



# Seat 6

A Short Story

by D'Ann Mateer

## Seat 6

Out of habit, Rena set her purse in Seat 6, Row K, Section C, Orchestra. Henry had always lingered outside until the lights flickered to signal curtain time, and even though he had his ticket for his seat, she always put her purse there to save it for him anyway. With a heavy sigh, Rena picked up her purse and sat in Seat 5. She crossed her ankles and arranged her skirt—the last one Henry had bought for her.

Looking across the aisle, she waved to Mrs. Wilson, alone as well. She glanced two rows behind. A young couple she had never seen before sat in Grace and Bill Garamond's seats. Was that Helen Porter at the end of the next row? The woman turned her head and Rena knew it was not.

Rena sighed again and opened her *Playbill*, skipping to the donor listings. Her eyes scanned first one page, then the next. In almost the exact center of the three columns listing Friends of the Theater (\$500+), she found it: Mr. and Mrs. Henry Masters. She let her wrinkled finger rest there a moment before turning back to "Who's Who in the Cast" and reading the accomplishments of today's actors.

People moved around her, filling the plush red seats. She remembered the days when she would have greeted each one with a smile, a handshake, a kiss on the cheek. They would laugh and chat of mundane things. They'd attended evening performances then, complete with sparkling evening clothes and fancy dinners beforehand. Their one splurge in an otherwise normal existence. When Henry retired, they switched to the matinee. Now, ten years later, she sat alone.

The lights flickered, then dimmed. Rena closed her *Playbill* and slipped it into her purse. Just as the orchestra rumbled and the last of the light faded, someone slid into Seat 6—Henry’s seat. She flinched then scolded herself. Henry’s seat had to be sold this season, but something in her had wished it to remain empty. A selfish wish, she decided, as she forced focus to the rising curtain. As always, the scene on stage caught Rena’s attention and she let herself become absorbed in another world.

As soon as the lights rose for intermission, Rena stood. Her purse fell to the floor, its sparse contents scattering.

“Oh, dear,” she muttered as she sat down again, leaning over to gather her things. When she reached to her left for her lipstick case, her hand brushed another.

“May I help?”

Rena sat up and looked over. The man in Henry’s seat smiled, but the intense sorrow behind his eyes startled her.

“Yes, thank you. I’m so clumsy these days.”

He handed her the lipstick case before retrieving her *Playbill* from beneath the seat in front of him. She stuffed her package of Kleenex back into her purse before gathering the stash of hard candy strewn beneath her feet.

Rena smiled at him as she took her *Playbill* from his hand and their fingers brushed once more. His crisp khaki slacks and button-down shirt stood out amidst the sea of old men in Sans-a-belt pants. His gray hair and faint smell of Old Spice opened again an intense longing for Henry to be at her side. She stood and excused herself, purse

firmly in hand, hoping she had time to make it to the ladies' room before intermission ended.

Complete with fresh lipstick, Rena headed back into the throng of theater goers, surprised at her pang of loneliness. The anticipation of returning to her seat slowed her. Which was worse—an empty seat or a stranger where Henry should be?

When she reached the bottom of the main staircase, she instinctively looked left. Henry had always waited there for her during intermission, his eyes already on her, no matter who stood talking with him. Lost in her reverie, Rena had to blink twice when she realized there was indeed a man standing there looking at her!

The deep blue eyes held unmistakable appreciation and admiration—the same look she had seen for over 50 years in Henry's brown eyes. Again, she noted the deep well of sorrow in the man who sat in Henry's seat now.

“Hello.” He stepped away from the wall and walked with her through the crowded foyer. “Would you like something to drink?”

“No, thank you. I—” She felt herself wobble but the man caught her elbow and steadied her. “Thank you—again. Mister. . . ?”

“Agee. Larry Agee.”

“I'm Rena Masters. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Agee.”

They walked in silence until they reached row K and reclaimed their seats. Mr. Agee fidgeted with his *Playbill* then leaned toward her.

“Do you come to these things much?” His hesitation reminded Rena of a little boy, lost.

“Oh, yes. We’ve had season tickets for many years. And you?”

“No.” He looked away and cleared his throat. When he spoke again, his eyes remained on the empty stage before them, and his body stiffened. “Every year I told Martha we’d come.” His jaw clenched, then loosened. “I even bought her season tickets—first row balcony, I think.” He shrugged. “She always came with our daughter, or a friend.”

Rena reached out and touched his arm. “And now she isn’t here, is that it? You wish you could go back and do it over again?”

Mr. Agee nodded and brushed at an invisible piece of lint on his pants.

Rena pulled her hand away and played with the zipper of her purse, her eyes absorbed in its movement. “I can understand something of what you feel.” She hesitated a moment, gathering her thoughts and quelling her emotions before clasping her hands together in her lap and continuing. “This is the first play of the first season without my Henry. Giving up his seat felt like losing him all over again. We had seats 5 and 6 for many happy years.”

The lights flickered then dimmed. The music swelled; the curtain rose. Rena tried to lose herself once more in the world on stage, but she found her heart twisting as she caressed her glorious memories and imagined the pain of Mr. Agee’s regret.

She applauded with enthusiasm when the final curtain fell; she always did, even when the performance was mediocre. She glanced beside her to see Mr. Agee slumped in his seat, his head bowed. As she stood, she leaned toward him. “I’m sure she’s glad you came.”

When the applause ended and the lights blazed again, Rena turned to make her way out of the theater. Mr. Agee's hand on her arm stopped her.

“Will you be here for the next one? I mean, this is your regular seat, correct?” His eyes searched hers in desperation.

Rena nodded.

He took a deep breath, regaining his former composure before he spoke. “I'm not sure I could do this again. But knowing someone like you will be here . . .”

Rena's eyes glistened with unshed tears as she smiled into his hurt gaze and covered his hand with her own. “I understand completely. I'm glad to know there will be someone here to fill Henry's seat.”

After giving his hand a slight squeeze, Rena eased into the exiting masses.