back by eleven, Mom," Elektra told her.

Sylvianne was rummaging through the cupboards, getting out the flour and sugar and cookie sheets when they came into the kitchen. "You must be Elektra," she said, smiling and extending her hand, "I'm Sylvianne."

"This is my dad, Alex," Drew said, as Alex walked into the kitchen.

"Hi, Elektra," Alex said, shaking her hand. "We've heard you don't allow any slacking off from the cast. We're looking forward to seeing the production."

"Yeah, I make them toe the line, and when they work hard, I make them cookies."

"OK," said Drew, "let's get to it."

"Have fun, you guys. I've left my cookbook on the island, in case you need some inspiration." Drew's parents diplomatically adjourned to the living room.

"Shall we make chocolate chip?" asked Drew. That was his favorite.

"Noooo. Too boring!" She was looking through the cookbook. "How about this one—Irish Christmas cookies. Looks like shortbread with caraway seeds. That looks different."

"I *hate* caraway seeds."

"OK, how about pumpkin? Do you have any canned pumpkin, by chance?" Drew went to ask his mom.

“Yes, there’s a can left over from Thanksgiving; it’s in the pantry.”

Drew got the pumpkin, and Elektra looked through the cupboards. “Your mom’s got some pretty neat shit here,” she said admiringly. “Look at this, *quatre épices*—I love this stuff! I’ll bet it would go good in the cookies. And these are fantastic cookie sheets. Cool!”

“You seem to know a lot about cooking. Does your mom like to cook?”

Elektra laughed. “She never cooks. I learned from Elena. She’s our—what? Everything. Cook, housekeeper, nanny, you name it. She’s been with us since my brother was born. Let’s see, he’s eight years older than me, so that would make it about twenty-five years. She’s part of the family.”

They mixed up the dough and talked and joked. When Sylvianne came in to refill her coffee cup, they were laughing and feeding each other cookie dough.

After the baking was done, they sat opposite each other in the breakfast nook, drinking milk and eating warm cookies. “Mmmm—these are really good. What’s different about them?” Drew asked. “They sort of taste like pumpkin pie, only peppery.”

“Yeah, it’s the *quatre épices*; it’s basically pumpkin pie spice with pepper. I think they turned out really well. Would you e-mail me the recipe?”

“Sure, if you’ll go to the junior prom with me.”

He’d startled her, as he hoped to. But she recovered fast. “It’s in two weeks, isn’t it? I thought you were supposed to, like, have your prom date lined up months in advance. Am I the alternate?”

“I didn’t know you months ago or I would have asked you then. No, you’re not the alternate.” He looked at her expectantly.

“Sure, OK.” She smiled at him. “Thanks.” She took another cookie (her sixth, Drew was counting) and said, with what he’d come to think of as her intense look, “So. Time for true confessions. Might as well get it over with all at once. I’m bipolar. My family is really rich. My little sister drowned six years ago in a boating accident. She was five and I was ten, and we’ve all been basket cases ever since.” She tried to look nonchalant as she stopped for a drink of milk.

“My brother’s in grad school, my mom’s on Valium, and my dad tries to take care of her by hauling her around on all his business trips. They’ve basically forgotten they have another daughter. So Elena takes care of me—or tries to. I pretty much take care of myself. Questions?”

Drew had been watching her face. With one finger he lightly touched the back of her hand. “Um . . . that’s a lot to take in. I’m really sorry about your sister, Elektra. I know that doesn’t help, but I still feel bad for you.”

“Thanks,” she said briskly, and got up to wash the cookie dough bowl and beaters. “You got any confessions? Anything I ought to know about you I don’t already know, like you’re a good student, you do aikido, you’re a fabulous trumpet player, and most of the girls in school would give anything to go out with you.”

“Did your sources tell you that I stole some candy when I was eight and my dad made me take it back and apologize? Or that I deliver twenty-five-hundred copies of the *Capitol Hill Times* every Wednesday night?” He was trying to lighten things up a bit and hoping she didn’t think he was trivializing what she’d told him.

“No, I didn’t get those juicy bits! But I guess I can still go to the prom with you. Only, no flowers. I’m not a flower kind of girl.”

On his way back from taking her home, Drew thought about what she had told him. Maybe the bipolar thing accounted for what Paul had said about her. And maybe the Valium accounted for her mom’s sort of vacant look.

Elektra wanted Drew to see one of her favorite movies, so he’d come over for a movie night. They made popcorn in the microwave and took it into the media room, settling close together in front of an enormous HD screen. “What are we seeing?” he asked.

“It’s a surprise. I don’t want you to make up your mind ahead of time about whether you’ll like it or not.”

“I’m hurt that you think I’m not open-minded,” he said, stuffing more popcorn in his mouth.

“You aren’t hurt, I can tell. But everybody has preconceptions. What if I said we were going to watch a new James Bond movie? You’d say, ‘Super, I love James Bond!’ Or if I said we’re going to watch a Hugh Grant film, you’d say, ‘Oh, he’s such a pansy.’ Anyway, this is one of my favorite films, so you’d better like it—or else!”

He casually put his arm around her, placed the popcorn between them, and they watched *Tango*.

As the credits were rolling, he said, “I loved it! One of the best films I’ve ever seen! Let’s watch it again! Buy me my own copy!”

She jumped on him and began tickling him. “I’ll teach you to make fun of my favorite films!” They laughed and rough-housed until she finally shrieked at him, “Stop, stop, it’s no fair, you’re so much stronger. I’ll never win!” She stood up and took his hand. “Come on, I’m going to show you the ballroom.”

He got up and followed her into the hall and up to the third floor. “You’ve got a ballroom?”

“Yeah, it’s really neat. It was our playroom when we were little, but when my sister died, my mom cleaned it out, got rid of everything. I was lucky Elena saved my teddy bears for me. So, anyway, it’s back to being a ballroom. I come up here and dance by myself sometimes.”

It was about twenty-five by fifty feet, with hardwood floors and a pitched roof with dark beams, totally empty except for an audio system in one corner.

“This is an awesome room—what a great place for a party! Did you ever think about that?”

“No, but I will. OK, Handsome, you’re going to learn the tango!”

“What! You just showed me the best tango-ers on the planet and now you want me to dance like that? I can’t dance!”

“Oh, shut up. You do sports and play music. Don’t tell me you can’t dance. You have to try or you’re going to be in serious trouble!” She had her no-funny-business look, so he figured he’d better try.

“So here’s the basic step. This is American tango, and it’s a lot simpler than Argentine. I’ll go backward, you come toward me on the opposite foot—like if I’m going back on my right foot, you’re coming forward on your left, OK?”

He nodded.

“Watch first. I go back right slow, back left slow, back right quick, then I take a little quick step to the left, drag my right foot over and pause on my left foot, ready to repeat the whole thing, starting back on my right foot. Got it? It might help if you say it to yourself; for you, it would be left, right, left, side together, pause, then repeat. OK, go when you’re ready, and I’ll follow your lead. Don’t look at your feet either.”

Drew focused on the wall behind her and repeated the directions, moving forward. She watched his face and moved back exactly when he moved forward. They went through the pattern three times.

“You’ve got it. It’s a lot easier to music.” She went to the sound system, punched a button and “Blue Tango” began. “All right. You did so well by yourself, now you get to dance with me.” She placed his right hand in the middle of her back, then showed him how her right arm and his left were together from the elbow to the hand. “You have to dance close for tango.”

“Fine with me.” He grinned at her and off they went. In a minute, he had it. “Hey, this is fun!”

“It gets funner. Now I’m going to show you a turn. So, at the pause, we make a right-angle turn, arms extended, side by side, and we do the same foot sequence. You have to turn me with your hand; otherwise, I won’t know what you’re going to do.” She demonstrated, and they practiced a few times. Then she showed him how to get back to the original position.

“So, when you do this dance, you have to have *attitude*. Snap your head around for the turns and look like one of those guys in a *GQ* ad. All smoldery or something. What do you suppose they’re thinking about to get those looks on their faces?”

“They’re probably pissed off because they’ve flunked their tango lessons.”

She burst into laughter. Then they resumed their practice. Another five minutes and he had the turns down.

“I knew you wouldn’t have any trouble with this, but I didn’t think you’d get it, like, *this* quick. Congratulations, Handsome. Two more steps and you get to quit. These are very romantic.” She showed him how to do *ochos* and a *corte*.

“Now comes the fun part! You have to hold me really close; we’re, like, glued together from the waist down—think you can manage that?”

“I know I can manage that, but I might forget to dance!”

“Think about cold showers or something. OK, you’re the lead. You have to decide which steps to do when. I’m going to get us a new song.” She punched another button. He pulled her very close, waited for the right beat, and they were doing the tango.

It was a long piece. They danced for six or seven minutes. He didn’t want to let her go when the music stopped. “Hey, that was wicked cool! I had no idea it would be so much fun. Thanks, Elektra.” He really wanted to kiss her.