

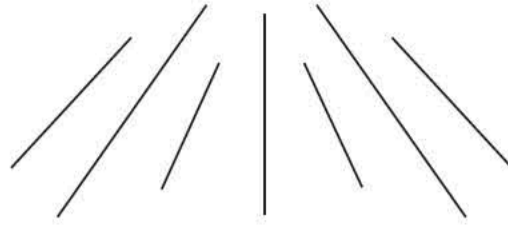
*The*  
CHRISTMAS  
STAR



Donna VanLiere



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# ONE



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**G**abe Rodriguez opens an air return in the second-grade hallway and pulls out the filter. He has worked in the facilities and maintenance department of the Grandon Elementary School for the last six years, repairing everything from a broken window, wobbly desk leg, and faulty window air-conditioning unit, to painting hallways and classrooms, pulling out dead shrubs and trees, and fixing out-of-order plumbing in the school kitchen and every bathroom. It's a job that has kept him busy from morning until sometimes the early evening, but he doesn't mind the long hours. It keeps his mind occupied, driving away thoughts of another time and another life.

"Hi, Mr. G."

He turns from his work and sees seven-year-old

Madeleine. "Good morning, Maddie. Are those new glasses?"

She shakes her head. "Nah. They probably just look new because I cleaned them today."

Gabe throws his head back and laughs. Sometimes these kids have no idea how funny they are. Maddie's right foot and leg were braced when she started kindergarten at Grandon and although she's now brace-free, her walk is gaited; she can't move as fast as other students. "Are you busting out of class?"

"No. I just need to get a book out of my backpack," she says, heading toward a locker. She opens her locker and tugs at the bright pink backpack, pulling it onto the floor. Her sandy-brown hair is up in pigtails and she's wearing a red Christmas sweatshirt with a snowman sporting a Santa hat on the front of it.

"You look awfully festive today," Gabe says, setting the old filter aside.

"We're doing presentations. I forgot my report," she says, pulling a paper from her backpack. "Mrs. Kurtz said if we look nice for our presentations that she'd give us extra points." She looks down at her shirt. "I don't know if this is nice enough."

He stops his work, smiling at her. "What?! Once you go to the front of the classroom Mrs. Kurtz is going to give you those points right away." He uses his hand and

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pretends to make checkmarks on it. “Does Maddie look nice? No doubt! She’s picture-perfect!” She grins, hanging the backpack on the hook inside her locker. “What’s your presentation on anyway?”

“Florence Nightingale.”

“Is she the woman on the pool and hot tub commercials?”

She giggles. “No! She was the one who started nursing.”

He grabs the new filter. “That’s right! That was going to be my next guess.”

She walks toward her classroom. “See you later, Mr. G.”

“Tell me how you did!” He begins to put the new filter into the air return. “And if you have time I want to actually hear your speech about the gymnastic lady.”

“She was a nurse!” Maddie says, shaking her head and opening the door to the classroom.

When he was young, Gabe worked with his dad mowing lawns and doing landscaping work, and because his dad felt insecure about his English, he acted as translator when they spoke to customers. His father moved to the States when he was twenty-six and fell in love with Molly, his English-as-a-second-language instructor, a fair-skinned white girl from Alabama, with light brown hair, blue eyes, and a molasses-thick accent. Gabe and his sister are the first Rodriguezes to be born in the United States; most of the relatives on his dad’s side of the family

still live in Guatemala. While he has his mom's nose, his other features seem to have come from his dad: dark, wavy hair, and dark eyes and skin. Here at the elementary school he often finds himself speaking Spanish to several of the parents who also struggle with English. After years of working outside, Gabe thought he would go to college right out of high school and get a degree in business or finance. Growing up, he had watched his dad struggle to pay the bills, trying to find jobs as a landscaper throughout the winter, and knew he didn't want to be in landscaping forever. When this job at the elementary school opened up, he jumped on it, hoping his landscaping experience would help and it did. He never thought that when he was thirty-four he would still be in Grandon, but here he is. He closes the air return and makes his way down the hall to the next one.

At the end of the school day, Gabe lowers the American flag at the front of the building and folds it. Walking to the doors, he notices Maddie waiting on the sidewalk with a few other children. "So how did it go?" he says, tucking the flag under his arm.

"I got a ninety-eight. I forgot to say when she died. But then I got extra points for being dressed nice and got a hundred."

"That's what I'm talking about!" He raises his hand and

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she high-fives him. The wind picks up and he pulls the hood of her jacket up over her head. “Do you have time to tell me about Miss Nightingale or is your van about to get here?”

She smiles. “It’s always late so I have time. Do you want to hear the whole speech or just the highlights?”

“Whatever you want to give me.”

Maddie crosses her arms against the cold and looks up at him. “Well, Florence Nightingale was born in 1820 in Italy and her parents wanted her to get married but she didn’t want to be married. She wanted to be a nurse. So even though a man wanted to marry her, she didn’t really want to marry him and studied to be a nurse. She was so good at it that she was asked to help lead nurses in the Crimean War and she made sure that the hospital was really clean and the patients were clean too. She’d walk from bed to bed holding a lamp and the soldiers called her the Lady with the Lamp. After the war she got a lot of awards and even some money for everything she did and she started a hospital and a training school for nurses.” She shrugs, lifting her hands as if to say, *that’s it*.

Gabe opens his eyes wide, looking at her. “That is the best presentation I’ve ever heard. And now I can say that I know all about Florence Nightingale and never think that she’s the hot-tub lady ever again.”

“You never did a presentation on Florence Nightingale?”

Maddie asks. He shakes his head. "Have your kids ever done one?"

"I don't have any kids. Just all of you around here," he says, waving his arm toward all the other children. "All of you keep me really busy."

She folds her arms, looking at him. "Are you married?"

He shakes his head. "I was but I'm not anymore."

She squints as she stares at him, thinking. "You should be married. You'd make a good husband. I could find you a wife."

Laughter shakes him down to his work boots. "You know, I might just take you up on that. I could use all the help I can get."

She raises her finger high in the air. "Then I'm on it!"

"But what about you? Are you married?"

"No! Oh my gosh, Mr. G.! I'm too young!"

He smiles. "And there's no way your dad would want to give you away." Her face clouds over and Gabe attempts to explain. "You know, a dad often walks down the aisle with his daughter to give her away to her groom on her wedding day."

She's quiet as she looks at him. "I know. I've seen that in movies." She looks down at the ground and Gabe could kick himself. What a dumb thing to say!

"Here comes your ride," he says. A white van with the

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words GLORY'S PLACE, written on the side pulls to a stop in front of them. The driver jumps out of the van to mark each child's name off on the clipboard he's holding. "See you tomorrow. Congratulations again on your presentation."

"Bye, Mr. G."

He scolds himself for opening his big mouth as he walks back into the school. He is heading for the maintenance office when he sees Mrs. Kurtz at the end of the hall. He hesitates, wondering if he should speak to her but decides that he should. Mrs. Kurtz is one of the teachers in the school who has been there the longest and he has always seen her to be loving and kind toward her students. He pretends to be doing something with the flag as she approaches. "Did you have a good day, Mrs. Kurtz?"

"I did, Gabe! How was yours?"

"Good. Good. Maddie just did her presentation for me."

She stops in front of him. "It was so good. They all were just excellent today."

"Um . . . she . . . uh . . . asked if I was married and then I teased her, asking if she was married and she of course laughed and said no. And I said that there's no way her dad would want to give her away." He sighs. "I could tell by looking at her that I said the wrong thing." Mrs. Kurtz nods, understanding. "I never ask the kids about a mom or dad. I know that many of them live with a single parent



or a grandparent. It just slipped out today.” He shakes his head, feeling stupid. “I never would do or say anything to make her or any of these kids feel bad about—”

She interrupts him. “Many children here are in one-parent homes.” She’s careful how she phrases her words. “Some don’t have either parent in their life.” She looks at Gabe and he understands. “I can assure you that Maddie does not hold a grudge against you and that tomorrow she’ll be the same happy little girl that she is every day.” She smiles. “I have to run.” She begins to hurry down the hall. “Haircut appointment and Lorelei hates tardiness!”

He opens the door to the maintenance office and places the flag on its shelf. He grabs the tools he needs in order to put a leg back on a library table and sighs, shaking his head. There was a time, years ago, when something as simple as a slip of the tongue would not have bothered him. As a matter of fact, he gloried in his anger and temper and fiery tongue. But today he hates the thought that he has darkened a little girl’s day.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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