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Stand By Me

Written by Sheila O'Flanagan

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Sheila
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Prologue

Dominique was trying to decide the best way to position a dozen coloured Chinese lanterns around the small patio garden when she heard the doorbell ring. Her eyes widened as she glanced at her watch and she hurried through the house, wiping her hands on her black jeans as she walked along the narrow hallway.

‘Hi.’ A petite redhead with a dark green baseball cap sitting unsteadily on her unruly curls looked at her with a hint of curiosity, and then smiled. ‘Mizz Delahaye? I’m Lizzie Horgan. I’m from the caterers.’

‘Bang on time,’ said Dominique. ‘I didn’t realise how late it was getting. Everything’s through here.’ She led the way back along the hallway into the small, square kitchen that she’d tidied that morning. Open French doors led to the enclosed patio where she’d been hanging the lanterns.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said as Lizzie looked around with unconcealed interest. ‘It’s a bit on the poky side.’

‘Don’t worry. There’s not that much stuff. We’ve catered for much bigger events than . . .’ Lizzie broke off,

aware that she could be insulting Dominique by (a) insinuating that her party was too small to worry about; or (b) implying that the client herself was someone who didn't know all about big events. There was a (c) too, of course, and that was that her boss had given her very strict instructions about how she was to treat Dominique Delahaye, and that with her careless remark, she wasn't sticking to Ash's instructions at all.

Those instructions, delivered firmly, were that she was to be as professional as possible. To be ultra-polite. To make the delivery and leave. She was not, Ash had warned, to engage the woman in casual conversation or make any comments at all that could be construed as interfering or critical or personal in any way whatsoever.

'We're not rubberneckers,' Ash had reminded Lizzie. 'We don't pry into our customers' private lives. No matter what our own opinions on them might be,' she added.

'I'll be discretion itself,' Lizzie assured her. 'But she's having a party, for heaven's sake! She must have something to celebrate. I haven't seen anything on the news, have you? Either about him or about her. I read that she'd gone abroad. That she'd met him somewhere. But that's obviously all wrong. So why d'you think she's doing this? Are they right about her having money? Is she back on the social scene again? Or is it a farewell party because she's leaving the country now?' Lizzie was almost breathless with excitement.

'It's none of our business,' Ash replied. 'It's a private party; she made that perfectly clear. Crystal clear, in fact, so no trying to worm info out of her. We don't know

what her situation is now. If she's getting back into the whole party scene, there could be lots of work for us in the future, but not if we upset her over this. So it's simply a question of us doing a good job with the minimum of fuss.'

Lizzie assured Ash that she'd be the soul of discretion, although she couldn't help thinking that her cool, calm and efficient employer would be much better at that. But Ash was working another function that day and couldn't spare the time for what was just a simple delivery job, no matter how famous (or infamous) the client might be.

So Lizzie said nothing further to Dominique Delahaye as she continued to transfer the food from the van to the kitchen as quickly and as unobtrusively as possible. But she couldn't help glancing at the woman from time to time and wondering if any or all of the reports about her were true. Ash frequently said that newspapers and magazines only ever gave one side of a story; the side that they thought was the most interesting, or fitted with their own philosophy.

In the past, stories about Dominique Delahaye were always about her glittering life, her social standing and her charity work. That had all changed abruptly, and the pieces over the last few months had been completely different. But it was a long time now since Lizzie had read anything about their new client in the paper. Though it was funny, she mused, as she plugged in the small wine chiller that the catering company supplied, how *normal* Dominique Delahaye seemed to be. There was, of course, no real reason why the woman shouldn't be normal. But

when everything you knew about her was thanks to the news reports in the papers and on the TV, you tended to forget that there was a real person underneath. Lizzie couldn't help wondering what the real Dominique was like. Normal or not, she doubted she'd ever really know.

Dominique hadn't missed the curiosity in Lizzie's eyes. She left the younger girl to finish unloading the van and went upstairs, shutting the bedroom door behind her before sitting down on the edge of the double bed. She released her breath slowly and evenly and then pinched the bridge of her nose with the tips of her finger and thumb. She'd been really looking forward to today, looking forward to doing something fun and frivolous for someone she cared about, looking forward to having some good friends, old and new, to the house; but she was feeling suddenly anxious, and her anxiety had been ratcheted up by the cheerful caterer's obvious attempt at nonchalance.

Would there ever be a time, she asked herself, when people stopped looking at her the way Lizzie Horgan had looked at her? With a mixture of sympathy and disdain and unbridled curiosity? Would there ever be a day when someone would meet her and not make snap judgements based on things they had read or heard?

Probably not, she conceded, as she released another slow breath. Probably not, and that's something I have to live with. Something I have to accept. Something, she reminded herself, I've already accepted, because I'm here today holding a party. There was a time when I thought I'd never even be at a party again. She got up from the bed

and stretched her arms over her head. She was doing the right thing. And the party was going to be great. It would be an occasion to look forward, not to look back. For everyone concerned.

‘Um, excuse me, Mizz Delahaye. Everything’s done now.’ Lizzie’s voice wafted up the stairs. ‘The food’s in the fridge, the ice is in the freezer and the wine is in the chiller. I’ve taken the glasses from the boxes and left them on the table. They’re already washed and I’ve given them a quick wipe too.’

Dominique took another deep breath and ran lightly down the stairs. The caterer was standing in the hallway.

‘Thanks,’ Dominique said. ‘You’ve done a great job. I appreciate it.’

Lizzie beamed at her. She’d thought she’d done a pretty good job too, unloading and storing everything in record time. Nevertheless, it was nice to get praise from Dominique Delahaye, who had, she knew, once been voted Ireland’s Most Celebrated Hostess. Dazzling Domino, they’d called her at the time. Of course, that was before everything had gone totally pear-shaped for her and she’d ended up being called a lot of other things instead. She was hardly dazzling now, was she, in her black T-shirt and black jeans, her hair held back untidily from her face and a streak of dust across her cheek. Although there was still something about her that held your attention, there was no doubt about that.

‘I hope you have a fantastic evening,’ said Lizzie. ‘Housewarming, is it?’ As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she wished she hadn’t said anything. Ash

would freak if she knew she'd asked a question. But she hadn't been able to help herself.

'No.' Dominique hesitated, and then gave Lizzie the ghost of a smile. 'It's a divorce party, actually.'

'Oh.' Lizzie looked surprised. 'I didn't realise . . . well, um, I suppose I should probably say congratulations – would that be the right thing under the circumstances?'

'It's not my divorce.' This time Dominique's smile was wider and there was an undercurrent of laughter in her voice.

'My mistake,' said Lizzie, thinking that the older woman looked a lot less fierce when she smiled. Almost beautiful, actually, with those dark brown eyes softening and two tiny dimples appearing in her cheeks. More like her photographs, in fact. Nearly dazzling after all.

'That's OK. Understandable, even.' Dominique still sounded amused.

'I didn't know that you'd moved to Dublin.' Lizzie felt that Dominique's smile allowed for a certain level of conversation between them, despite Ash's warnings. 'I didn't even think you were in Ireland, to be honest.'

'I never left Ireland,' Dominique told her gently. 'No matter what you might have heard. And I'm from Dublin, so perhaps it was inevitable that I'd end up back here again.'

'The house in Cork was magnificent, though.' Lizzie filed away the information about Dominique's residency. 'And the views were spectacular. I remember the pictures of it in the *Hello!* magazine spread.'

'The Curse of *Hello!*,' said Dominique ruefully, and then smiled her wide smile again.

It was nice to see that she could still smile, thought Lizzie. Obviously, in recent times, there hadn't been much for her to smile about. And then she wondered if the stories that talked about secret trysts and hide-aways in the Maldives were true after all and if that was why her client could afford to throw parties and smile so brightly. Keep your head, she told herself. It's none of your business. Remember what Ash said. Don't ask unwanted questions.

'Well, look, have a great divorce party for whoever it is.' Despite the ban on asking questions, she did desperately want to know if Dominique had already got a divorce herself.

'Thank you,' said Dominique. 'We'll do our best. And thank you for the food and the wine and the ice and everything else. If I ever get around to a divorce party for myself, I'm sure I'll be in touch.'

Lizzie blushed. Dominique had known what she wanted to find out and had told her. There was something very controlled about her, Lizzie thought. A wariness, too. But she'd probably had to learn that. She remembered a photograph of Dominique in the grounds of her house in Cork, taken with a telephoto lens, in which she hadn't looked controlled at all. In which she'd clearly been crying. The caption hadn't been sympathetic. It had said something about Crocodile Tears.

If it was me, I don't think I'd ever be able to face anyone again after all that, Lizzie reckoned. I'd just be too embarrassed.

Dominique didn't seem to be embarrassed, though. She was looking straight at Lizzie, her brown eyes steady

in a face that was slightly drawn but still attractive, despite the fine lines around the edges of her eyes and a definite crease on her brow. Lizzie wondered whether they'd all appeared in the last few months.

In earlier photographs, the ones in the magazines and the social diaries of the newspapers, before the ones that were taken with telephoto lenses, Dominique had never looked anything other than radiant. But those sort of pictures were always retouched, everyone knew that. Nevertheless, Lizzie was certain that a couple of years ago Dominique wouldn't have been seen dead like she was now, even if she was just meeting the caterers. Especially if she was just meeting the caterers! It would've been unthinkable. All the same, there was something captivating about her. An attraction that wasn't all to do with her slightly angular face and those huge liquid eyes.

The Domino Effect. That had been the headline on one of the newspaper articles. But of course they'd only written it then because she was the wife of an influential businessman who'd given her the nickname. Nobody realised the impact that the piece, and its accompanying photograph of Dominique sipping champagne whilst sitting on a marble worktop, would have.

Even people who hadn't read the original article had heard of her afterwards. She'd become a celebrity in her own right, a must-have person at any glittering event and an inspiration to lots of women.

What would it be like, Lizzie wondered, to have it all and to lose it? To have made your way to the top only to have it taken away so abruptly? What would it be like,

she asked herself, to know that people were talking about you and wondering whether every word from your lips was a tissue of lies, whether you knew the truth behind everything that had happened and had been part of it all yourself?

She shivered slightly. During the years when she'd read about Dominique Delahaye, she'd envied her. Envied her looks and her lifestyle and especially her attractive, successful husband. Everyone had loved her. Everyone had loved him. Everyone had called them the perfect couple.

That was then, of course. They weren't saying that now. Even though, over the last year there'd been more newsprint than ever devoted to them. Lizzie had read most of it and joined in the gossip.

They'd been a couple well worth gossiping about.

Chapter 1

He was the first person ever to call her Domino. Until then, she'd always been Dominique. At home, her mother resolutely refused ever to shorten it or to use a pet name for her. Evelyn simply couldn't understand why people would give their children one name only to call them something else entirely. She herself never responded to Eve or Evie but only to Evelyn. Or, naturally, to Mrs Brady. She preferred being called Mrs Brady by people she didn't know very well. She didn't like strangers to be too familiar. She hated the way that chit of a girl in the bank called her Evelyn, as though they were the best of friends, when the relationship between them was that of customer and teller. The world, she thought, was becoming far too disrespectful and everyone was a good deal less deferential than they'd been when she'd been growing up. As far as Evelyn was concerned, that wasn't a good thing, and it wasn't helped by giving children pet names.

So Dominique it was, even though Evelyn's own pronunciation made it sound like the male version, Dominic. During her pregnancy, Evelyn had been certain

that she was expecting a second boy, and had already chosen his name. The arrival of a girl had surprised her, but she'd promised St Dominic that she'd name the baby after him and she was a woman who kept her promises.

She prayed that her daughter would be blessed with her namesake's reputed integrity and honour as well as his charitable disposition. Evelyn was heavily involved in charity work herself and was one of an army of women who cleaned and polished the parish church so that the scent of beeswax mingled with the floral arrangements that were renewed every week, while the pews glowed in the light that slanted through the stained-glass windows. On the day she brought Dominique home from the hospital, Evelyn hung a picture of the saint holding a bible and a lily over the baby's cot and asked him to bless her baby and keep her on the straight and narrow. When she was a little older and was sleeping in a bed instead of a cot, Dominique begged her mother to take the picture down, insisting that it scared her; but Evelyn told her not to be silly, that St Dominic was there to look after her and he always would. It wasn't until her teens that Dominique finally replaced the saint's picture with a large glossy poster of Sting, whom she adored and whose lyrics she once told her brother Gabriel were far more meaningful to her than prayers. She also stuck up posters of Simon Le Bon and Annie Lennox in her room. Evelyn pursed her lips at the sight of them, but realised that as far as Dominique was concerned, there was no point in saying anything at all.

At school, Dominique tried to shorten her name to Nikki, but somehow it never quite worked. There were

two other Nikkis at the Holy Trinity School for Girls and both of them were adorable and gorgeous, which meant that to be a Nikki she would have had to be adorable and gorgeous too. Unfortunately, she didn't have Nikki McAteer's shiny blond hair and baby-blue eyes, or Nikki Dunne's bouncing auburn curls and perfect skin, and so she stayed Dominique, or sometimes Dommy, which she hated because it didn't conjure up the type of person she would have liked to be. Not perhaps as flighty as the most popular girls in the school (whose only interest was in make-up and boyfriends), but someone who was pretty and fun to be with and who was invited to parties and other social events as a matter of course.

But it was hard to be fun, she thought, when she was stuck with parents like Seamus and Evelyn; and hard to make the most of her decent bone structure and slender figure when her porcelain-pale skin was prone to spots and her almost black shoulder-length hair was boringly straight and curl-free. Tragically, from her point of view, her short sight meant having to wear glasses; and despite the optician telling her that the square tortoiseshell frames (which were all she could afford) were grand on her, she knew that they didn't really flatter her face.

Dominique longed for the kind of sleek looks and outgoing personality that would have allowed her to be part of the group of girls who were acknowledged to be the leaders of their years. But only a favoured few were like the two Nikkis, or Cara Bond, or – the queen bee herself – Emma Walsh, who would regularly flick her chestnut curls from her face with a careless gesture that

managed to convey her superiority over everyone else in the class without really trying.

It was in her fifth year of secondary school that things began to change for Dominique. The change wasn't brought about by the sudden disappearance of her spots (unfortunately they were as persistent as ever) or by a new hair product that gave her bouncing curls (nothing worked on her poker-straight mane), but by the fact that she was thrust unexpectedly into the limelight as Judas in the school production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. This was only because Nikki Dunne was hauled into hospital with appendicitis the morning of the production and Dominique, as her understudy, was told that she'd have to take her place. Dominique had nearly thrown up at the thought. It was one thing singing the part at rehearsals; it was quite another to actually have to perform in front of people. Her original role in the production had had nothing to do with singing at all. She'd been down to sell raffle tickets.

'Ah, don't worry about it,' said Maeve Mulligan, her best friend, as they sat backstage together. 'You're Judas, for heaven's sake. You're the villain of the piece. If you hit a wrong note, people will almost expect it of you.'

'Yeah, but they'll also know I'm not meant to.' Dominique's teeth were chattering with nerves. 'And Cara and Emma will be creased up with laughing at me.'

'They won't,' said Maeve. 'They're not that evil. Besides, they want the show to go well. They'll help you out.'

'Someone else should've been the understudy.' Dominique picked at a spot on her chin. 'You know they

only chose me for it because they try to make girls like us part of everything.'

Maeve nodded. She knew what her friend meant. The girls with the smooth skin and glossy hair were the ones who always got picked for the school plays. Everyone knew that. The others, still gawky or spotty or awkward, ended up making scenery and selling tickets, although they were trained as understudies. Most of them accepted that this was merely to make them feel good about themselves. They were never expected to have to actually perform.

'You'll be fine,' she said. 'Your voice isn't that bad anyway.'

'Nothing like Nikki's, though.'

'We'll all be rooting for you,' Maeve assured her. 'My mother has promised to clap like mad every time you open your mouth.'

Dominique smiled faintly. 'Well mine certainly won't. I'm not sure how she feels about me in this role. Judas Iscariot was hardly her favourite person.' She picked at the spot again and this time it started to bleed. 'Damn it,' she said. 'I don't want to be dripping blood all over the stage.'

'If you left them alone, they'd go,' observed Maeve.

'If I leave them alone, they multiply,' Dominique told her. 'I'll have to load on the foundation to hide them.'

Maeve grinned. 'Maybe it's because you're so spotty that they got you to understudy. You know, Judas looking a bit mean and pustular while Jesus Christ is kind of cute.'

'I'm glad you're my friend,' said Dominique grimly. 'Otherwise I'd hit you for saying that. Even if it's probably true.'

* * *