

The Final Arrangement

Chapters 1-3

by

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CHAPTER ONE

There was nothing unusual about the beginning of the day they found the Vulture dead. I arrived at work at two minutes to nine, which is completely usual. Rosie's Posies, a flower shop, opens at nine a.m., and I am not an early riser. I'm not Rosie either. My name is Quinella McKay, Quincy to anyone who knows what's good for them. I'm Rosie's niece.

I took over my aunt's flower shop in northern Utah when she decided to travel the world. It happened to be at the same time that I needed a job. And a car, and a life. I got two out of three—the white zombie delivery van didn't do much for the getting-a-life part.

So there I stood that morning, struggling to unlock the front door. Nothing unusual about that, either. The ancient key was so ground down that part of my daily ritual included doing the unlocking dance while cars buzzed past on the busy intersection in front of my corner shop.

The hot exhaust belching from commuter cars accentuated waves of heat broiling off of the asphalt of the parking lot. Just before I finally muscled the key far enough to tumble the lock, I heard the phone inside the shop ring. The hand not turning the key held a giant Coke; another of the regular props in the opening dance, and off of that same arm dangled a tote bag. The bag was big enough to carry a small child and weighed about the same. Something at the bottom of it vibrated and chimed in alternating syncopation with the phone in the shop. It sounded a lot like my cell phone ring-tone. Using the key as a handle, I pulled the door open and stumbled into my store.

A wave of heat slapped me in the face as I continued in. The acrid smell of dried leaves and stems hung in the air. Apparently the air conditioner wasn't working properly—not unusual at all. I let the bag drop to the floor, probably crushing the cell phone and sprinted to the telephone on the back wall of the design room, the drink clutched in one hand. I tripped over a potted azalea left too close to the walkway but managed to keep my precious elixir of energy from spilling while I regained balance.

I slowed just long enough to put the drink on the design table then finished the race to the phone counter. I lifted the receiver and croaked out, “Rosie’s Posies, how may I help you?”

“Hi, Quincy,” Danny Barnes said in a chirpy voice. He was my nearest competitor and oddly enough, one of my closest friends. “Sorry to call in the busy morning but *O.M.G.*, have you heard?” Years of conditioning made it impossible for anyone brought up like Danny or me, as Mormons in Utah, to utter

the phrase “Oh my God.” This just wasn’t done. One could say, “Oh my gosh,” “Oh my heck,” or even go as far as to say, “Oh my hell,” when provoked, but never the forbidden phrase. Given the choice of either saying it or slamming my fingers in the car door, I’d choose the latter. The discomfort would be shorter lived.

“Did I hear what?”

“Oh this is big, this is so big, My Fair Lady. You haven’t heard about Derrick?”

“Derrick—oh, you mean, flower Derrick, Derrick the hated, Derrick the Vulture?”

“Yes, yes that Derrick.”

“What, is he selling flowers to all of the wedding reception centers in the state now too?”

Derrick Gibbons, the Vulture, had been responsible for the near death of my business, about a year before. Mysteriously, he emerged as the sole provider of all sympathy flowers to mortuaries in the entire area. At the same time, the flow of referrals from said mortuaries stopped coming my direction, which obliterated half of my sales.

“I haven’t heard anything. I just got here.” I glanced up at the clock on the fresh-grass-green-painted wall. “In fact, can I call you back later?”

“No! You have to hear this!”

“Wow. Okay, you were telling me about Derrick...” I wedged the phone between my chin and shoulder and switched on the nearby computer and printer.

“They just found him—at the mortuary—dead as a doornail.”

“What?”

“I know! Can you believe it?” Danny asked me as if we were gossiping about something as mundane as the ugly arrangements at Joanne’s Flower Basket.

“Wait...what?”

“No, it gets better. They found him—on display—in a casket—in the chapel—just like it was a regular viewing. And—are you ready for this—there were flowers on top of the casket.”

“You are shitting me!” I forgot my customer language filter.

“I know. A fully arranged casket spray right there on top of the casket. I am stunned. I’m stunned! Absolutely speechless,” he lied, seeing as how Danny has never been speechless a day in his life.

I absolutely *was* speechless for a moment.

“Danny, you’re being totally serious right now. You’re not joking?”

“I am not joking!” His voice increased in pitch at the end of his sentence sounding like an old-fashioned train whistle.

As I stood at the phone counter, I thought I should be feeling some kind of sadness, or at the very least feeling sorry for the Vulture. But the only thing I could think of was his overly tanned face lying in a casket with pasty, two-shades-too-white mortician’s make-up spackled on.

“Danny, how do you know any of this?”

“Well, you didn’t hear it from me, but, I sent my delivery driver to the mortuary early this morning to pick up a rental piece we used for an arrangement

a week ago that we need to use tonight for an enDerrickment party. You know, the pillar with the cherub holding the bowl that I use for my waterfall design collection?”

For Danny, unwinding a good piece of gossip was an art form not unlike creating a beautiful one-of-a-kind floral masterpiece. A complicated design that must be carefully crafted, each stem thoughtfully considered before being placed, each detail delicately, yet purposefully described. I could just see his hands waving and imitating the flow of water cascading from the top of a cliff to the ground below while he talked.

“Isn’t it ironic that we used the piece for a funeral one day and now we’re using it for a wedding?”

“Danny! Dead Derrick—casket spray—mortuary—remember?”

“Oh, sorry. Anyway, my driver went to pick it up, and there were cop cars and flashing lights everywhere. So he calls me on the cell and says they’ve got the place blocked off and there’s no way he’s getting in. So I called the mortuary to tell them it isn’t bad enough they have to whore themselves out to Derrick the Vulture, who doesn’t even own a shop in our city, but they also have to inconvenience me and my staff and my customers by keeping my property hostage. I told them I would send them a bill to cover the delivery charge of having my driver return repeatedly, and that they would be charged a fee for every hour I am delayed in retrieving my property.” He stopped talking and I heard the rush of air he sucked into his depleted lungs.

Of course I knew about one third of what he had just told me was the actual story; the rest was Danny's usual flourish.

"The secretary apologized for my inconvenience and told me there had been an accident. So, I called my brother and asked him to give me the scoop."

Danny's brother was a county sheriff's deputy, and at six foot three, weighing in at about three bills, he was Danny's polar opposite. While the sheriff brother spends his days off hunting and camping, the florist brother barely breaks the six-foot barrier, is very trim and put together, and he wouldn't be caught in public with as much as a wrinkle in his shirt or a hair out of place. Danny would rather die than wear camouflage.

"What all did your brother say?"

"Mostly what I've already told you about them finding the Vulture there at the mortuary in the coffin and the flowers. He really shouldn't have told me anything. That's why you didn't hear it from me."

"Were they his?" I knew Danny knew exactly what *they* I was talking about.

"Kevin doesn't know a tulip from a daisy, so I doubt he would know who made the casket spray. Besides, aren't you curious about how Derrick got there? I mean, I think he was processed and prepped like one of their customers."

The other line on my phone started ringing.

"Dang it! I've got to go, Danny, I'll call you later."

As much as I would have liked to gossip all day, I needed to run a business. I punched the button for the other line before Danny had a chance to reply.

“Rosie’s Posies, how may I help you today?”

“Oh, so you *are* there?” My mother’s voice rang with the usual guilt-imposing tone.

“Hello, it’s good to hear your voice, too, Mom,” I said sarcastically. I grabbed my apron from a nearby hook and looped it over my head, while juggling the phone receiver. “Did you just call my cell phone?”

“Yes, I’ve tried to call you four times at the shop, but you won’t answer your phone. How do you expect to get any orders if you won’t answer your phone?”

“Mom, I don’t know why you keep saying *won’t* answer my phone. You know that the shop doesn’t open until nine, and I’ve taken the extra precaution of adding a voicemail service to my phone so that people can leave a message.” I sighed. “But you knew that already.”

“Well, that’s why I called your cell phone.”

“I just couldn’t get to it, Mom.” I held back the next heavy sigh welling up in my throat. My relationship with my mother would probably be classified as dysfunctional by a mental health professional. At the very least one could call it strained. I decided however, that it wasn’t worth ruining the day to fight with her.

“Sorry, I guess I woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning.”

“You’ve got that right, missy. Anyway, I called to ask if you’ve heard your sister’s news.”

My heart sank. “Which sister?”

“Sandy. They just asked her and Rick to be the nursery teachers at church.”

“Oh, really? Well good for them. I was afraid you were going to say something about Allie.”

“Why? What have you heard about Allie? What’s wrong?” Her voice filled with panic.

“Mom! Nothing. I haven’t heard anything. Calm down. I just worried when you said something was going on with one of my sisters.”

“Well, of course you assumed the worst with Allie. I don’t know why you have such a problem with Brad. He is a good man, Quincy Adams McKay. You should go to the single adult ward at church. You’d be lucky to find such a catch. You’re never going to find one with the life you’re living now.”

Ah...yes, she’d taken the gloves off. She’d used my middle name, and slipped in a dig about going to church. Or in my case, not going to church. She didn’t come out directly and *accuse* me of not going to church. Instead, she used the time-honored method of most mothers, which was passive-aggression with a pinch of guilt mixed in for good measure.

“Mom, you know why I don’t like Brad; I used to be married to one of his kind, remember? You know, the guy that used to knock the shit out of me for a hobby?”

“Language, Quincy! You always have tended to exaggerate. I am sorry that your husband wasn’t always easy to get along with, but we all have our faults. Brad is a returned missionary, and he has a good job...” Just as Mom started her repetitive trip down the denial river, the other line on the phone started ringing.

“Oh, sorry, Mom...” The phone rang again.

“She’s hinted they might go ring shopping soon...” Another phone ring.

“Mom, I’ve gotta go—the other line is ringing—Mom—I’ll call you back.” I hung up fully aware I would have to pay for it later. She probably hadn’t yet noticed I wasn’t on the phone anymore.

I punched the button for the other line hoping I hadn’t missed a customer.

“Rosie’s Posies, this is Quincy.” The refrigeration unit on top of the walk-in cooler started up with its loud whirring.

“Hello, this is Betty Carlisle—I’m a volunteer with the hospital gift shop.”

“Oh hi, Betty.”

“I just thought you might want to know that we are out of arrangements in the cooler.”

“Out?”

“Out.”

“Okay, we’ll bring a cooler full as soon as we can.”

“All right, dear. Bye.”

This was more like it. July isn’t exactly the greatest month for florists. It’s even slower than January, which is horrific for sales except for the fact that

it's funeral season. Not a term used with customers, but a common part of the vernacular in the business. I allowed myself just a moment of indulgence to think about where the mortuary would send its customers now that Derrick had fallen victim to funeral season in July.

My pulse quickened as I itemized the increasing responsibilities for the day. My glances at the clock became more frequent as I hoped my helpers would arrive sooner than planned. The radio I had switched on earlier no longer played background music; instead it was screaming car commercials. Sweat began to pool on the back of my neck, and along my hairline.

Where was that Coke? There had been far too much action already without taking a hit. I grabbed the cup and perused the order bins on the wall, dragging cold liquid comfort through the straw, making every sip count like the final pulls on a last cigarette.

After organizing the daily orders and the hospital list, I ducked into the walk-in cooler to get more flowers and greenery and relished the relief it offered from the summer heat and the inadequate air conditioner. The whirring of the fan pushing air inside the cooler played tricks on my hearing, making it sound like the phone was ringing. I ignored the phantom sound. Then I heard it ring again. I popped my head out of the cooler and realized both lines were ringing.

"Damn it!" Saying it out loud seemed to help. Arms full, I used one foot to close the door while balancing on the other leg, then walked over to the design table, attempted to put everything down quickly without breaking any stems and rushed to the phone.

“Rosie’s Posies, how may I help you?” My voice sang out with a tone of warmth and enthusiasm—from where it came I don’t know.

“Hi, my name is Roger; may I speak with the person who makes the decisions about the phone bill?”

A scream rang out within the walls of my skull. “She’s not here right now,” I lied, while hardly restraining the fury in my voice.

“When would be a better time for me to reach her?” Roger—if that was his real name, tried to sound friendly and helpful.

“I don’t really know, just between you and me, she’s kind of unreliable. I couldn’t really give you a time, I never know myself.”

Painfully, yet mercifully, the other line kept ringing. I didn’t want to risk letting the voicemail pick up and lose a potential customer because I had been speaking to Roger.

“Oh, there’s my other line, it’s probably the boss calling to say she’s not coming in.”

“It’s okay. I’ll wait while you check.” I had to give Roger extra points for trying. Unfortunately for Roger, I neglected to hit hold. Oops.

I answered the ringing line. My ear started to throb.

“Rosie’s,” I answered sharply.

“Is the owner there?” A deep male voice asked.

“I am not interested!” I fired back. “I’m really busy right now and you guys have already called me this morning. Talk to Roger over in the next cubicle.”

“This is Detective Arroyo with the Hillside City Police Department. I’m looking for Quinella Swanson.”

Ugh. I closed my eyes and leaned my forehead against the wall.

“This is Quincy,” I corrected. “What can I help you with today?”

“Ms. Swanson, do you know a Derrick Gibbons?”

“My name is Quincy McKay. Swanson is my *ex*-husband’s name. And yes, I know Derrick—well I know who he is. I mean was. I guess that should be was, shouldn’t it?” My cheeks started to burn like they always do when I jumble my words.

“Why would you say *was* Ms...McKay?”

A cold burning started to churn deep in my stomach. A three-alarm fire burned across my cheeks. Danny’s admonition not to tell anyone echoed inside my head. His brother could lose his job if they found out he’d leaked the story. I had just broken the unspoken code of the florist.

If there’s anyone who knows all of the gossip in town, it’s the florist. Any florist knows that when they hear something juicy, they keep it in the vault. Danny was going to kill me.

“Ms. McKay, I need to speak with you about a few things. How long will you be there today?”

“I...all day as far as I know. But...”

“I just need to ask you a few things, so I need you to stay put.

“I’m sorry, Officer...”

“It’s Detective.”

“*Detective*; I was just wondering why you would need me to stay here. Not that I plan on going anywhere, but can’t we just talk over the phone? I mean, I don’t really know anything about Derrick anyway.”

“No. Like I said, don’t go anywhere.”

“Detective, I’m trying to run a business, and I’ve got a lot to worry about right now. It doesn’t really work for me to stay here all day, waiting. Isn’t it possible just to do it over the phone...now?”

“Somehow I knew you would be a pain.”

“Excuse me?” He was very unprofessional. “Is there a problem here?”

“Should there be a problem? Is there something you’re not telling me?”

He sounded like a detective on a bad TV show.

“This conversation is getting weird. I don’t know why you’re talking to me in that tone and I really don’t know what I could tell you about Derrick.” I swiped my hair out of my face and tucked it behind an ear. “If this is about the parking lot thing yesterday...”

“What parking lot thing?”

Oh, crud. “Never mind. Nothing. I’m just flustered by the way you’re talking to me. I don’t like your accusatory tone, Officer. I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“It’s *Detective* Arroyo. And my tone is the least of your worries right now. You were the last person seen with Derrick Gibbons while he was alive.”

“Whoa. Exactly what are you saying?”

“I’m saying don’t go anywhere.”

Then, there was nothing but silence.

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I stood immobile after I hung up the phone. A knot inside my head, consisting of hundreds of thought threads all pulling in their own direction resulted in my inability to do anything but stand there, stunned. Meanwhile the cooler motor clanked on again and the radio blared.

What a bizarre phone call. And what kind of idiot cop calls ahead, thus tipping off a suspect? Of course, I wasn't a suspect. Was I? This had to have been a joke. But, I didn't know anyone that would pull such a mean prank. *Wait a second*—the ex-husband. His relatives were virtually half the population of Hillside; he probably had connections at the police department.

I looked down at the caller ID. It said Hillside City Police on the screen. If it was a joke, someone could get in a lot of trouble just for helping my ex get his jollies. There had to be another explanation, but I didn't have time to think about it. Maybe it involved Danny's brother. But worrying about the jerk cop and his weird phone call would have to wait. I had things to do and if Detective Arroyo wanted to talk to me about Derrick, or for whatever reason, he would have to do it around my schedule.

If Arroyo really was a cop, I would probably be regretting the fact that I almost let slip about my little tiff with Derrick. I hated him even more now dead than when he was alive. I thought back to the night before, when I had gone to

deliver a puny little planter basket to the mortuary. We bumped into each other and I ended up falling down on the asphalt after he pushed me. Derrick walked away as if nothing ever happened and there were no witnesses to the altercation. Or at least I thought there weren't any witnesses.

"Okay," I said out loud, "Enough time wasting." The day was melting away as if the heat outside had an effect on the passage of time. I picked up the phone receiver yet again. I called Cindy, my assistant floral designer, who wasn't scheduled to come in until noon.

"Hello." The disdain in Cindy's hello indicated that she probably saw the shop number pop up on her caller ID.

"Hi Cindy, I am so sorry to ask this, but can you please come in early?"

She responded with a long, intentionally drawn out sigh.

"How early?"

"As soon as possible."

"Why?" She sounded like a whiny teenager arguing with her mom.

"Some last minute stuff has come up." I didn't want to mention the slim possibility of the police showing up. "The hospital called and we've got to get a full load over there soon."

"Wuhl, isn't Nick supposed to be there?"

Nick was my delivery driver. He'd been working for me for three weeks. So far he'd only been late four times, but he eventually shows up, which is better than the previous two drivers.

I glanced up at the clock and couldn't believe what I saw. "It's past ten already! Cindy, I just need to know if you can come in or not. Nick doesn't do arrangements, and we've got a lot of stuff to get done." Why should I explain anything to her anyway? I was supposed to be the boss.

"Hhhuh," she exhaled forcefully enough to collapse a lung. "Okay, I'll guess I'll come in."

"Thank you so much, I really appreciate it."

"Yeah." The phone went silent.

"Be happy you have a job, you little troll!" I said to the receiver after I replaced it in its cradle with a little extra force.

I walked over to the radio and turned off one of the background noises. At least I had control over something. As I picked up my knife, I heard the familiar sound of the phone, and stuck the knife in the pocket of my apron as I reached for the receiver with my other hand.

For the next twenty minutes I fielded phone calls, which actually consisted of orders for the day. Now the heat was on—both outside with the weather and inside with the sudden onslaught of business. I returned to the design table and worked in between glances at my watch and the front window, worried it might be the police, instead of my helpers who would come through the door first.

Finally Nick walked in the door. Nick Wilson was twenty-two years old. A good enough looking guy, but he disguised it with a lazy demeanor. His slouch just shouted out, "I dare you to ask me to move any faster."

"Hey, Nick."

“Hey, Quincy. How’s it goin’?”

“Well, it’d be goin’ a lot better if my driver had been here at ten.”

“Oh yeah, sorry.”

“I’m sure you’re all broken up about it.”

“Huh?”

“About being late, I’m sure you just feel terrible about being late.”

“Oh. Yeah.” He had no idea what I was talking about.

“I was being sarcastic Nick. You need to be on time from now on.”

“Oh.” Pause. “K.”

I wasn’t going to hold my breath on that one.

“Since I don’t have time to finish making all of these before you leave, I need you to go to the front display cooler and grab a thirty-five dollar arrangement. Then write the card and take the arrangement to Fairview.”

Nick stood in place for a few beats while I watched for signs of cogs turning in his head. He looked up at me and I pointed toward the front of the store. His synapses finally fired up and he ambled in the direction of the cooler. While on his way, the front doorbell chimed. Cindy’s blond hair filled the doorway and framed a giant pair of metallic bug eye sunglasses. The glam glasses only distracted me momentarily from the thing that would cause a stress-invoked heart attack before I turned thirty.

Cindy is what you might call well-endowed. She wore a tight, white, scoop-necked tank top, which was too short to cover her belly button ring. Her cut-off denim short-shorts were too low riding to conceal the jewelry either. As

she begrudgingly swanked her way back to the design area, I noticed Nick had a new purpose and pace to his step as he followed her while holding an arrangement.

As she approached the design table where I stood, I tried to assemble the correct words. I had to say just enough, but not too much. She had to know she couldn't wear that to work right?

I must deal with this employee in a firm, but friendly manner. That's what Aunt Rosie had written in her shop instruction manual. As I tried to come up with something profound, Cindy reached the design table, but made a sharp right turn to the wrapping counter where she liked to stow her purse; she was obviously avoiding speaking to me for as long as possible.

"Hi," I said with questioning intonation. I had decided to wait to speak with her privately about the dress code, after Nick left. That was, until I saw the view from behind when she crouched to put her purse under the counter. Not only was her lower back tattoo obscured slightly by the hot pink thong, but the shorts had a three-inch wide hole under her right butt cheek.

All thoughts of friendly firmness disintegrated.

"Are—you—kidding—me?" I said.

"What?" She said innocently as she stood up.

"You cannot seriously think you can wear that to work in my shop."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Yeah, what's wrong with what she's wearing? It looks pretty hot to me," said suddenly-not-slouching Nick.

“Nick! Aren’t you supposed to be doing something? Besides, you can’t talk about how hot your co-worker is.”

“So you admit I look good.” Cindy said, glowing.

I thought my head might explode.

“You know if you had only come in wearing the tank top, which shows the most cleavage as is possible while still maintaining the laws of physics, we might have been able to have a little talk. But the tattoo framing thong and the rip-in-the-ass jeans are just a bit over the top.”

“Whoa, when did you get a tramp stamp?” Nick said.

“Nick!”

“Dude, you probably shouldn’t show your ass though, that’s not proper,” he said, with a straight face.

“Proper?” I turned my attention to Nick. “Aren’t you the guy that wears his pants so baggy that an old lady called the police and complained about being flashed when a young man matching your description got into a van in front of our store?” Things were totally out of control at this point. “By the way, have you bought a belt yet?”

“Hey, I was just trying to help.” Nick said, surprised at my lack of appreciation for his words of wisdom.

“You can help by getting that delivery to Fairview and getting back here to take the hospital cooler stuff.”

“Okay, I’m going.”

He picked up the arrangement he'd left on the table and reached for the van keys on the hook on the wall.

"Nick, the card!" He hadn't written the card yet.

"I'll do it." Cindy declared, and then walked over to the little rack on the front counter displaying the cards and envelopes that are usually enclosed with a flower delivery. She proceeded to pick up a card and pen, then lean down on the counter to write, causing her butt to protrude behind her and thus be prominently displayed to both Nick and myself so that we had a bird's eye view of the ensuing rip, which resulted in a now, six-inch tear.

I glared at Nick, daring him to say a word. A look of fear passed across his face. He walked over next to Cindy, and looked straight up at the ceiling with his hand held out until Cindy placed the card filled envelope in his palm. He then marched with intent toward the back door and the parked delivery van that doubled as my personal vehicle.

"Cindy," I said wearily, "if it were just the cleavage-fest tank top, you could cover up with an apron. But you can't wear those shorts. At the rate they're ripping you'll have a fully exposed cheek in about thirty seconds."

"Well you're the one that called and asked me to come in early. I'm doing you a favor by being here," she said indignantly.

"Exactly what kind of favor is it that you're doing for me? Doubling as an on-staff barfly? And what does coming in a few minutes early have to do with what you're wearing?"

"I didn't have any other clean clothes."

“Well next time do me a favor and wear something with stains all over them will ya? It’d be a lot better than this.”

“Maybe there won’t be a next time. There are other jobs out there you know.”

“You’re right, Cindy. There are a lot of jobs out there. But the only ones where you’re allowed or encouraged to dress like that have descriptions including words like, johns, pimps, street, and walking.”

My sarcasm seemed to break the tension and Cindy looked up at me trying to suppress a smile.

“Okay, I shouldn’t have worn this to work. But you don’t have to be such a bitch, Quincy. You could have just told me to go change.” She turned her head away, embarrassed to show the emotion beginning to well up in her face.

Employees aren’t supposed to talk to their bosses like that. But, a boss probably shouldn’t tell their employee they are dressed like a prostitute. I’d let the stress get to me and snapped. It hurt to have Cindy call me a name like that, though. But, I couldn’t let her know it. I turned my heated face away from her.

The two of us stood there, three feet apart looking in opposite directions, both knowing we had breached employee/employer etiquette but not wanting to admit it.

“Cindy, you just caught me off guard. It’s been a stressful morning.” I felt very un-confident and none of the usual snappy comebacks came to mind.

“Not everyone is as perfect as you, Quincy.” She said calmly without sarcasm.

I heard a snuffle, and turned my head toward her. She carefully wiped away tears so as not to smear her eyeliner. The sniffles kept coming as she maneuvered around the store. So maybe I really was a bitch. But I was a bitch who had orders to get out the door. I needed Cindy's help.

"I'm not perfect, Cindy. Far from it. I'm sorry I didn't handle this well." I really did feel guilty for talking to her in the way I had, especially in front of someone else. "Well, we don't have time to send you home, but I have my gym bag in the car. You can wear my warm-up pants and a t-shirt." I tried to think of a compliment to help smooth things over. "You know, you really are lucky. If I had a figure like yours I'd want to show it off too."

"Thanks." Cindy replied. "I'm sure your pants will be a little long," she said with a make-lemonade-out-of-lemons voice, "but they'll fit. I feel bad though—I'm definitely going to stretch the chest out in your t-shirt. Sorry."

"No problem," muttered the B-cup.

CHAPTER TWO

We survived the morning madness and the early afternoon ran smoothly. No sign of the unprofessional detective—he sure seemed in a hurry on the phone earlier. Nick returned and left again with a full vanload. Cindy and I made several bouquets to fill our orders, and we even had time to make speculation arrangements to put in the front cooler for sale.

As we placed the last mono-botanical arrangement of fuchsia gerbera daisies in the cooler, I heard the back door slam against drywall, and then the pounding of feet.

“Quincy!” Nick was almost breathless after blasting through the store.

“What’s wrong?”

“I was just in a hit-and-run.” He sounded genuinely upset. But in the short time Nick had been employed by me, he had already proven to be quite a storyteller. Coupled with that, my sister Sandy’s husband grew up in the same neighborhood as Nick, and Sandy knew all of the dirt about Nick and his infamous reputation. Her “helpful” warnings about Nick were reminders of my

inferior abilities to run the business, thus keeping her superiority intact. This of course only made me want to believe in Nick all the more now, despite my better judgment, if only to prove my sister wrong.

“A hit-and-run?”

“Yeah!”

My shoulders dropped and I looked for the nearest seat when I realized Nick was serious. I reached to my forehead and drew my hand down my face as if it might help swipe the stress and frustration of the day out of my head. I took a deep breath and sighed. “Tell me what happened.”

He pointed as he said, “I was at the intersection right there. I was turning left onto Main Street, and just as I went to get into the left turn lane, this truck hit me on my side and then passed me on the left and turned left in front of the cars coming straight and took off onto the freeway.” He said it all without stopping for a breath.

“Where did it hit on the van?” I asked as I started toward the back of the shop.

“On my side in the back.”

We arrived at the van. A small dent dug into the rear panel and poppy-red paint streaks overlaid the dent like brush strokes, just behind the rear wheel.

“Nick! It looks to me as if you just didn’t look in the mirrors and ran into someone.”

“Quincy, I swear I looked. It was a red pick-up truck. I saw them in the rear view mirror when they were behind me.”

I looked at him with a puzzled expression.

“Far behind me, Quincy. There is no way I would have hit them if they hadn’t sped up. I swear.”

“You said them. There was more than one person?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure, ‘cause when I looked over after the truck hit me, I saw them passing me. It was two guys. They were looking at me, shaking their fists and yelling.”

“What did you do after they passed you?”

“I waited until it was my turn to go through the intersection, and then I tried to follow them, but I was too far behind. I saw them get onto the freeway.”

What else today? I took a deep, cleansing breath, and exhaled as slowly as I possibly could. “Okay, Nick. Let’s go call the police.”

###

Nick busied himself with sweeping and taking the garbage out to the dumpsters while we waited for the police to arrive. His newly found work ethic led me to believe he might have told the truth about the accident.

Cindy had gone home promising to wash and return my clothes the next time she worked. I attempted to get some much neglected paperwork done while waiting for the police, but I found myself staring into space at my desk, thinking about what I would say to that jerk detective when he arrived. I thought of several different ways to tell Detective Arroyo how I would be talking to his boss

about the way he had talked to me over the phone. Of course I would need to get the hit-and-run taken care of before I berated him.

When he questioned me about Derrick, I would tell everything I knew about him, which was pretty close to nothing. Just that he took over half of my business with absolutely zero design skills and the highest prices for flowers and then treated me like garbage when I saw him in person. The detective said I was the last person seen with Derrick. But I didn't think anyone knew about our recent altercation, nobody else was there. He must have bragged to someone about it afterward. Big tough man knocking down an unsuspecting woman. He had probably changed the details of the story to whomever he talked to.

“Quincy, he's here.” Nick called.

The ball in my stomach returned after I stood up and saw the navy and white Crown Victoria parked directly in front of the shop. Not exactly good for business to have the cops parked just outside the front door.

I made a quick dash to the bathroom in the rear workroom to do a once over in the mirror over the sink. As I fluffed up my hair and checked my teeth for foreign bodies it occurred to me I was doing something my mother would do. I shut the light off and returned to the design room.

I gasped as soon as I saw our visitor. How could this guy possibly have been the jerk on the phone? It didn't seem karmically fair. The officer in the front of my store wore a uniform that fit just right over a body which was obviously toned and hard underneath the taut navy fabric. His physical presence alone commanded my attention, not to mention the gun in the holster at his waist,

along with all of the other objects on his belt. He must've been six-four. Tall, even by my five-nine standards.

“Hi,” I said as I approached and extended my hand. I didn't know if it was proper procedure to shake hands with the police in this situation. I was on autopilot; this officer's good looks were distracting.

“Hi.” His return handshake was accompanied by a smile. The gesture was firm but not a bone crusher. They say you can always tell a lot about a person by the way they shake your hand. He displayed strength, along with thoughtfulness for another person, and handsomeness. I could have imagined it, but I thought his gaze lingered an extra beat as our eyes met.

This was decidedly different than I had imagined after this morning's phone call.

“I think I spoke with you earlier today on the phone?”

“Um...I don't remember talking to you.” A look of confusion spread over his amazingly handsome face. “I'm Officer Cooper. Are you sure it was me you talked to? I'm here about a hit-and-run call that came into dispatch.”

“Oh, sorry, I guess I spoke with a different officer this morning.” Relief. “Yes—hit-and-run. That would be Nick's department.” I called Nick's name toward the back of the store. He had become scarce after announcing Cooper's arrival.

“So, are you the manager here?” Cooper asked.

“You could say that. I'm the owner, actually,” my cheeks heated up at this, for some reason.

“And you were involved in a hit-and-run?”

“No, it was my driver, Nick, who seems to have disappeared.”

“Okay. Well, let me get your information down and then we’ll find Nick and talk to him.” He unsnapped his front shirt pocket and my knees got weak. My palms were sweaty and I think I may have drooled a little. Then he pulled a tiny notebook and pencil out of the pocket.

“So your name is Rosie?”

“No, my name is Quincy. The business is named for my Aunt Rosie, the previous owner.”

“Oh, that makes sense. So, Quincy,” he looked down at me and smiled, “is that your full name?”

Ugh, the name.

“Quinella Adams McKay. Q...U...I...N...” I spelled it before he had to ask me to.

Nick returned, looking furtive.

“Nick,” I said, “this is Officer Cooper. Tell him what you told me.”

Nick began his tale and I listened in.

“So you’re saying that this car hit the rear driver’s side as you were getting into the left hand turn lane?” Cooper asked.

“Yes,” Nick replied.

“Well,” Cooper paused slightly, the pause proclaiming doubt, “let’s take a look at the car.”

I asked if Nick needed to be present while looking at the damage. He didn't, so I directed Nick to stay inside and stack the clean, dry buckets.

We made our way to the back parking area. Walking next to Officer Cooper made my insides feel all fluttery. I hadn't experienced that feeling in a long time. It was like I was a teenager sneaking outside the back door of the house with a boy.

I led Officer Cooper to the van. The remnants of red paint disturbing the shiny white rear panel of my Chevy Astro mini-van, along with some ten-inch-long gouges just above the back driver's side tire were still there.

Cooper took what seemed to be too quick a glance, and then scrawled some things down in the tiny policeman notebook.

"Okay, I think that's about all I need," he said.

"That's all?" After watching and reading so many crime dramas, I wondered if there shouldn't be more of an investigation, perhaps the CSI squad should be called in.

"Is there something else...?" His eyes brightened while he paused to look at me before putting the notebook back into the little shirt pocket. Maybe the pocket wasn't so small; he just filled out the shirt so well it seemed impossible something could fit into the pocket.

"I—no. Just—I'm really hot." I noticed a smile quickly spread across his face.

"Yes," he said.

"I meant it's too hot out here..."

“Yes—hot—out here. It is hot out here,” he said.

I couldn't stop being a moron. He had a hypnotic quality that kept me from making sense. My brain synapses were somehow being blocked by good looks.

“Let's go inside and maybe I'll remember what I was going to say about you.” I gave my head a shake to try and rattle the confusion away. “I mean—what I was going to ask you.”

“That's a good idea.”

As we made our way back into the store, I realized Nick hadn't told Cooper about the drivers of the truck.

“Officer Cooper, Nick told me about two guys driving the truck; I noticed he didn't give you their descriptions.”

While he looked at me intently as I asked, his expression changed to apprehension after I finished talking.

“Let me be honest with you, Mrs. McKay...”

“It's Miss and it's Quincy,” I interrupted.

“Sorry, Miss Quincy.”

It was his turn to blush.

“I'll tell you what. I'll write up the report of what Nick told me and what I've seen, and we'll see if anything comes up. But I have to say...” he spoke carefully while the corners of his eyes wrinkled as if it were painful to tell me, “I really don't believe Nick. The way the damage looks on the car, it seems like he just didn't check his blind spot and wants to cover it up.”

Now I know I didn't really believe Nick at first when he told me about the accident, but something about having Officer Cooper assume Nick's guilt just rubbed me the wrong way. Maybe because he was agreeing with my older sister.

"Officer Cooper..."

"It's Alex, and no officer—please," he said.

His dark brown eyes warmed as he offered the personal detail. The warmth melted my insides for a very short moment until I realized again why he was there. There was a purpose for the police being here whether I called him officer or not and we needed to stay focused on the current problem.

"Okay—Alex. I realize Nick probably has a reputation that makes it difficult to listen to him objectively, but please base your report on fact and not assumptions."

The tilt of his head along with raised eyebrows indicated perhaps I had extended my boss duties a little too far.

"I'm sorry. I'm not trying to tell you how to do your job. It's just—I think Nick is telling the truth about this one no matter how it looks. I feel it in my gut. Believe me—I know Nick is no saint."

His expression softened slightly but he rolled his eyes—I think he thought it went unnoticed. "Okay, I'll take down a description of the guys in the car just in case. But I'll tell you right now, it's doubtful you'll be anything but disappointed."

"Why would I have any reason to be disappointed? If you do your job I'm sure there won't be any reason at all for me to be disappointed."

“Listen, Miss McKay, I don’t tell you how to do your job, so how about you go ahead and let me do mine? This isn’t my first day, you know. I was actually trying to help you out by saving you a little grief. If you stopped trying to be the boss for a minute you might be able to appreciate that fact.” His hands braced tensely on his hips, above the cop tool belt.

“I’m sorry.” I mumbled. What had Cindy called me earlier? I guess she was right. “Please forgive me, it’s been a stressful day and I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“It’s okay. I understand. If I ever need help interrogating a criminal, I might just give you a call. Let me give you my card. This is a direct line to reach me if you ever need anything, except if you want to boss me around.” He handed the card to me and winked.

“Thanks Officer Cooper. I…”

“It’s Alex,” he said softly.

I felt my face heat up. “Alex, thank you. I hope I won’t ever need to use it. No offense.”

“None taken. See ya.”

He left and I felt butterflies flutter up just about everywhere they could.

CHAPTER THREE

The end of the workday couldn't have come soon enough after the day I'd just had. Although, I did receive a nice reward in meeting Alex Don't-call-me-Officer Cooper. I didn't know what had happened to Detective Arroyo and I didn't care.

I pulled the van into the driveway next to my Victorian cottage on the corner. Due to a frugal choice made by my grandmother, it's a cottage rather than a gingerbread mansion like the Painted Lady houses in San Francisco. Grandma was a widow with nine children to take care of. The top levels of those brick Victorians got drafty in the winter, and being the sensible woman my grandma was, she had the second level removed from the house. Sure it would be more crowded down below, but the closer proximity of all the people inside would make everyone warmer and decrease the heating fuel needs even more.

Grandma left the house to me when she died. She passed away just before I left my ex-husband. I had lived with her during the summer right after high school and for the couple of semesters I went to college before getting married.

Everyone in the family was surprised after the reading of the will. Her attorney told me she had arranged to change it about two weeks before she died based on a premonition. I had never told her of the things that were happening with my ex-husband.

She saved my life when she gave me that house. I had no money and nowhere to go. Home wasn't an option. My father had moved to another state to get away from my mother. He left under the auspices of a lengthy tour with his bluegrass band, "The Salt Flat Lickers." Frankly, I couldn't live with her either; she refused to remove her head from the sand regarding the topic of my abusive husband.

My usual "coming home" routine included a thorough visual security scan of the entire property. The first and most important step was to take a look around as I drove up to the house, checking to make sure nobody was lying in wait. It was a habit I learned as soon as I moved in. For about a year, chances were good either my ex or one of his many, many relatives would be waiting there or had already been there and left. Being related to polygamists held perks for the ex such as a seemingly endless pool of extra people with nothing better to do than lean over the front fence and stare at me from a few yards away or leave nasty little calling cards. Nothing specific, just a dead rat or bird on the porch or blobs of spit dripping from the back door. I liked to refer to them as the Housewarming Gifts. I kept a whistle on my key chain and a canister of pepper spray in my bag just in case someone was waiting for me with one of those gifts when I got home one night.

Of course I had no desire to cook anything when I finally left the shop. I stopped at the Bulgy Burger drive through before heading home. I cut the security inspection short when the aroma from my burger reminded me I was ready to devour some junk and drown out the resulting malaise and grease after-burn by making my own hot fudge sundae. Somehow I always seemed to have the ingredients for those on hand.

After a swift change into my nighttime uniform, consisting of a Han Solo t-shirt, cut-off pajama pants and knee-hi tube socks with the requisite tangerine colored stripes at the top, I sat down on the couch to eat my Bulgy Junior Burger with a side of tots and fry sauce. Just as I reached for the remote, the phone rang. The caller I.D. said it was my sister Allie's cell phone.

“Hey, Allie.”

“Hi, Quince.”

“What's up?”

“Oh nothing. I just thought I'd call and see what's going on.” I knew right away something was wrong. My sister never called me just to chat, and her usual bubbly, enthusiastic voice was strained and flat.

“Um...nothing going on here, I just got in. How about with you?”

“I was just calling to say hi,” she said. Okay, something was seriously wrong.

“Allie, where are you?”

“I'm in my car.”

“Where is your car?”

“I’m parked in front of Mom’s house.” My heart dropped. Call it intuition or experience, but I knew she must not have wanted to go into the house because our mother would have been able to see something Allie didn’t want her to see. Allie didn’t realize I understood all too well what kind of guy she was dating.

“Do you want to come over here?”

Her voice cracked. “Yes.”

“Okay, come over. We’ll watch a movie. I’m making hot fudge sundaes.” I knew right then she didn’t need me asking what was wrong, what he’d done, or why she didn’t want to go into Mom’s house. It would probably be obvious in about seven minutes when she got to my place.

She came to the back entrance. I opened the door and became sick inside at what I saw. She had a red and purple goose egg with a cut on her left temple. Her jerk boyfriend hadn’t been as crafty as my ex. Mine always kept the blows to the head within the perimeter of the hairline—that way the bruises couldn’t readily be seen.

I got a bag of ice and a hot fudge sundae for her. “Allie, I know how you got that, and you don’t need a lecture about it or him. But I am telling you that I’m not going to let it happen again. We’re not going to let it happen again. And that’s all I’m going to say about it right now. Let’s watch a movie.”

She smiled and nodded her head. Then we ate too much ice cream and watched the movie. Allie crashed on the couch before the flick finished. I hated to move and wake her up, so I turned on the local TV news.

Suddenly, a non-specific shiver chilled my spine while the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I looked up, muted the TV, and listened. I heard nothing and returned to the news. Just then, a shadow climbed up the wall behind the TV set. I turned to the big picture window behind us. Through a gap in the curtains, I could see the shadow growing taller with every flicker.

I shot up from the couch, knocking a spoon from the ice cream to clang and rattle on the hardwood floor. I ran to the front door, then fumbled before I unlatched the deadbolt and the lock on the doorknob. The front door opened to a fifteen foot long sitting porch running half the length of the front of the house. At the other end of the porch was a column of flames licking the bead board ceiling. My breath stopped short at the sight of the orange monster in front of me.

I always keep a small fire extinguisher in my kitchen upon the advice of a smart lady at my bridal shower. "Have a fire extinguisher in your kitchen," had been a lot more useful than "never go to bed angry." Next to remaining alive and intact, it was the best thing that ever came out of my marriage.

After retrieving the extinguisher from the kitchen, I ran back to the front door, grappling with the pin. I aimed the nozzle at the base of the fire and squeezed the handle. After the loud swooshing noise was gone and the white cloud had disappeared, the orange tower at the end of my porch had been replaced by a black, charred, stinky pile.

I stood, arms dangling at my sides, the extinguisher still hanging from my fingers. I was too stunned to do anything else. Allie appeared at my side and gently slipped the extinguisher out of my hand. She put her arm around my

shoulders and we stood there and cried, our shoulders shrugging together as the
let down from the adrenaline rush set in.

###

After a quick inspection and pause to sniff the air, Allie and I determined
that someone had left a flaming bag of poop on my porch. We returned inside the
house and both sat on the couch. Neither of us spoke for a long time. The house
was still and quiet; Allie must have turned the TV off when she woke. With
elbows on knees and head in cupped hands I tried to make sense of what had just
happened, including trying to wrap my mind around a murder, a hit-and-run and
now a fire on my porch, all in one day.

Allie broke the silence. “This has to be Brad.”

“The guy just doesn’t do anything subtle, does he? I mean, I guess he
could be worked up enough to do something like this. I know he’s jerk enough
for sure, I’m just not sure it’s his style. His MO seems to be more secretive, at
least from what I’ve seen—or not seen before.”

“How did you know he was doing things before?”

I snapped my head up and looked at her. “Allie, I know how he works. I
lived through it with one just like him. And it isn’t to their benefit to have visible
proof of their handiwork, so that everyone in the world can see what sick,
demented, psychos they are. Although, he wasn’t too careful on your forehead
this time.”

“I really did fall down the stairs, Quincy.”

I looked at her with an “oh-give-me-a-break” expression.

“That is, after he slammed me into the wall and pushed me.”

“I don’t believe I have to say this yet again today, but we need to call the police.”

Allie grabbed my arm and looked at me with fearful eyes.

“Quincy, we can’t call the police. Brad told me if I ever called the police, he would kill me and I believe him. Even if he didn’t do this, Quincy you cannot call the police. Please, Quincy! Don’t call.”

My sister had been terrorized by that monster, and he was probably feeling extremely pleased with himself and the power he had just wielded over the both of us. He was in control now, or so he thought.

“Allie, I know you’re scared right now, but we can’t just sit here and take it and pretend that nothing happened. And who knows? Maybe it wasn’t him. Maybe it was a bunch of teenage boys with nothing better to do.”

I looked up at the clock, it was only nine-thirty. I had an idea. I retrieved the business card Officer Cooper—I mean Alex—had given me. When he’d given it he said, “If you need anything, call me.”

Well I needed something, so I called.

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Thank you!