Chapter 1

So, You’re 50 and Apparently Vintage

At seven twenty on the morning of your fiftieth birthday, your daughter comes into the kitchen wearing a shirt you last saw on your sister in 1995.

You have a mouthful of toast. This gives you a moment to consider the possibility that other people also owned black Cranberries tour shirts. Thousands of people, probably. An entire arena full of them.

Then Emma reaches into the cabinet for a mug, and there it is under her left arm: a crooked little white star, embroidered over a cigarette burn by a girl who had told her mother, quite firmly, that nobody smoked at those concerts.

You swallow.

“Where’d you get that?”

Emma glances down. “Morning to you, too.”

“Good morning, honey. Where’d you get that?”

“Vintage store on Oak. Why?”

She pours coffee into the mug that says WORLD’S OKAYEST AUNT. Your sister gave you that, too. Considering what she owes you, she has a nerve.

“I used to have a shirt like that.”

“Yeah, they made more than one, Mom.”

“I’m aware. I was there when they sold them.”

Emma leans against the counter. She’s seventeen, old enough to enjoy your stories on the condition that you’re telling them to somebody else.

“The little star,” you say. “Let me see the back of it.”

She lifts her arm. You turn the sleeve inside out. The embroidery looks pretty good from the front. From the back it looks like somebody tried to strangle a spider with dental floss.

“Oh, my God,” you say. “I did that.”

“You sewed this?”

“Four times. The first three stars had six points.”

She examines the stitches with considerably more interest than she has ever shown in anything you’ve mended for her.

“The guy at the store said it was a custom detail.”

“Well. He’s right.”

She tells you what she paid. Thirty-eight dollars. You put down your toast.

“Including tax?”

“Why is that the part you care about?”

Because you remember what it took to buy that shirt the first time. Two Friday nights watching the Miller twins. One of them had recently learned that if you put a wet Cheerio against the television screen, it would stay there until an adult peeled it off. By the end of the second Friday, you'd earned every thread.

You wore the shirt all summer. In August your younger sister, Julie, asked to borrow it for a date with a boy named Brad who drove a brown car with one green door. You said yes, as long as you got it back by Sunday.

You pick up your phone.

Julie answers over the sound of running water. "Happy birthday! I was gonna call you."

"Where's my Cranberries shirt?"

The water stops.

After thirty-one years, you find that silence deeply satisfying.

"Oh, hell," she says.

Emma pulls out a chair.

Julie remembers borrowing the shirt. She also remembers that Brad threw up behind a miniature golf course, a detail you could have lived without. As for the shirt itself, she thought she gave it back.

“You came home in it,” you tell her. “I remember because you got into bed with me.”

“Did I?”

“You said you were never dating again.”

“Well, I certainly should’ve stuck with that for a while.”

The two of you had shared a room until you were sixteen. After you got your own, she still came in whenever anything went seriously wrong. First heartbreak. Bad haircut. The afternoon she backed your mother’s car over a sprinkler head and created a small municipal fountain. You’d lift the blanket and move over. Usually she brought pretzels.

Emma’s still listening. You realize she’s never heard most of these stories. To her, Julie has always been Aunt Julie, a woman who carries stain-remover wipes in three different scents. She has no idea that this same woman once came through a bathroom window holding her shoes in her teeth.

“Ask her if she wants to know where I found it,” Emma says.

You put Julie on speaker.

“Was there a whole rack of them?” Julie asks.

“It was on a mannequin in the window.”

You look at your daughter. “My shirt was in a window?”

“With these awful silver pants. I made him take it off the mannequin. He didn’t want to. He said the window was a whole thing.”

Julie lets out the snort you remember from the other bed. “You know what, Em? Your mom made a guy take that shirt off a display, too.”

And suddenly you can see it. The merchandise table folding in the middle. The shirt hanging on the wall behind a college kid with a strip of duct tape stuck to his jeans. He had one left, and he didn’t feel like climbing up there to get it.

You’d stood with your cash in your hand until he did.

“Really?” Emma asks.

“Really,” you say.

She and Julie start discussing how the shirt might have ended up on Oak Street. Best guess, a box from Grandma’s basement. Julie promises to reimburse Emma thirty-eight dollars, which is more financial responsibility than she ever demonstrated in the actual nineties.