

Chapter 1
(Unwritten) Rule No. 5 of the Gibbons Family Handbook:

Family always comes first—while men come somewhere between shoes and handbags.

He’s amazing!”

“I know! Isn’t he brilliant?”

“The show is wonderful! Just wonderful!”

If they only knew, Dawn Gibbons thought as she glanced around the crowded gallery.

She looked at the people strolling throughout the exhibition space, at the couples who stared at the canvases on the exposed brick walls and nodded in appreciation, and she wanted to give herself a toast. She hadn’t thought she would be able to pull this off, considering the limited amount of time she had to organize this exhibition, considering how much arm twisting she had to do to get tonight’s featured artist to just pick up a paintbrush and *paint something!* But she had done it. Despite all the obstacles she had faced, tonight had been a resounding success. Dawn didn’t toast herself, but she downed what was left of her Moët & Chandon and smiled.

“Great work, darling!” said Percy, the gallery’s owner, in his British accent as he sailed toward her.

He was wearing a leather jacket and faded jeans today—an outfit that was much too young for a man his age. His thinning gray hair was pulled back with a rubber band, leaving a knobby stub of hair at the end. The three top buttons of his silk shirt were open, revealing the wiry hairs on his pale chest. He wrapped a skinny arm around Dawn’s waist and gave her an affectionate squeeze.

“Thanks, Percy.” She wrinkled her nose at the overpowering smell of his cologne and nodded. “It did turn out well, didn’t it?”

“We should go somewhere after the show and celebrate, darling,” he whispered warmly as he leaned toward her ear. The smell of his cologne became five times stronger. The heat of his breath on her cheek almost singed her. “Maybe you’ll finally let me take you out to dinner.” His hand descended from her waist to her ass. He petted it gently—like he would a purring kitten—and winked one of his blue eyes at her. “What do you say?”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that.” She slowly removed Percy’s hand from her bottom. “But thank you for the offer.”

Percy was one of the few rich men in Dawn’s social circle whom she hadn’t dated, and quite frankly, she didn’t have any plans to ever date him. He was her boss! Her art and her work as gallery director were more important to her. Unfortunately, Percy wasn’t accustomed to women turning him down, which probably made him even more eager to get her to dinner and finally get into her pants. She was a challenge to him now, the Mt. Everest that he had yet to climb. But she desperately wished he would take his mountain boots and pick and climb somewhere else.

“I should go around the room and mingle.” Dawn patted his arm soothingly, hoping to soften the blow of her rejection. “You know, make sure everyone is enjoying themselves and—more importantly—buying the artwork.”

“Yes. Yes, of course, darling.” His smile tightened, barely masking his disappointment. “Mingle! Mingle! Don’t let me keep you.”

She turned and walked away, handing off her empty glass to one of the waiters who strolled around the room with Lucite trays covered with hors d’oeuvres and champagne glasses.

Her sister Lauren's restaurant Le Bayou Bleu was catering the event with Southern-style, high-end cuisine that all the patrons couldn't seem to get enough of. In fact, she heard whispers from the staff that they were dangerously close to running out of food.

Lauren couldn't be here tonight herself to supervise. She was still on maternity leave and was at home with her infant son, Crisanto Jr., but Dawn's other two sisters had shown their support by coming to the event. Her very pregnant sister, Stephanie, had waddled through an hour ago. She had purchased one of the smaller pieces on display before leaving the gallery with a mouthful of shrimp. Dawn's eldest sister Cynthia had left fifteen minutes later. She said she had a date with a very wealthy construction company owner and had to run home to change clothes.

"He's handsome, charming, and he pulled in seven figures last year, girl. You never know," Cynthia had remarked. "He could be *the* one!"

By "*the* one" Dawn assumed Cynthia really meant number three, since this would be Cynthia's *third* husband if she managed to get this one down the aisle. Though, truth be told, Dawn had little room to talk herself. She had been married twice before also, continuing the long tradition in her family of women who married often and divorced just as frequently. But unlike Cynthia, Dawn had little interest in finding a third husband.

Dawn had been doing some soul-searching and self-examination lately with all the changes that were going on around her. Two of her sisters had fallen in love. One had recently had a baby and the other had one on the way. Dawn felt like she had reached a point in her life when obtaining a rich husband wasn't as important to her anymore. Besides, rich men were a lot like the temperamental artists whose work she featured at her gallery. They both required coddling and their egos had to be constantly fed. She didn't have time to cater to both right now.

Dawn continued her path across the gallery, adjusting the cowl neck of her maroon top and the hem of her asymmetrical wool skirt as she went.

“Congratulations, dearest,” said Madison McGuire, a small-town girl who made good by marrying one of the most powerful lobbyists in Washington, D.C. Now the wealthy D.C. socialite patronized the local art scene.

“Thank you for coming, Maddie!” Dawn said, leaning forward and lightly kissing the air beside Maddie’s rouged cheek.

“Oh, I wouldn’t miss it for the world!” Maddie exclaimed. She took a sip from the champagne glass. “The exhibit is fascinating . . . and of course, I have to do my research!”

“*Research?* You know, a little birdie told me that you’re thinking about buying Sawyer Gallery, but I wasn’t sure if that was just a rumor.”

Maddie laughed. “Oh, it’s not a rumor. I can assure you of that! Martin Sawyer is ready to move on to a new venture, and I told him I’d happily take the gallery off his hands. We signed the paperwork a month ago. I plan to hold our grand opening sometime in the spring.” She leaned toward Dawn and whispered, “Do you think you would be interested in changing venues? I’d love to have you at the helm of my gallery.”

Dawn glanced across the room at Percy, who was idly groping some bouncy young blonde as he stood among a circle of friends.

Maddie’s offer was certainly tempting. Unlike with Percy, Dawn wouldn’t have to worry about Maddie patting her ass and trying to seduce her on a weekly basis. Plus, Dawn had always admired Maddie. If there was nothing a Gibbons girl loved more, it was a fellow woman who used her wiles and her wits to climb the socioeconomic ladder, a woman who knew how to “get her hustle on” but to do it with grace and style.

But Dawn liked the control Percy gave her over the gallery. She loved her staff. She was comfortable here.

Dawn sighed. "I don't think I would, Maddie, but thank you for the offer."

Maddie glanced in Percy's direction. He and the blonde were now making kissy faces at each other, making Dawn cringe.

"Are you *sure*?" Maddie asked again. "I heard Percy can be quite the handful."

You have no idea, Dawn thought. She hesitated then nodded. "I'm sure."

"Oh, well. It was worth a try." Maddie waved her hand. "Always good to see you, Dawn."

"You too," Dawn replied, continuing to make her way across the cavernous space. She stopped now and then to talk to and kiss the cheeks of a few patrons, but she soon noticed two men she hadn't seen before. They were standing near one of the floor-to-ceiling canvases on the far side of the gallery. They drew her attention because their staid business attire made them stand out like sore thumbs from the rest of the flamboyantly dressed art crowd.

The shorter of the two stood in front of one of the paintings, gazing at it admiringly. The elderly gentleman was dark-skinned and very distinguished looking with his navy blazer, tan slacks, white dress shirt, and penny loafers. He leaned his weight against a bamboo cane as he bent forward to read the plaque near the painting.

Beside him was a man who was almost a foot taller and was several decades younger. He was less engrossed in the artwork than his companion. Instead, he stared in amazement at the people in the gallery as if he were watching circus performers. His honey-colored skin and short dark hair was in striking contrast to his pale gray eyes that she could see distinctly even at this distance. He was handsome, though a little too straitlaced for her taste.

Accountant? she thought as she scanned his perfect black suit, sensible blue tie, and starched white shirt. *No, he's probably an actuary, I bet. Any person who dresses that boring has to be in insurance.*

She slowly walked toward them. Boring or not, they could be prospective buyers—wealthy suburbanites with a lot of cash to spend who wanted to impress their friends with the discovery of a hot new artist.

“Hello,” Dawn said. She extended her hand. “My name is Dawn Gibbons. Is this your first time at our gallery?”

She offered her hand to the older gentleman first. He hesitated before taking it.

“Hello,” he said softly, finally shaking her hand. His wrinkled face filled with warmth. “It’s a . . . a pleasure to finally meet you, Dawn,” he began nervously. “I-I had debated on coming here tonight. I couldn’t work up the nerve at first until my friend, Xavier, here,” he nodded toward the younger man who stood silently at his side, “agreed to come with me. But I really wanted to . . . Oh, listen to me ramble. I should introduce myself first.” He cleared his throat. “My . . . My name is Herbert Allen.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Allen.” She nodded in greeting. “Thank you for coming to our gallery.” She pointed toward the painting. “So tell me, are you interested in this piece?”

He paused and gazed at her quizzically. “You’ve . . . you’ve never heard of me before?”

Dawn’s smile faded. She shook her head. “No, I’m sorry. I haven’t.”

He looked deflated.

Now put on the spot, Dawn quickly flipped through her mental Rolodex, trying to recall the name, Herbert Allen, but she came up with a blank. She hoped he wasn’t someone important. Percy would be royally PO’d if he found out she had offended one of his friends.

Suddenly, something came to mind. She snapped her fingers. “Oh, I remember now! I’m so sorry. Tonight has been so crazy and I’ve been so frazzled!” She laughed and patted his shoulder, turning back on the charm. “Herbert Allen. Yes, I remember. We met at the spring benefit last year, didn’t we?”

He and the younger man exchanged a look. He then shook his head. “No, we didn’t meet at a spring benefit. In fact, we’ve never met before. I had . . . I had hoped your mother had mentioned me, at least.” He shrugged. “But I guess not.”

Dawn frowned. “My mother?”

He took a deep breath and gazed into her eyes. “I’m your father, Dawn.”

“*What?*” Her gaze shifted between the two men. “I’m sorry. Is . . . is this some kind of a joke?”

“No, it’s not a joke. I really am your father.”

He took a step toward her and she took a hesitant step back, trying desperately to process what she was hearing.

“Dawn, I wanted to have a chance to—”

“Wait. Wait! Stop! Back up!” She held up her hands. Her heart thudded like a snare drum in her chest. “What are you talking about? What do you mean you’re my father? I . . .” She took a deep breath, fighting to regain her calm. “I haven’t seen or heard from my father in thirty-seven years and you . . . you just show up out of the blue like this! You just blurt this out!”

His eyes lowered to the hardwood floor. “I know and I’m sorry. I didn’t want to do it this way, but I don’t have—”

“No!” She furiously shook her head. “No, I’m not . . . I’m not doing this.”

Dawn turned around and walked away from him. She angrily strode toward the gallery's revolving glass doors, ignoring the curious stares that followed her as she passed. She felt as if she had been ambushed. Was he really her father? If so, why did he choose tonight of all nights to announce himself? Why hadn't he picked up a phone and called? Couldn't he have sent a letter? This was ridiculous! She was practically trembling with anger and confusion. She had to get out of there.

"Darling, where are you going?" Percy called after her, but she ignored him.

Dawn stepped into the gallery's foyer. It was decorated for the holiday season with garlands, holly, and twinkling Christmas lights, but she certainly wasn't in the holiday mood right now. Just before she reached the doors, she felt a strong hand clamp around her wrist. She whipped her head around and looked up. When she did, she was staring into the gray eyes of the wannabe actuary. His warm touch and gaze instantly made her tingle, catching her by surprise. It was a feeling she didn't want right now. She yanked her wrist out of his grasp.

"Can you hear him out?" he asked. "It took a lot of courage for him to come here tonight!"

"*Courage?*" She glared up at him. "Is that what you call it? Why didn't he find that same damn courage ten or twenty years ago? Where the hell has he been all this time? Why is he doing this here? Why *now?*"

His stern expression softened and once again she was struck by how handsome he was.

"Look, Herb knows that he hasn't been the best father to you. Believe me. But your mother didn't exactly make it easy for him these past years."

Dawn narrowed her eyes at the mention of her mother. She crossed her arms over her chest. "*Excuse me?*"

“Look, all that it’ll take is ten minutes of your time. He came all this way. Just . . . Just let him explain himself. Please? He has a lot that he would like to get off his chest and he doesn’t have much time left to do it.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“Your father is sick, Dawn. He has cancer . . . and the prognosis isn’t good.”

Dawn’s arms dropped to her sides. She stared at him in disbelief.

God, this was a lot to take in! Here she was in the middle of an exhibition and her apparent long-lost father had suddenly popped up out of nowhere, and now she had the added shock of finding out he was dying from cancer. What was she going to find out next? That a spaceship had landed outside the gallery? Dawn closed her eyes and raised her hands to her now-throbbing temples. She desperately wished her sisters were here. She could use one of their shoulders to lean on right now.

“Will you give him a chance?” wannabe actuary asked quietly. “Hear what he has to say?”

Dawn opened her eyes. She was still furious, but part of her worried that she would regret this moment if she walked out the gallery and didn’t come back.

“Fine.”

She then walked back across the gallery with wannabe actuary trailing behind her.

As she crossed the room, she examined the older man more closely. He had skin the same shade as her own and large dark eyes she could have easily inherited. Those dark eyes now gazed at her worriedly.

Her mother had never talked about her father—or any of Dawn’s sisters’ fathers, for that matter.

“As long as he takes care of his financial obligations to you, what difference does it make whether you see him?” Yolanda Gibbons would ask when her daughters were younger and they openly wondered why they had not received so much as a birthday card or telephone call from any their fathers. “*We’re* important,” Yolanda would insist. “Not a man who knows absolutely nothing about you.”

Though Dawn had longed for her father in her younger years, she had gradually accepted her mother’s opinion on the issue as she got older. If Dawn’s father really had cared, he would have tried to contact her. He would have moved heaven and earth to let her know he wanted her and loved her. Now as she watched the man claiming to be her father take uncertain steps toward her, she knew there was no real explanation he could offer for his absence all these years. But she would listen. She would give him his ten minutes then send him on his way.

“Thank you for coming back,” he said gently. He leaned most of his weight on his cane. “I apologize for how I did this. I didn’t want to tell you this over the phone, and I didn’t know how to—”

“Not here,” she said firmly, cutting him off. “We can talk in my office.”

She walked around him and led him toward a corridor filled with a series of rooms at the back of the gallery. She paused at her office door and turned. “In here,” she said, motioning toward the doorway.

He glanced up at the younger man.

“I’ll take it from here, Xavier,” he said. “Thank you.”

Xavier looked at Herbert, then at Dawn. Their eyes met. She cocked her eyebrow in challenge. Was he going to insist he come along?

After some time, Xavier finally nodded. “Okay, I’ll . . . I’ll wait here.”

Herbert continued down the corridor.

“But call me if you need me!” Xavier shouted out to him.

Herbert nodded and waved him away. “Don’t worry. I’ll be fine.”

“Is he your bodyguard or something?” she whispered when Herbert stood next to her.

She still eyed the actuary guardedly. He equally scrutinized her from the other end of the hall.

“Close,” Herbert said with a soft chuckle. “He’s my lawyer . . . well, corporate counsel for my company.”

Lawyer, huh?

Well, she guessed he wasn’t an actuary after all.

Dawn ushered Herbert into her small eight- by eight-foot office and shut the door behind him. She had kept the space simple in its décor with an industrial design desk and leather chairs. A bookshelf was on the right wall. The only adornment in the office was the several paintings by the gallery’s many artists and a few works of hers.

“Have a seat,” she said, gesturing to one of the chairs opposite her desk.

She sat down in her rollaway desk chair and watched as he carefully lowered himself into his. When he sat down, he let out a barely stifled groan.

He does look sick, she thought as she looked at his slightly ashen face.

“Dawn,” he began, “I understand that you’re angry with me, but I didn’t want to put this off another day. I’ve been putting off coming to see you for weeks now.”

“Why?”

He lowered his eyes. “Because I know it’s something I should have done years ago and I feel like such a . . . such a bastard for taking so long to do it, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart? It was odd hearing a stranger call her that.

He hesitated. “When you were a little girl, I had thought about seeing you. But your mother and I did not part amicably, to be honest. I allowed my feelings toward your mother to taint whatever possibility we had of developing a relationship. I was . . . I was wrong for doing that.”

Dawn didn’t say anything in response. What was there to say?

“I didn’t find out about you until after you were born,” he continued. “My lawyer at the time got a letter from your mother stating that she had a baby and that she was seeking child support. I was . . .” He paused again. “I was very shocked . . . and angry. You see, Yolanda and I hadn’t dated for very long.”

“Long enough to make a baby, though,” Dawn interjected, leaning back in her chair.

“That is true. I’m not denying that. But again, we had dated only briefly. We were together for only a month or so and then I was transferred to my company’s satellite office in Europe. I never got the chance to really know her. Then my lawyer found out a bit more about her . . . her background. The marriages . . . How she dated wealthy men almost exclusively. When I found out, I felt . . . manipulated . . . *duped*, in a way. Like she had used my affections and—”

“*Trapped you?*” Dawn finished for him. She rolled her eyes. “Look, if you’re here to talk shit about my mom, we can end this conversation right now.” She began to rise from her chair.

“Thank you, Mr. Allen, for your visit, but—”

“No, no! That’s not what I intended. I just . . .” He took a deep breath. “I just wanted you to know why I did what I did. There’s no excuse for it, but that was my thinking at the time. Please, Dawn. Please sit down.”

Her nostrils flared. She slowly lowered herself to her seat, crossed her legs, and adjusted the hem of her skirt.

“Sweetheart, I didn’t come here to insult your mother or to make you angry. I came here to try to make amends. I’m not well. I have . . . I have prostate cancer, and despite my doctors’ best efforts, it’s . . . it’s spread.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said quietly, and she meant it.

He cleared his throat. “When you’re faced with an illness, you start to reexamine your life and the mistakes you’ve made. Not building a relationship with you was one of my biggest mistakes, and I would like to rectify that if I can.”

“How?”

“I’d like to get to know you, Dawn, and to spend time with you, if you will allow it. Maybe we can have dinner together or spend a day or two together. Whatever you would like to do, I’m willing to do it.”

Dawn closed her eyes again. She didn’t want to be cruel, but this was too much, *way* too much. She hadn’t even known this man existed until fifteen minutes ago. Now he wanted to build a relationship. She opened her eyes.

“Maybe. But can I . . . can I take some time to think about this?”

He gazed at her for a long time then finally nodded. “Sure, I understand.”

But he didn’t look like he understood. He looked disappointed.

Dawn rose from her chair and he followed suit. She walked him to her office door. When she opened the door, he turned and looked at her.

“Even . . . even if we don’t see one another again, Dawn, it was a pleasure to finally meet you,” he said, offering her his hand.

She shook it. “It was a pleasure to meet you too, Mr. Allen.”

He gave a small smile. “Please, you don’t have to call me Dad, but at least call me Herb.”

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Herb.”

He opened his jacket and handed her a business card. “If you do wish to meet again, here is my number. I do hope . . . I do hope to hear from you, Dawn. I sincerely do.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking his card.

She watched as he stepped into the corridor. He was still gazing at her as she shut the door behind him. When the lock clicked, she fell against the wooden slab and let out a pent-up breath she didn’t know she had been holding all this time.