

# Talk Gertie To Me

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## ONE

*Well, this day was a total waste of make-up.*

*From The Tao of Gertie*

“Times Square. Crossroads of the world,” said Reese with a flourish of her arm as we exited the subway onto Forty-second Street. “And the only place in New York where you're guaranteed not to find a New Yorker.” She scowled at me. “Except us.”

“You're a good friend,” I told her.

“You bet I am.” We headed around the corner, shouldering our way through a crowd congregating in front of a tabletop Rolex salesman. Reese nodded toward the gullible tourist handing over two crisp twenties to the sidewalk hustler. “A sucker born every minute,” she said, loud enough for several heads to turn and stare at us. Subtlety wasn't Reese's strong suit.

I thought about the watch I bought for my father's birthday the first week I arrived in the city. Heat crept up my neck. “Not too long ago I was that sucker.”

She elbowed me in the ribs and laughed. “But we cured you. Now you're one of us.”

“Damn right.” I nodded in appreciation. “Good-bye small town Iowa naive; hello cosmopolitan New Yorker.”

“So, Miss Cosmopolitan New Yorker, explain why you dragged me to Disney World North on our lunch hour.”

When I stopped walking and indicated the restaurant to my left, she tossed back her head of multi-colored dreadlocks and groaned. “This is about Dave, isn't it?”

My goofy grin said it all. I, Nori Stedworth, was in love. Head-over-heels, butterflies-in-the-stomach, heart-pounding, walking-on-clouds, song-singing *in love* with a capital L-O-V-E. For the first time in my nearly twenty-six years as a living, breathing homo sapien.

Yes, I had been in love before. At least I thought so at the time. In hindsight, though, each of my previous relationships -- all of which could be counted on one hand with a couple of fingers to spare -- had fallen into either the Puppy Love, Infatuation, or Lust categories. Unfortunately, this revelation always dawned as I picked up the pieces of both my shattered heart and fractured ego. But I was older and wiser now; I've learned from my failures. And this time I knew beyond a shadow of doubt that it was the real thing. Love with a capital L-O-V-E.

Which explains why I had left my sanity in some subterranean cave -- or at least on the subway -- and now stood in front of AWE, the American Wrestling Enterprise theme restaurant.

“Tell me we're not going in there,” pleaded Reese.

“I have to.”

“You're not in love, girl, you're in denial. Need I remind you that you *hate* pro-wrestling?”

“True.” I'd rather run a marathon with ten ingrown toenails than sit through an hour of steroid-filled, muscle-bound men and women knocking each other's brains out.

“Then what are we doing here?”

I shrugged. “You know how much Dave loves pro-wrestling. He lives for his weekly fix of choreographed insanity. It's his one flaw.”

“One?” Reese raised both eyebrows.

I shot her a scowl. “I don't understand why the two of you don't get along.”

Reese rolled her eyes. “You want a list? Let me count the ways.”

I held up a hand to stop her. Besides Dave, I had three close friends in New York: Reese, Gabe, and my dearest friend, Suz. Other than Reese and Gabe, none of them cared for each other. Whenever I tried to get everyone together, the results were disastrous.

Last February I invited all four over for a winter doldrums party. Big mistake. Finally, in desperation I popped in a video, and for the next two hours we sat in silence, munching on popcorn, drinking wine, and watching Russell Crowe slay tigers and gladiators. After that, I gave up, resigning myself to seeing Suz without Dave, Dave without Suz, and Reese and Gabe without either Suz *or* Dave.

“Look, his birthday is coming up -- his thirtieth, and he's already dropped a number of none-too-subtle hints about *Mania and Mayhem on Broadway* .”

“I'm afraid to ask.”

“It's The Great White Way's newest offering to the culturally-challenged masses. Three hours of half-naked wrestlers prancing around the stage of the Broadhurst Theater.” Okay, I'll be the first to admit I'm a culture snob. To me, the very idea of sitting through such an evening made *The Full Monty* sound like Sophocles.

“Definitely theatrical sacrilege,” said Reese. “Rogers and Hammerstein are no doubt flip-flopping in their graves.”

I ignored her sarcasm. Reese didn't care much for Broadway, highbrow *or* lowbrow. Her tastes ran more in the direction of salsa and reggae.

“So you're going to swallow your pride and buy him tickets?”

I offered her a weak smile. “A woman in love will do most anything for her man, including throwing a tarp over her common sense.”

She greeted that confession with another groan. “And I'm here because...?”

“Moral support.” With that I grabbed her hand and dragged her into the alien universe of AWE.

Having caught glimpses of wrestling on television, I expected to find myself surrounded by insult-hurling eight-year-olds and their tattooed and pierced older counterparts. I wasn't disappointed. The room was filled with raucous diners of both sexes and all ages, shouting and cheering at the overhead television monitors as they gobbled up their meals.

Body art abounded, especially on the groups of teens gathered around many of the tables. Most of the men wore jeans and muscle shirts; most of the women wore hot pants and midriffs.

Reese glanced around the crowded room. “I think we made a wrong turn south of Saturn.”

I eyed her outfit. "You fit in better than I do." She wore black leather Escada trousers and a spaghetti strap peach silk corset-style shirt. My Ralph Lauren taupe linen suit made me stand out like a vegetarian at a pig roast.

She frowned at the overly violent scene on one of the TV monitors. "Why are we here instead of at the box office?"

"Because this is the only place you can buy tickets, thanks to some marketing genius." In a ploy that took commercialism to new heights -- or more appropriately, new lows, the producers of *Mania and Mayhem on Broadway* had chosen to make tickets available only at the AWE restaurant. And not in a separate gift shop but right in the middle of the restaurant. That way, they could tempt diehard fans into shelling out above and beyond the one hundred dollars a ticket for all sorts of merchandising accouterments, not to mention a meal. Smart move, considering the producers of the show were also the owners of the restaurant.

For twenty interminable minutes we inched our way forward in the ticket line. The sights and sounds of celebrity wrestling bombarded us from every corner of the cavernous space. From giant television monitors mounted around the perimeter of the room. From mega-watt speakers blasting play-by-play. From the raucous patrons, screaming their enthusiasm, stomping their feet, and pounding their fists as they watched their favorite testosterone jock pummel his opponent with a step ladder. The heavy odors of fried chicken, burgers, and fries saturated the air. I tried not to ogle the freak show atmosphere surrounding me; Reese openly ogled.

"Dave's going to owe me big-time," I muttered under my breath.

She smirked. "He's going to owe you big-time squared after you sit through an evening of warbling and waltzing wrestlers."

I grimaced at the monitor where one tattooed, muscle-bound jock had just bashed a folding chair over another tattooed, muscle-bound jock's head. "Not enough. Definitely big-time cubed."

"Whatcha want, gorgeous?"

Two *tickets to the ballet*? I smiled to myself. Dave hated the ballet as much as I hated pro-wrestling. Payback would come on *my* birthday.

"Hey, red, you wanna stop mooning over The Boulder's tight ass and tell me whatcha want? I ain't got all day."

"Nori." Reese nudged me out of my reverie.

That's when I realized I had made my way to the head of the line, and the thick-necked guy with the nose ring and shaved head was speaking to me. "Two tickets for next Saturday night." I handed over my credit card.

"Orchestra or balcony?"

My preference would have been balcony. Last row. Obstructed view. Reluctantly, I said, "Orchestra."

"What else?"

"That's all."

He raised one pierced eyebrow and leered at me. "They're for sale, you know."

"Excuse me?"

"The Boulder."

I glanced around. "What boulder?"

“*The Boulder*. The guy you were drooling over.” He nodded in the direction of a life-size cardboard wrestler wearing a leather vest, a matching thong, and a menacing grin. Nothing else. “You can stand him up in your bedroom and eye his assets to your heart's content.”

Heat surged up my neck and into my cheeks. “I was *not* eyeing his assets!”

“Sure you weren't, sweet cheeks.” He winked. “I can wrap him up in brown paper for you. No one'd know.”

“Just the tickets,” I said, wishing I could click my heels together and disappear. Damn. There's never a pair of ruby slippers around when you need them.

“How about a T-shirt?”

“Just the tickets!”

“Key ring? Hat? Beer mug?”

“No, no, and *no* !” I had to laugh despite myself. Did I really look like someone who would sport a snarling wrestler-emblazoned baseball cap? I glanced at the lunchtime crowd and then at the Coach wallet in my hand. I didn't belong in this place. I wasn't one of *them*. Was I the only one who saw the incongruity here? I turned back to the clerk, who despite all appearances to the contrary, obviously mistook me for a fan, and shook my head. “Just the tickets, please.”

He refused to give up. “What about something for your friend?” he asked, motioning to Reese.

“No thanks,” she said. “I gave up wrestling for Lent.”

He shrugged and ran my card. “Enjoy the show,” he said, handing me an envelope after I signed the credit slip and passed it back to him.

“Oh, yeah. Definitely.”

“What some people won't do for love,” said Reese as we exited the world of wrestlemania.

I felt the need to defend my beloved. “Look, other than this one little Neanderthal throwback penchant, Dave Manning is everything a girl could hope for.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. He's a drop-dead gorgeous hunk with a great sense of humor.”

“I'll grant you the hunk. The jury's still out on the sense of humor.”

“And he has a promising career as an up-and-coming dermatologist. He's poised to take over his father's practice when Dr. Manning retires next year.”

“Aha! So it's really about his money.”

“No, of course not.”

She elbowed me. “But it doesn't hurt, right?”

“Okay, I'll admit the money's a nice bonus, but it's more than money. Dave has class.”

She screwed up her face. “You're confusing class with Upper East Side snobbery.”

Even though I knew I'd never convince her, I tried to explain. “He knows how to dress.”

“Big deal. My four-year-old nephew knows how to dress himself.”

“Not dress himself. Dress correctly. And it *is* a big deal. At least to me.”

“Okay, I guess I can understand, given the last guy you dated.”

“Don't remind me.” I cringed at the memory of Ethan Fried showing up in a T-shirt and cut-offs for a co-worker's engagement party at the Plaza.

“Let's get down to what really counts,” said Reese. “How's the sex?”

“Shh!” I glanced around to see if anyone had heard her, but the crowd passing around us remained oblivious to our conversation. Still, I couldn't contain my grin. “Let's just say on that score alone I could forgive Dave his fascination with wrestling *and* a hundred other annoying habits - - ”

“Aha!”

“*If* he had any.”

Reese shook her head. “Love is blind.”

“Not blind. Open-minded. It enables me to grin and bear my way around the wrestling.”

“And what do you get in return for all your altruism?”

I exhaled in exasperation. “Honestly, Reese, you make love sound like a list of debits and credits that have to be balanced out at the end of the day. Dave loves me. That's all that counts. Besides,” I beamed at her, “with any luck, a freak tornado will descend on New York and decimate The Broadhurst Theater prior to next Saturday night.”

Reese erupted in laughter. “Talk about grasping at straws.”

I shrugged. “Hey, a girl can hope, can't she?”