

CHAPTER FIVE: SARA GORDON

Tonight I was meeting Sara Gordon for diner. I dressed for the occasion. She had style. She had possibilities. I met Sara through Jack Nelson and Audrey Lagrange; they were both friends of hers. Jack had a crush on Sara. But nothing had progressed very far. In her favor, she claimed that she had a romantic lover who ushered on trips around the world. Italy, Greece, wherever. It gave her purpose for enduring lonely nights while he was away.

She agreed to go out with me. I thought that it might provide a significant contrast with women like Monroe. Here was a girl with whom I could actually talk about literature.

We met at the Cove. We came in separate vehicles.

“They tell me you’re a writer. So what kind of book are you writing?”

“It’s about a girl who knows a secret. And she’s being chased by a mysterious organization.”

“Sounds like a thriller.”

“Yeah, it’s a thriller. But it’s more than that.”

“I always get so embarrassed trying to talk about my novel. I don’t want to give away the story. And it’s more about the theme. But that just sounds so vague.”

“Is it based on actual experience?”

“Not entirely. But there are bits and pieces from my life.”

“I don’t think that I could ever write a novel. I don’t feel as if I have enough to say.”

“We all have our stories.”

“I’m sure we do.”

As if that’s all there is to writing a novel. I want to encourage other writers. But I don’t want people to think that this isn’t work. That just anybody could do it. Because they can’t. Writing a good novel is an art. Like putting together a puzzle. You need enough good clues. Characters that live and breathe. But you also have to have something to say. I feel as if I am getting carried away.

“Why would anyone want to read one of your novels?”

“It’s entertaining. It gets people thinking about their lives. Why do we read?”

“To escape. Sometimes there’s too much of a jumble when I try to read.”

“I think that’s the difference between a really great writer and a not-so-good one. Great writers untangle the jumble. They make it clear for the patient reader.”

Each word was very deliberate for her, “I just hate getting confused. I sort of like biography. I read a book about Elizabeth Taylor. You know that actress.”

“Did you like it?”

“Some of it made me sad.”

“You don’t like sad things?”

“Not often.”

“Often sadness is a key into deeper experiences.”

“Is that supposed to be poetic? It sounds like nonsense.”

I had got so wrapped up in the conversation that I had forgotten about the person that I was with. What was she wearing? How did she hold her fork? Why did she order what she did?

“That’s a pretty dress.”

It was a lovely spring dress, a flowing print.

“Most guys don’t notice what I’m wearing. Unless it’s revealing.”

She looked deep in my eyes, then looked away.

“What’s that?”

“Oh, nothing. I miss Bill.”

“I’m sure that you do.”

The mushroom soup had a pleasant bite. The gentle creaminess was heavenly. The bread had a hearty crust. And the salad exhibited a remarkable crispness and was sprinkled with shavings of parmesan. The tuna was sliced thin with a lovely pink rareness. It melted in my mouth.

Sara remarked on my overwhelming sense of enjoyment. You seem so involved in your meal."

I smiled , but she quickly looked away.

"I admit it. I'm a fussy eater." she set aside her fork, and stared into space."

She had made a point about ordering something original from the menu.

“Is that with a cream sauce?” I asked her.

“And wine.”

“Sounds great.”

“I make it at home.”

I wanted to take that as an invitation.

She again focused her gaze, “If you were going to write about me, what would you say?”

“That your reach exceeds your grasp.”

She pursed her lips, “That sounds mean.”

“It wasn’t meant to.”

There was a serious to her inquiry. This was nothing like Monroe. I never felt as if I was being teased for some ulterior motive. Sara seemed authentically interested.

I watched her hands as they cradled the fork and knife. She ate quickly, hardly pausing between bites. I tried to make sense of this in light of her attachment to luxury. She was more clinging than she wanted to let on. There was nothing casual about her vision for the future. She didn’t want to appear desperate. And she did everything that she could to hide a rapacious nature. But she was not an artist, more of a collector. For the time being, she had collected all that she needed to be happy. But her relationships with Bill was based on a lot of promises. And he had only delivered part of the bargain. She had given herself completely to his panorama of the world. And she was always observing through his binoculars.

I navigated through this hollow in her soul. She had education, but everything seemed focused around some kind of test. She organized everything into these units of knowledge. And she couldn’t venture far from these tethers. I wanted to know how she was arranging our experience into her notebooks and folders. How was I making out on the exam?

She wanted to learn about my characterization of her. I had tapped her favorite subject, Ultimately, this was the only thing that she could talk about in any detail. For her it was all a grand act. She led me around the catacombs like an informed tour guide.

“I hear that there are ghosts down here.”

She laughed, “No one believes in ghosts.”

“So what is the appeal of this underground location.”

I imagined a spring that sustained her passion. It was like a divine kiss that nurtured her inner vitality. If these waters flowed in such profundity, what was her resistance. Why were her aspirations so pedestrian?

“Do you write?”

“I keep journals. I email loads. I have some ideas for stories.”

“You should take some time to develop the stories.”

“I told you that I hate sad things.”

“They are sad.?” I was probing her.

“Melancholy. Girlish silliness. I have my insecurities.”

“We all have them.”

“They just paralyze me. I don’t like that. It’s a trap to wallow in your uncertainties. I have a job. There’s a direction in my life. There is no reason to be sad.”

She needed to get back to her shiny surface. When you looked at Sara, you wanted to see the depths. But she was less amenable to self-analysis.

“Some guys think that there’s a mystery. A treasure down there. Deep in my soul. But I am what I am. I have things to do. Places to see. I can’t worry about it.”

I tried to correct her, “It’s not worry.”

“I don’t like to talk about it too much. Tell me more about what kind of character I would be.”

I wanted to say that she wouldn’t be like Monroe. But that was too much to explain.

“You’d be someone with purpose.”

“That sounds good. Do you find me attractive?”

I briefly looked away.

She added a thought, “Just for the novel. I’m not trying to flirt with you.”

“Of course not.”

“I miss Bill. But not in a sad way.”

“Oh no!”

“Tell me about myself.”

There was a breeziness to her pose. It reminded me of someone that I would want to read about. On the other hand, I had difficulty imagining her character. It was obvious that Bill took her for granted. Beyond that there wasn’t a lot to say. She had surrendered so much of herself to a princeness that he came to possess. He could hardly bother to make herself his jailer. She just made herself a prisoner for him.

She wondered, “You’re not afraid of me. I don’t mean that in a sexual way. But you have been a little cold. As if you’re watching me from afar.”

I was afraid that this was some kind of trick. She was bringing me closer just so she could slam the door when I wanted to learn more. I simply didn’t want any trouble.

“I don’t think that you want me to get too close.”

“But as novelist, couldn’t you take a closer look.”

”I really don’t like to turn the magnifying glass on my friends.”

“I don’t see it that way.”

“I know. But it ends up becoming like that. I guess I’m always measuring my characters

against some standard.”

“I have my own standards.”

“I recognize that. But that has a way of backfiring. You can hold a fictional character up to model. But real people need more space to breathe. We’re not meant to stay on track.”

“That makes me sound aimless.”

“Not you. Just in general.”

“Why do we read if it doesn’t tell us who we are?”

She was admitting to a deeper motivation for her own art.

“Why are you so afraid of sad things?”

“It’s just something that I say.”

“So you’re a sad person?”

“Not really.”

She had already pursued the questions. She couldn’t stop now.

She continued, “I hate to dwell on my problems. It makes you weak. It makes you despondent.”

“So life isn’t perfect.”

She frowned momentarily, “It never is for anybody. But I never let it bother me.”

Sara tried to recover with a more cheery demeanor. But she had again revealed too much. She hardly wanted to appear weak.

If I started to explore her character any deeper, it was going to be difficult. It could take all night just to get her to admit something insignificant. Even at that, she’d deny it next time that I’d see her. There was a moralistic tone to everything that she said. This helped fuel her passions. And she was convinced that she would be rewarded for her straight and narrow approach. So much for that.

If I wasn’t going to play her game, how could the rest of the evening progress. In a strict sense, she wanted to be entertained. I wasn’t ready to do backflips for her.

To compensate for her own fears about herself, she tried to shake my confidence, “Admit it. You love drama. If things are difficult for you, you think that it’s all part of a spiritual journey. The glory of agony.”

“I’m not into suffering. I’m just not going to sell out to be comfortable.”

“I’m not selling out.”

“I didn’t say that you were. I was speaking for myself.”

She was a little flippant, “You’re telling me that you’re different. What makes you different? That you’ve analyzed and catalogued all the internet porn that you’ve downloaded. Big deal!”

“I don’t do internet porn.”

“Whatever it is. Violent games.”

“That’s not me either.”

She was searching for her in, “However you realize your fantasies. But you’re all into the permanence of non-permanence.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You build a wall around yourself so no one can get close to you.”

“That’s not how I am at all.”

“What about us?”

“We’re friends. You’re already with another guy.”

“I know your type. You wouldn’t be with me even if I was available.” She stretched out her legs until they hit mine under the table. “Sorry about that. These chairs are so close together.”

“This is a small table.”

“That’s why you’re so into novels. Pretend feelings! Didn’t you say that you were writing a novel about a runaway. Sort of your female counterpart. You could take advantage of her, and she’d never be the wiser. She’d believe that you were revealing some adult secret to her.”

“That isn’t how it works.”

“Tell me how it works. You’ve been checking out every girl in here.”

“I like to observe my surroundings.”

It became obvious that Sara loved to talk about herself. But she really didn’t have that much to say. It wasn’t as if she could put everything about Sara Gordon into words. She was just Sara Gordon.

I imagined the care that she took in picking out a dress. Or how much time she took to get her hair ready. Or she was obsessed with finding the right accessory. I could see her thumbing through pins until she found one that went with her dress. For all the time that she took, she was hardly the vision that she assumed. She looked attractive. Her clothes flattered her. But she lacked the joie de vivre that would really distinguish. She impressed Buddy or whatever his name was. And that was good enough for her.

In the middle of the meal, Buddy rang her up.

She excused herself, “I have to take this.”

“Of course you do,” I said under my breath.

She was gone for what seemed like an eternity. I stared at my plate.

When she returned, I asked, “How’s Binky?”

“Buddy!”

“I thought his name was Beau.”

I could tell that I had messed her up.

“He’s great.”

“I bet he’s missing you.”

“More than that. He longs for me?”

“Like Troilus and Cressida.”

“What?”

“So he’s sending you a present.”

“How did you know?”

“Telepathy!”

“No, really.”

“If he really loves you, he’d send you a token of his affection.”

“That is sweet!” She understood none of my irony.

I wanted to ask more about his gift. But I didn’t want to encourage her illusion. It wasn’t as if he could just quit his job to be with her all the time. Did she make all that difference in his

life. She was more like a security system that could monitor his emotions. If he felt bad about things, he could ring her up. She would cheer him up. But if he really felt happy, he'd ignore her and pretend that he was too busy with work.

"You can't act like you know him. Not the way that I do."

"That's why you need to tell me more."

This was her favorite subject, even more important than Sara Gordon. It was the one part of her life that remained out of her grasp. At the same time, he made so much possible for her. She could sustain the fiction that she was a world traveler. She just hardly knew the world where she traveled.

"You're not making fun of me."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because you're envious of me and Binky. I mean Buddy."

"You mean Beau!"

"Right. There you go making fun of me."

"I didn't say Binky."

"But you said Beau."

"What? No such thing."

"Huh?"

"Are you going to have something more to eat?"

She again surveyed her plate. She took a bite of salad and tried to recover.

"When Binky's away, you're not tempted to be with other guys."

"Tempted yeah. What's the big deal?"

"You don't follow through on your desires."

"That surely isn't why we're hanging out."

"I'm not pretending that's the reason I'm asking."

"We have an understanding."

This was more of an excuse on her part. She was afraid to express her independence.

"Understanding how?"

"Let's just say that it's all a matter of how long he's away."

"So you do stray on occasion."

"I don't consider it cheating."

"So you make out with other guys."

"I won't admit to that. I'm starting to feel as if this is some kind of interrogation."

"But you will let guys do things to you. Just as long as you don't do anything actively yourself."

She became very defensive, "I'll let guys take me out to dinner. And they can buy me drinks. And get me to act a little crazy. But that's where it stops."

"A little crazy," I probed further.

"I'm not going to let anyone touch me if that's what you were wondering."

"You don't mind feeding their fantasies."

"Guys are going to have fantasies if they see me in a short skirt on the street."

"Do you dress to get a reaction?"

"You are a jerk."

“We can change the subject.”

She took a sip from her wine. “I have nothing to hide.”

“You don’t tease?”

“That is all subjective. Guys will take things that a girl says and twist them all around. But that’s not teasing. That’s wishful thinking on the part of they guy.”

“You’re not suggestive?”

“Sex is part of life. Flirting is good. And if that gets someone to buy me another drink, all the best for both of us. But I can’t control what he thinks about me. Not in the least. I don’t encourage it. But I’m young. I want to have fun.”

“And Binky doesn’t seem to mind.”

“He’s not with me right now. So I can’t control what he says or does.”

“But you do have your suspicions.”

“Those are your words.”

“You think about it?”

“Do you think about it? When you watch me cross my legs, do you think about what I look like naked.”

“What if would I say if I told you that I think you’re hot?”

“Do I get you aroused? Do you want me to come over to your place and get naked for you? If I spread my legs for you, would you eat me out. Is that what you want me to say to you. Does that get you hard? ‘cause that’s the best that it’s going to get. For you or anyone. I can’t be responsible for your fantasies.”

“Don’t stop!”

She gave me the finger, “Fuck off!”

But she just stared at me. She wouldn’t get up from her seat. We sat there in silence for a few moments. We had both been jacked by the exchange. She rearranged her hair.

“I need to go to the ladies room.”

She sashayed as she walked off.

When she came back, she acted all prim again.

“I need some coffee.”

“No dessert.”

She had just done her lips. They glowed.

“No, I’ll be OK.”

“How about an after dinner drink?”

“Maybe some brandy.”

She needed to distract herself. Maybe she was missing Beau.

“When is he coming back?”

“In a week or two.”

“You’re not sure.”

She didn’t want to be reminded how helpless she was. She’d go to work. Keep herself busy. But her life was always on hold when he was away. And she still needed buckets of flattery to hold her up. But she didn’t want to do anything that could upset the whole apple cart.

“We could not talk about something else.”

“Cool. Whatever you want.”

I was wondering if I could use her hesitation to my advantage. I found her entertaining. But her arrogance was not at all appealing. And I did not want to reward her attitude.

“I’m glad that you took me out. I need to be cheered up.”

She toasted me with her brandy glass. She knew how to forget her misery. But she didn’t want to lose her composure. That was all that she had. It would be hard picking up the pieces if she got too wasted.

She appealed to me, “Make sure that I don’t get too shit-faced.”

“I’ll stop you before you start falling down.”

“I hope that you’ll catch me way before that.”

“I’ll catch you no matter what happens.”

“You are sweet.”

She was turning on the charm. Had things already progressed too far for her.

“I wish that you were more like Buddy.”

“How is that?”

“You need to have more ambition. What do you do for money? Paint houses.”

“I told you that I deliver pizzas.”

Despite her own vulnerability, she was still quite disparaging.

“Sara, you need to lighten up.”

“How is that?”

“I don’t know. Try to be more friendly.”

“Friendly to you. I’m trying to do my best. I just don’t want to give you the wrong impression.”

I needed her to clarify herself, “And what would that be?”

“That I wanted to go out with you.”

“You’ve already made that pretty evident.”

“Honestly, I like you. But there is no way that we could have sex. But if you want to come over to my place, we could sleep in the same bed.”

“I always sleep naked.”

“I don’t. So do what you have to do. It’s a big bed. I’m not sure that I want to be alone.”

“You are really inviting me over.”

“I’m thinking about it.”

For a while, I felt that she was letting down her guard. But it was more about her feeling good in light of her phone conversation. She knew that he was hanging her on. But she didn’t want to sink to the level of everyone else.

When we finally got back to her place, she excused herself: “I told you that I wanted you to come in. But I changed my mind. I really need to be alone.”

“That’s okay.”

“I just drank too much. I don’t want you to see me like this. Another time!”

She kissed me on the forehead, and then she rushed in the house. I wasn’t sure what to say.

Sara wanted to be someone’s wife. She was willing to wait the obligatory number of years. But after that, she wanted things set in stone. Buddy had laid out a path for her. But now he seemed to be retreating. She wasn’t about to trade down. He could promise her trips around

the world. But her patience was wearing thin. She couldn't afford to let the illusion fade before there was something else to take its place.

She deliberately avoided my calls for the next couple of days. I would only force her to consider the inevitable.

The next time that I saw her, she was out for dinner with an acquaintance of mine. He had no idea that we knew each other.

"She's pretty hot!"

"She's a friend."

"I didn't know. She's been coming on to me all evening."

"She told me that she was engaged."

"She can't be. Not the way that she's been touching me."

"It's all an act."

He resented my intrusion, "Why are you such a dick?"

When she came back from the bathroom, she gave me a big hug. "I thought that you were going to call."

"I tried a bunch of times. I never heard back."

"I had something wrong with my phone. Call me!"

I reassured her, "I will."

When she sat down with the other guy, she deliberately put some distance between them. She winked at me as I headed out.

I thought it would be polite to call her one more time.

"Buddy's coming in town for the week. I'll call you when he leaves."

I wasn't holding my breath. But she did call a couple of weeks later.

"I need to see you. Nothing serious. Just casual."

When I arrived at the coffee shop, she was all smiles.

"I missed you."

"It seems like almost a month since we went out."

"More than that."

What had she been doing?

"Are you still with Buddy?"

"He finally proposed. Look at the ring."

He had spent some money.

"Have you set a date?"

"It's all tentative. We're still figuring out some things. Like where I'm going to live after the wedding. He's talked about me coming to Rome."

"You're sure that this guy isn't already married?"

"He did have a tough break up. But he's always been single."

Had she really met me just to tell me that she was engaged.

"I needed to apologize for that night. I may have said some things. Things that I didn't really mean. But it all sounded right at the time. I was so embarrassed. I just drank like a fish."

She really hadn't had very much to drink. She needed to cover her tracks. But it wasn't as if I was going to ring up Buddy.

"Sara, I do wish you all the best."

“That’s not all.”

I wondered, “You’re okay?”

“I’m doing swimmingly. It’s just that I need you to know something.”

“What is that?”

“I really like you. And I made a jerk of myself that night. I really have to apologize.”

“You’ve done more than enough already.”

I could hear her breaking up with Buddy. But I wouldn’t be lucky enough to hear that news.

“There’s nothing that you want to say to me.”

“Are you sure that marriage is in the cards for you?”

“Are you silly? That’s all that I’ve ever wanted.”

“Does he even satisfy you?”

“That’s not what it’s about. I have something dire to confess.”

“What?”

“That guy that you saw me with.”

“Yeah, Chris. He’s a real scumbag.”

“I’ve been sleeping with him for over a month now.”

“It hasn’t been that long since we went out.”

“Are you keeping track? I don’t know. I’ve been sleeping with him. And I don’t want to break it off.”

“What about Buddy?”

“I love him. At least, I love what he does for me.”

“But you’re with Chris.”

“Would you think that I was a bad person if I didn’t change. If I married Buddy, but I stayed with Chris.”

“Chris is a loser.”

“I know. That’s why I’m going to marry Buddy. But I like sleeping with Chris.”

“What does this have to do with me? I’m not a priest. I’m not even that into psychology. Do what you want!”

She was frantic, “But I don’t want you to think that I’m a bad person.”

“Why do you care what I think?”

“You’re a writer. You understand deeper truths. I don’t want you to paint me as a loose woman.”

“You didn’t have to call me up. I really don’t want to hear any of this.”

“I want your blessing for my wedding.”

“I don’t even know why you’re getting married.”

“Now, you’re criticizing me.”

I didn’t want to put myself in the middle of this. When she made a pass at me, I thought that there was some meaning to her front. But now it just was tawdry.

“I just want you to like me.”

“I think that was my problem. I really did like you.”

“As a friend. Every guy that I know wants to sleep with me.”

“I hope that you don’t oblige them.”

“I want you to understand me. I have needs.”

“Needs for what? We had one long conversation. I don’t really know you.”

“But you almost came over to my place. You almost spent the night.”

“Almost doesn’t amount for too much any more.”

“It’s not what you think.”

She was speaking faster than I could keep track. What was I supposed to say back to her? If I really liked her, I was really messed up.

“I’m not here to rescue you. I can’t pull you out of this, clean you up, and make it all better.”

She was helpless, “What can you do for me?”

I didn’t have too many options.

“The best that I can do is quit while I’m ahead.”

“You’re going to do nothing.”

“Are you with Chris? Are you with Buddy? You’re certainly not with me.”

“But you seem so together.”

“I don’t have the aspirations of Buddy. As for Chris, what am I supposed to say? That makes no sense to me.”

“I’m confused about it too. It just feels good.”

“That’s great for you!”

“I’m afraid that I’m drinking too much. I’m just lonely.”

“You’ve got a damn ring. What more do you want?”

“I want someone to really love me!”

“Sometimes, you are asking for too much. Enjoy what you have.”