

Carnations Can't Keep Secrets

February 14, 1989

Flashing lights of a police cruiser that had just pulled up in front of Glory's shop caught her attention. A van marked CANINE UNIT parked behind the cruiser. She stopped refreshing a display of mixed bouquets in the shop window. Was her day about to take another twist? She wiped her hands on her green work-smock sensing something was very wrong ... for the second time that day.

Her morning had begun earlier than usual. She'd done a drive-by of her shop before parking in the back alley. At six-thirty, there was already a line-up of early-bird shoppers who wanted to beat the rush and pick up flowers for their sweethearts.

The weather was holding steady at freezing with no chance of snow. Valentine's was on a Tuesday this year but it didn't really matter ... for a florist, it was a busy occasion no matter what day of the week it landed on.

Glory's staff was scheduled to arrive at seven. Each of her girls had worked until ten the night before. It was the old "make hay while the sun shines" routine. Or in this industry, make the most of the current over-commercialized Hallmark event - and flowers fit the bill.

The phone was ringing as she unlocked the back door. Glory had rendezvoused at five a.m. with Sonny from Holiday Wholesale Florist to pickup three more cases of carnations pre-ordered from "the clock". Thankfully her shop's proximity to Canada's largest wholesale floral auction which was located in Mississauga, allowed her quick access to extra product in emergencies.

Sonny Jansen had been her main fresh flower supplier for almost seven years. He was a dependable guy who never let her down. *And* he was sweet on Iris, one her employees. He had agreed to swing by later in the morning and fill in any voids in her inventory. No doubt by then she would need more roses (there were never enough roses on Valentine's) more greens, plus another pail or two of cut tulips and alstroemeria.

With the cases of carnations unloaded and the coffee pot bubbling, Glory could now answer the phone in the back-room until Violet, Iris, Daisy and Honey arrived to open the shop. Honey was short for Honeysuckle, a rather unusual British moniker. Glory chuckled as she always did when she thought of her staff all with such lovely botanical names.

"Morning Glory Florist. Happy Valentine's Day! How can I help you?"

“Hey Glory, didn’t know if anyone would be there yet. It’s Syd Andrews. I was hoping you could send flowers to Marilyn at her work today. A nice mixed bouquet around ten dollars. And *you* know what she likes!”

Syd was one of the shop’s regulars. Like clockwork, once a month he ordered flowers for delivery to his wife’s workplace. Marilyn was a sweet lady. She was a member of Glory’s writers’ group and they had become fast friends. “For sure Syd. What would you like the card to read?”

“Think I’ll be original this year. How about ‘Happy Valentine’s Day, Love Syd.’ Do you have the address for Wellsford Electronics?”

“Sure do. Consider it done. Thanks for the order!”

No sooner had Glory hung up the phone than a chorus of giggles announced the arrival of her staff: Violet, the methodical organizer, who kept everything running on an even keel; Daisy the young wisp of a girl with long blond hair and a natural talent for design; Iris, the dark-haired beauty, who could coerce any young man into spending extravagantly at her slightest suggestion; and Honey, whose shortened name perturbed the Brit to no end. Honey with hair the colour of moonlight, was the resident mother hen, whom they all adored. Glory couldn’t imagine a better team.

“Good grief, customers are already lined up. Want me to open up now?”

“Sounds like a plan Iris. You get things organized out front with Daisy. Violet, you start wrapping that first set of deliveries that we prepared last night. And Honey, I’ve picked up three more cases of carnations that need a fresh cut and to be put in water. They’ll replace the ones we sold to Hillcrest High School yesterday.”

That was a sweet deal, thought Glory. The school planned to sell single stem carnations as a fundraiser for Student Council. They had agreed to purchase the blooms still packaged in their long, corrugated, cardboard boxes, each of which held seven hundred carnations of assorted colours. The bulk of carnations sold in Canada were now arriving almost daily from Bogota, Columbia. The “dry packs” as they are called, were most efficient in transporting carnations long distances via air. The flowers were cut tight in South America just before they opened, and then stored and shipped in a climate-controlled atmosphere.

The school had agreed to a price that allowed Glory to double her purchase rate and still benefit the students who were selling blooms for one dollar, thus making a handsome profit. The catch was the students had to unpack the flowers, and then carefully make a fresh cut on each stem

before placing them into pails of warm water. Done a few days ahead, this would encourage the blooms to open fully for sale by Valentine's Day. It was a win-win situation.

The morning flew by with nonstop orders, customers and phone calls. By 2:00 p.m., Glory was wondering why Sonny hadn't stopped by yet. It was quite unusual for him not to check in. Her supply of greens was dangerously low. No doubt he was busy too and behind schedule. After all, it was one of the busiest days of the year in the florist industry.

While she waited for Sonny, Glory swapped places with Daisy and waited on the next customer in line. He looked something like her boyfriend Ben, which reminded her that the only thing she'd received from him for Valentine's this year was a generic dollar store card. "Loser" she muttered to herself.

The fact that the customer was tall and Hollywood-handsome, with sandy-blond hair, may have influenced her choice too. Up close, she noted he was *way* better looking than Ben. His cornflower blue eyes were intense. His overall appearance was that of prestige and importance. Glory was a sucker for a man in a camelhair coat. His was tailored to perfection.

"How can I help you?"

"I have a card here that is signed and I would like to include it with a delivery to go out this afternoon. I would like to send two dozen long stem red roses."

"Of course. Who are we delivering the flowers to?"

"Marilyn Andrews. She works at Wellsford Electronics on Carlisle Boulevard."

Glory stopped writing. She tried to focus on the order pad in front of her.

"Are you all right, ma'am?"

"Yes ... I'm OK."

She mustered a weak smile. In an attempt to regain her composure she continued, "Now then, two dozen red roses. You do know that roses are at a premium price today?"

"That's of no concern. If you would take extra care with this order and bring the total including delivery to an even two hundred dollars, it would be appreciated." His payment was in cash.

Glory counted the bills. She was trying to absorb the situation.

"Your name and phone number, sir?"

“I choose not to give my name.” He smiled. A smarmy smile. Like the Cheshire cat would smile when keeping a secret.

The shop had an unwritten policy about such situations. There were a lot of weirdoes out there. Staff was instructed to *always* get a contact name and phone number from the sender. Just last year, a customer sending boxed flowers from another shop had asked to add something to their order. The florist obliged and the man took a minute at a side-counter to place the item inside. Deliveries were ready to go out the door and the employee saw no need to re-check the box. The customer had already flustered the staff member by insisting on remaining anonymous and she just wanted rid of him. It ended up a messy situation. The addition to the floral delivery was a dead snake.

“Sir, we do insist on contact information ... just in case there is any problem with the delivery.”

With an icy stare that Glory found intimidating, combined with a measured monotone, the man spoke. “The lady *is* working today.” Pause. “The flowers *will* be delivered today.” Pause.

“Therefore, I foresee no problem.”

There was that smile again.

“Of course. We will look after your order.” Glory was imagining a name for him. Lance or Lorne came to mind. No. Elliot Thornbury III. Where did that come from she thought to herself.

Sir Thornbury left the shop. He swaggered when he walked.

Glory needed to wrap her mind around what just happened. She turned and walked down the hallway to the back-room. As she passed a jasmine plant she inhaled the soothing aroma hoping the scent would calm her. It didn't.

“Violet, did that bouquet go out to Marilyn Andrews yet?”

“Yes it did. Is there a problem?”

“Yes, well, not really. Maybe. Here's another delivery for her.” She handed Violet the new order.

“Do me a favour and keep this one to yourself.”

“Oh my” Violet exclaimed. “If I were the suspicious type, well, I'd be suspicious.”

“You okay with everything back here?”

“For sure. Everything's under control. Are *you* all right? You look kind of ... rattled.”

“Not sure. Think I’ll work out front for a bit longer. I’m still waiting for Sonny. Have you heard from him?”

“No, nothing.”

Glory needed to keep busy. She decided to tidy the display of mixed bouquets already prepared for last minute shoppers. She never tired of the simple beauty of flowers and how much joy they gave to her customers *and* to her. “Don’t forget to stop and smell the roses” was her favourite saying. So simple. So effective.

Morning Glory Florist’s colourful cut bouquets had become the shop’s trademark. Monochromatic combinations of burgundy, fuchsia, and raspberry with a pop of lime-green, or mixtures of rich harvest-gold, lemon and white were popular. A combo of burnt orange and amber plus blooms in a shade of pale yellow, plus that same pop of lime-green, were another customer favourite.

Glory smiled. Her business was doing exceptionally well, and her staff knew the drill. She couldn’t imagine a better job.

And that was when the police officer walked into her shop.

“Ma’am, I’m Constable Foley. May I please speak to the manager?”

“That’s me. Glory Gilmore. I’m the shop owner.”

“May we talk somewhere private?”

Glory regained her composure enough to ask the officer if he would kindly move his cruiser plus the Canine Unit van to the back of the shop. She couldn’t afford to lose business because police were onsite. After the constable had complied with her request, Glory discreetly asked her puzzled staff to wait on customers and answer phone calls from the front of the shop.

“Ms. Gilmore, there’s no way to sugarcoat this. We have reason to believe there have been drugs smuggled into a local school and we think they have been transported via your shop.”

Thinking that someone was playing an elaborate prank on her, Glory started to chuckle. Observing the officer’s stern frown, she stopped.

“Ma’am, this isn’t a laughing matter. My colleagues and I have just left the premises of Hillcrest High School. We have in our possession a substantial quantity of evidence. Did you sell carnations to the school’s student council this week?”

“Yes I did. They’re selling carnations for an annual fundraiser. There’s nothing illegal about that.”

“No, but the fine, white powder found in the corrugation of those cardboard packing boxes *is* illegal. We realize you most likely were not aware of the drugs. We need to confirm the name of your floral supplier. We will also require our canine unit to search your premises. All routine. We will be as quick as possible.”

As requested, Glory provided the information. Constable Foley told her that the owner and staff at Holiday Wholesale Florist had been under surveillance for months and had just been arrested.

A million things were running through her mind. How could Sonny do this to her? She’d been a good customer and always paid her bills on time. How could he risk her reputation? Was she going to be charged as an accomplice?

Glory tried to calm down as she watched the search. She’d recently read about the city’s newly formed Police Dog Services. Little did she know she would be watching one of the beautiful animals in full search mode in her own shop. The only thing the police presence did answer was the question as to Sonny’s whereabouts.

The interruption in business did not impede the day’s sales which were going to be a record high.

Glory continued filling delivery orders. Her heart rate had returned to normal. Keeping busy was always the best way to stay calm. At least until Iris walked down the hall from the front of the shop with an incredibly large bouquet in an unusual cello-wrap that Glory knew was *not* from their shop. Iris set the bouquet on the work-table.

“Wow! Where’d these come from?”

“They just arrived.” Iris looked pale. “They’re for me.”

“Whoever sent them sure knows you well. I’ve never seen Casa Blanca lilies *and* White Wizard lisianthus in one bouquet. There’re both incredibly hard to find and expensive, especially on Valentine’s Day! Who are they from?”

She handed Glory a typed delivery tag with no mention of the florist shop the bouquet was sent from. “That’s odd.” Then Iris showed Glory the card with two single red hearts decorated with tiny, sparkling gems. There was no name. She flipped the card over but it was blank too.

“Well there’s a plot twist. Yowzers!”

There were very few folks who knew that Casa Blanca lilies and White Wizard lisianthus were Iris's two favourite flowers. The staff knew. So did several of her old boyfriends. So did Sonny.

"No way. Could it be?"

"Could it be what?"

"Never mind. You should be thrilled! All I got for Valentine's was a lousy dollar store card from Ben." Sheesh. No plans to meet up this week, not even a phone call. Daisy had mentioned she had seen Ben out a local club recently with another woman. Glory was *so* ready to move on.

Not long after the arrival of the mysterious bouquet, Violet called Glory to the phone.

"I'm sorry to bother you Glory. It's Marilyn." She sounded rattled. Gosh, it was an epidemic that day. "You may have a hunch why I'm calling. Can you please tell me who sent those roses?"

"Marilyn, I'm really sorry but the customer who sent them would not leave his name. He paid in cash. In fact, I waited on him. He was insistent on *not* giving his name."

"If I describe him to you ... who I think it is, can you tell me yes or no?" Glory listened to the description. Her answer was yes.

There wasn't anything Glory could do as she listened to Marilyn, who was compelled to unburden herself. Marilyn had gotten in way too deep in a situation that wasn't going to end well. She was reminded how often she thought florists would make great psychotherapists, with discretion and exceptional listening skills the prerequisite. Marilyn's story was safe with Glory.

No doubt the high school would want to keep the drug scandal quiet too which was a good thing. What had Sonny been thinking?

Her day ended late. Just as she was closing up, she noticed a lone Talisman-orange rose in the cooler. She wrapped the bloom to take home. Her mom had carried Talisman roses in her wedding bouquet. It was Glory's favourite too. She took it as a sign of courage and comfort.

As she arrived home she kicked off her boots, threw her winter coat on the sofa, placed the rose in a vase and sat down to eat her supper – take-out from the Corfu Grill. Her favourite meal was a treat to herself for Valentine's Day.

She opened a bottle of chilled white wine and poured herself a glass. Glory had made it through the day. Between Constable Foley, Marilyn, Sonny, Iris, Sir Thornbury and no-show Ben, the day had been an interesting roller coaster of emotions.

Her career choice held surprises each and every day. Some were more earth-shattering eye-openers than others. Others were down-right shockers. Today was all of the above.

A knock at her door caught her off guard. She switched on the porch light and opened the door. Marilyn stood there, looking disheveled and holding an overnight bag. She was sobbing as Glory hugged her. Few words were spoken. Sometimes conversations don't require a lot of dialogue.

Glory offered Marilyn a glass of wine. As Marilyn spoke freely and poured her heart out, Glory re-affirmed in silence, her own choices in life and savoured her resilience. Her shop served the community, gave her purpose and kept her in balance. Earlier, she'd left a voice message for Ben. She was no longer in a relationship and that was a good thing too.

Most every event in life, whether it is happy or sad, flows through a florist shop: birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, funerals and tragedies. Glory contemplated the stories she'd have to tell one day. Maybe she would write a TV sitcom pilot centred on a local florist shop. Her writers' group would love the idea!