

Thorns

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

It started on an unseasonably hot May afternoon. The air was as thick as a Midtown July. I'd already brought the exotics inside -- much as I hated to since exotics lured the casual buyer, the out-of-towner, the newly arrived soon-to-be-jaded Manhattanite. Exotics were what they expected from the city. Something unusual, something strange, everything they wanted available for a price.

The shop's interior was as cool as it could be with the front door open. In the summer, I kept the air at frigid, but I didn't have the budget for that in May. So I had the air at luke-cool and kept the misters running. The plants would survive a day or two of this, and if the weather stayed the same, I'd have to spring for the extra electricity.

I was rearranging everything when she came inside. I saw her in the big round shoplifter's mirror I'd installed long about 1985: before then, I thought that my mirrored cases protecting the most fragile blossoms would give me enough reflection to prevent the occasional theft.

Then I was naive enough to wonder who would steal plants. After all, resale was hard. But four teenagers with their eyes rolling inside their sockets from some drug I couldn't identify, waving semi-automatics and shouting, "_Mister, hey, Mister, open the goddamn cash register_", changed my focus on security forever.

She peered through the fronds of an apartment fern, bumped a bucket of past-their-prime rosebuds, and somehow managed to knock over -- and catch -- some pansy starts I saved for the locals who liked to put them in their windowboxes.

I watched her work her way to the counter, not liking the long white box she carried under one arm. She slammed the box on the counter and looked around, hoping to find someone who would answer questions or take a complaint. I sighed as softly as I could, left the calla lilies I'd been shearing for a funeral in the Village, and headed toward her, trying not to let my reluctance show on my face.

She was slender and almost pretty, with honey brown hair that marked her as a non-native New Yorker. Her lower lip was chapped -- either she bit it too much or no one had taught her about Chapstick -- and her skin was that blotchy pale most white New Yorkers managed to sustain year-round.

She shoved the box at me. It was long, and dented, with a dirt stain on the side, as if it'd been thrown or dropped onto the street. A gold sticker with the shop's name in italic script held the box closed.

I touched the edge, felt the familiar ridged cardboard, wondered if I'd find the roses I customarily put inside or something else, something worse.

"What can I do for you?" I asked, pretending I hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary.

"Don't send me any more of those." She shoved the box again. Her hand was shaking. I got the sense that her anger covered a deeper emotion, one I couldn't yet identify.

I slipped my finger between the box's lid and its interior, felt the softness of tissue paper, just like I would have expected from our store. With a single movement, I flicked the box open.

A dozen white roses, an expensive item at this time of year. They were wrapped in red tissue, just a smattering of baby's breath behind them, and some green fronds to give it all color.

A beautiful package. I'd worked on it myself. I had tied the white silk ribbon around the stems just that

morning.

"You don't care for roses?" I asked.

"I don't care for him." She shoved the box a third time. It slid halfway off the counter, and I had to catch it before the flowers spilled onto the floor.

"Ma'am, this is probably something you should take up with the gentleman -- "

"I would if I could," she snapped, "but I don't know who he is. He's stalking me."

I felt the fine hairs on the back of my neck rise. I fumbled inside the tissue for the card I remembered placing there.

I found it. One of the simpler ones with green leaves running along the side.

My heart is true, it said in my handwriting.

"You've seen him. You tell him to leave me alone." Her trembling had moved from her hands to her face. Her eyes filled with tears and she blinked angrily. Her lashes got wet, but the tears didn't fall.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't see him. This was a phone order."

I knew that much from the fact that I had written the card.

"Taken with a credit card?" she asked.

"Probably," I said. "I would have to check."

"Well, don't take any more, especially not for me." She whirled, stumbled into one of my taller orchids, and grabbed the pot as if it were a lifeline.

I came around the desk, balanced the orchid and put a hand on her back. Her muscles were rigid. She pulled away from me, glaring at me as she did.

"I'll do what I can," I said. "I'll need your name and address just to make sure."

She nodded, wiped a hand over her face, then mumbled, "Ruth-Anne Grant."

"Miss Grant, I'll make sure he doesn't send you any more flowers from here. Would you like me to give his information to the police?"

She blinked. I saw her expression clear as the idea reached her mind. I knew what she was going to ask before she asked it.

"Can you give the information to me?"

"Not his credit card information," I said. "I do have a name, though. Would you like that?"

"And a phone number?"

I wasn't sure of the ethics of that. "For that, I'd have to talk to the police."

She nodded, expression tight. "The name then. The name's a start."

I moved the orchid away from her, then went back to my desk. The desk was in the back, near the

workstation I used for more elaborate orders. The easy orders I prepared out front so that customers and passersby could watch if they so wished.

There was a large glass window that opened into the store, so that I could see the customers, and above that, the images from several security cameras that I bought last year.

Ruth-Anne Grant wandered through my orchids, touching the fragile blooms despite the signs that warned her not to, and looking at the other plants that covered every available space in the store. Outside, a young couple holding hands examined one of the apartment-size palm trees that stood just under the awning.

If this were a normal afternoon, I would have gone out and asked them if they were interested in a plant to live up their home. But it wasn't a normal afternoon. Ruth-Anne Grant's revelation had made certain of that.

Twenty years ago, I gave up my law practice to open a flower shop. I had discovered that I wasn't tough enough for the law, but I loved plants. I thought of flowers as a way of delivering joy or comfort. I spent extra time on bouquets for lovers, and when I designed funeral arrangements, I tried to give them a special touch, so that the bereaved would see the sympathy I had for them.

I never thought my gift would be used to terrorize someone.

My fingers were shaking as I sat behind the desk. My computer slept, the dark screen running the shop's logo against a backdrop of lilies.

I used the mouse to wake up the machine, then I went into the day's order files. I searched by recipient. My software was so well designed (thanks to a former lover) that I found Ruth-Anne's order quickly, even though I'd had a very busy morning.

The information rose in front of me like a rap sheet. The flowers were ordered by a Dwight Rhodes, and he paid with a platinum American Express card. He lived in Soho. I recognized the address as one of the newer coops that had sprung up in recent years.

There was nothing in his information that would have made me suspicious. I didn't even wonder why he came to my shop, which was nowhere near his home. A lot of people walked past here on their way to work; I would simply have figured if I had even thought about it at all that he was one of them.

As a double-measure, I checked Ruth-Anne Grant's address. She lived in the Village, one of those twisty neighborhoods with funky apartments and a lot of local color. I wondered how Rhodes had first seen her -- whether they worked near each other, or had stumbled into each other at some restaurant.

I checked the in-store window. Ruth-Anne was waiting by the counter now, leaning away from the roses as if they might poison her.

I scrawled his name down, then shut down the program before heading out front.

"Here," I said, handing her the paper, not wanting to speak his name aloud. "This is the man who ordered your flowers."

She stared at the paper for a long time. She had stopped shaking. In fact, she seemed calmer now than she had when she had entered the shop.

Outside, the couple shook their heads and walked on. A woman wearing black fondled the wisteria I had wrapped around a clay statue. A man leaned against a lamp post, drinking bottled water, and watched

her examine the plant.

"Could you tell me anything else?" Ruth-Anne had looked up from the paper. The blotchiness had left her skin. Now it was just pale. I could see exhaustion in her features, exhaustion so deep I wondered how she could function from day to day.

"I just don't feel right giving you anything else," I said. "I'm not even sure I should have given you his name."

"Just tell me this," she said. "Does he live in Manhattan?"

I nodded.

"Near me?"

I figured I could give her that much. I shook my head no.

"Is he Uptown or -- "

"I can't," I said. "Really. I'll talk to the police. I'll give them everything they need. Just send them in here, and they'll take care of it."

Her mouth closed, her lips tight over her teeth, almost as if she were physically holding the words back. She took a deep breath, obviously gathering herself, and then she extended her hand.

"You've been a lot of help. I'm sorry I was so upset when I came in."

I took her hand. She was so thin that I could feel the bones beneath her skin. "Anyone would be under the circumstances."

She nodded, then slipped her hand out of mine. She headed toward the front of the store.

I scurried around the counter, and said, "Wait."

She turned.

I grabbed a small pot of pansy starts. "Here," I said. "Take this."

Ruth-Anne frowned. "What for?"

"I just -- don't want you think of flowers as bad things. These'll grow in your kitchen window or on your balcony. If you let them, they'll take care of you all summer."

She studied them for a moment, just like she had studied the paper. Then she took them from me.

"Thank you," she said and she smiled. The smile gave her a bit of life, made me see what she had been like before this entire ordeal started. "I had forgotten how kind people can be."

And then she left.

I stood among the pansy starts for another ten minutes, just staring outside my shop. The mists came on once, caught me in their spray, and eased some of the heat. People wandered by on the sidewalk, sometimes touching, always admiring the plants.

The man, leaning against the lamp post, finished his bottle of water, and went inside the deli next door. A teenager skateboarded by, leaping off the curb so that he avoided my display.

I went back to my arrangement, but my heart wasn't in it. Instead, I grabbed the roses from the box, removed the damaged ones, and put them in a bucket of water.

I grabbed a sign from my desk drawer -- _Free. Take one_ -- and taped it to the bucket. Then I put the bucket outside.

As I did, a woman who looked wilted from the heat stopped in front of me.

"Free?" she said. "Really?"

"Really."

She picked up the most perfect rose and rubbed it against her cheek, her eyes half closed.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you."

And then she walked away.

I smiled, feeling better. Then I went back inside, feeling refreshed enough to give everything I had to finishing the funeral arrangement before my delivery guy showed up.

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The police arrived two days later.

Rain had broken the heat, and spring had returned to the city. My shop door was open, like it had been during the heat wave, but now cool breezes blew through, albeit cool breezes smelling of auto exhaust and garlic-ginger from the Asian-synth restaurant on the corner.

I knew from the moment the two men entered the store that they weren't customers. My customers browse. They touch leaves, sniff flowers, run hands lovingly on clay pots. These men strode in, coats flaring behind them. Plants trembled in their wake.

I watched from the counter, my finger hovering above the panic alarm I had installed after the teenager incident. If the men tried anything, I'd press the button and a siren would blare. I would use that moment to duck and run to the back, hoping I could make it out of the store before the men realized where I had gone.

They were both white with black hair and chiseled faces that would have been attractive if they hadn't had such hard lines. Broad shoulders, muscular arms, and beneath the coats, the bulge of shoulder holsters that hid guns.

The taller one reached me first. He had a flare of gray at his temples that softened the hard edge. If I had met him in a bar, I might have bought him a drink, hoping for some conversation before we had a dance or two. But I could tell from his posture that he was the kind of man who would never dance with another man. The only way he would enter the bars I frequented would be by accident.

"Mr. Shelton?" His voice was deep, authoritative. I jumped in spite of myself.

My hand trembled over that button, even though I knew at that point that this man was not going to rob me. "Yes?"

He flashed a badge at me. I struggled to see it clearly. My finger remained near the button.

"I'm Detective Whittig. This is Detective Barret." Whittig indicated the shorter man who had stopped

behind him. They both stared at me.

My hand had moved away from the button.

"May I see your badge again?" I asked, glad that my voice sounded calmer than I felt.

Whittig opened the badge wallet and I peered inside. It looked official enough.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"Two days ago, you ran a stolen credit card to pay for some flowers."

I probably did that more often than I realized, but no cops had ever visited me because of it.

"No credit card company has contacted me," I said.

"They wouldn't." The second detective, Barret, had one of those dry voices that sounded sarcastic even when he wasn't trying to be.

"It's common procedure to have a stolen card denied," I said, "or to be contacted by the credit card company if the transaction is unusual. Two days is a long time. I would have heard."

"Maybe normally," Whittig said, "but this isn't normal."

"Perhaps you'd better fill me in, then," I said. "Why wouldn't I have heard?"

"Because the cardholder is dead," Barret said. "He couldn't report it missing."

I frowned. "Even so, the credit card companies monitor transactions. They should have noticed something unusual."

"There's nothing unusual about buying flowers from a neighborhood vendor," Whittig said. "I'm sure someone would've noticed the card was missing, if it'd been used more than the once. But it wasn't. It hasn't been used at all since two days ago."

"So how do you think I can help you?" I asked. "Would you like me to look up the record? If the card was stolen, I probably won't have much you can go on."

Barret looked pointedly at my mirrors and the single camera hidden behind an extremely well-tended spider plant. "Maybe you got video of the person who used the card?"

"Two days ago?" I nodded. "I keep the tapes for months."

"Holy Christ," Whittig said to Barret. "Someone who actually follows the security company's directions."

"I've had a few bad experiences," I said. "I do everything I can to make sure I don't have any more. If you give me a name, I can look up the transaction, see what time it occurred, and give you the pertinent video."

Whittig nodded. "Let's do that."

He glanced at his partner. Barret didn't seem to have an objection.

"His name was Dwight Rhodes," Barret said.

I froze for perhaps a half second, maybe less. It felt like an eternity, like I had guilt written all over my

face. Guilt and fear and something else -- something I hadn't experienced in a long, long time.

Horror. I felt horror.

"Rhodes," I said, somehow managing to keep my voice even. "Dwight."

"Yes." Whittig was watching me. "Do you know him?"

"If he shopped here, he was an acquaintance." I retreated to primness. "The name doesn't ring any bells."

I hoped they couldn't see the lie.

"That's R-O-A-D-S?" I asked.

"No." Barret used that dry voice again. "R-H-O-D-E-S, like rhododendron."

"All right." I sounded just a little too hardy now. They had to know something was up. "I'll check that for you. The main order computer is in the back."

"Mind if we come with you?" Whittig asked.

"Actually," I started to say that I did, then I stopped myself. Much as I wanted to look this information up alone, I didn't want two police officers in the front of my store discouraging business. "I don't mind at all."

I led them into the back. It smelled of greenery, of the lilac shipment that had just come in as well as the last of the Easter lilies. Bouquets, some half finished, littered my worktable, and two orders still waited for customer pick-up in their white floral boxes.

I tapped the computer, hoping I was wrong about the name, that it wasn't the one I had given Ruth-Anne Grant. The detectives leaned over me, crowding me. I could hear their breathing, raspy and out of sync.

I found the records from two days before, and of course, there it was, the name, Dwight Rhodes, big as life. His Soho address was there, along with his phone number and the stolen credit card.

"That's it," Barret said unnecessarily.

I opened the file, revealing the order, the time it had come in, and when I had processed it.

Whittig swore. "Phone order."

I sat there, unable to move. My mouth was dry. I had given this man's name to Ruth-Anne Grant. She had been in bad shape.

She had thought he was her stalker.

And now he was dead, with detectives here, following up.

"Can we have a print-out of that anyway?" Barret asked.

The print-out would lead them to Ruth-Anne Grant. She was the one who got the flowers; she was the one who returned them. Even if she hadn't done anything, she would still tell them about her visit here.

About what I had done.

I used the key controls to hit print, and heard my printer snap to life a few yards away. The detectives had turned their attention to it; I was no longer of any use to them.

"I take it," I said, wishing that I could banish the primness from my voice forever, "this Rhodes was murdered."

Both detectives turned back to me, identical movements, bringing them closer and adding to that claustrophobic feeling.

"Didn't we say that?" Barret asked. "I thought we said that."

"We might have said he was just dead." Whittig's tone told me that he knew full well what they had said, that it had been deliberate.

"So he was," I said. "Murdered. In the last two days. Right?"

I was still staring at the screen. Both men were reflected in it. They looked at each other over my head.

"What's it to you?" Whittig asked.

"Because," I said, the primness finally gone, my voice shaking. "I might have made a big mistake."

"You knew him?" Barret asked.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know if I ever met him. But I gave his name away."

"His name?" Whittig sounded confused. "To who?"

The printer beeped. The paper had run out. I stood, grabbed some paper from the storage shelf, and put it in the paper tray. Then I manually restarted the printer. The order spit out, quickly and cleanly.

I handed it to Barret, and pointed to the sentiment on the card.

"I gave his name to Ruth-Anne Grant," I said, wishing I didn't have to say anything, wishing this had never happened. "She thought he was stalking her."

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It felt like I had passed a death sentence on someone, like I had been the person who had stood up in a large theater, pointed at a woman I'd only met once, and shouted, "Unclean!"

I could tell just from the looks on their faces that the cops thought they had their killer. Hell, I believed it too. The coincidence was too much. I'd learned a lot about investigations and coincidence and the ways crimes were committed in my old job, and I knew the odds favored Ruth-Anne Grant over everyone else.

They were going to talk to Ruth-Anne, and they would push her and poke at her, and make her say things she may not mean. And she would no longer be the victim of a stalking. She'd be the perpetrator of a crime.

I stood and went back to my computer, feeling like I hadn't had any sleep. Detached, tired, empty. I shuffled across the floor, and brushed against tables, nearly knocking over a globe filled with late-season forced narcissus.

I caught it, held it, feeling the bubble glass in my hands. It would be so easy to crush the globe, feel the bulbs and squeeze them to death as well.

Life was so hard to cultivate, so easy to destroy.

I set the globe on the rough-hewn antique table I used for my more fragile vases.

The door opened and I whirled, careful to miss the tables this time, although I brushed part of a palm and broke off a branch. For half a moment, I feared the cops were back.

They weren't. Stan, my delivery driver, stood in the doorway, looking at me with great annoyance. He was young, early thirties, and had visions of being a Broadway star.

He had the beauty for it, but not the chops. I'd seen him off-off-off Broadway, and he was so wooden that I was embarrassed. Still, one couldn't fault a man for his dreams. And with the money he earned from this, and his two other jobs, he paid for lessons at one of the acting academies on the upper west side.

"I knocked in back. Pounded in fact, and you didn't even bother. I'm half an hour behind now. I couldn't leave the truck back there and you know how hard it is finding parking up front."

"I'm sorry," I said. "The cops were here."

He flushed as if he were the one they were after. "Cops? You okay?"

"I don't know," I said, surprised that I made the admission. I never talked much with Stan. He was too attractive, too young, and frankly, a bit too dumb for me. I didn't want to get involved in anything more than the employer-employee friendship we seemed to already have.

"Nobody broke in, did they?" He had been driving for me when those kids came in with the shotguns. In fact, he was the one who helped me clean up the store.

I shook my head. "One of my customers was murdered."

I guess I could call Dwight Rhodes that, even though I knew he had never really been a customer. At least, not voluntarily.

"Damn, boss, I'm sorry."

I nodded, and decided that I had to move.

"I only have three deliveries this afternoon," I said, and hoped it was true. I couldn't remember any of the orders I'd taken. Everything left my brain when the police came through that door. "But if you finish early, check with me one last time. I'm a bit frazzled."

"No kidding." He pushed his way past the line of herb starts I kept for the locals. "I'd be too."

I knew I could trust him to check back if he had the chance. Stan was good that way. He'd been one of the best employees I ever had, even though he wasn't technically just mine. When I realized that I didn't have enough business to pay for all his delivery runs, I got together with a few other smaller shops. We shared Stan as our delivery driver. It covered his vehicle costs, and it took the burden off our small businesses. None of us counted him as an employee. We all paid him under the table, and he took care of his own costs.

Of course, the only price we paid on that was a future one: If Stan ever got that Broadway job he dreamed of, we'd lose him in the space of an afternoon.

I followed him into the back. He grabbed the largest arrangement, a cliched spray of carnations and greenery for a funeral, and carried it to the truck. I followed with the daisy basket I'd made for an

upscale boutique and the delicate vase filled with the palest pink roses I had.

We loaded up the truck and he left, after checking to make sure I was all right.

I said I was, and even I believed the lie. Until I found myself in the back, staring at the damn computer. I wasn't looking at the missed deliveries, even though I had promised myself I would.

I was doing something I should have done that very first day, when Ruth-Anne Grant crossed my threshold.

I should have run a search on her name, seen how many other deliveries she got from me, and who had sent them.

The computer found five, spaced over five months. They came at the same time on the same day of the month, as if the guy had a ritual.

And of course, each name who sent the flowers was different from the last. The bouquets were different too, and so were the prices, almost as if this mook knew how much was on that credit card he'd stolen and how much he could spend without getting caught.

Roses in May, hyacinths in April, tulips in March, a mixed bouquet in February, and an expensive bonsai -- one I had nurtured for nearly a decade -- in January. That one broke my heart as if this stalker had attacked me personally.

If Ruth-Anne Grant knew the bonsai was from the stalker, she had probably thrown it out.

All that work, all that love, lost.

Just like Dwight Rhodes was lost.

I did another search, this time for the names on the credit cards, to see if the stalker had used them more than once. He hadn't, and they had never shopped here.

Then I printed out the Ruth-Anne Grant order files. As they chugged out of my too-slow ink jet printer, I studied them. Phone orders each one, each with a romantic message, each sent anonymously.

And those dates...

They weren't really enough to let a woman know she had anything more than a secret admirer. What made a woman think she had a stalker? Frequent, persistent attention. Phone calls. Letters. Gifts.

Many, many gifts.

And clearly this guy wasn't one who liked face-to-face contact. He ordered with false names and left no fake name on his deliveries.

The only other things I could tell about him were obvious: he had opportunity to get other people's credit cards without them reporting the theft to the credit card companies, and he knew his flowers. He bought what was in season.

Frequent, persistent gifts. Once a month wasn't frequent enough, and Ruth-Anne Grant's anger made me think the flowers were a theme.

Persistent. That much was clear. But smart enough to cover his tracks over and over again. With the credit cards, with the names, with the anonymous messages.

I gripped the papers, still hot from my printer, and sank into a nearby chair. Ruth-Anne Grant hadn't been lying about the stalker.

I whirled in my chair, grabbed the phone, and dialed Flowers by the Book, a boutique book and flower shop nearby. We shared Stan, and I liked to talk to the owner, Odele Page, an opinionated woman in her mid-fifties.

I explained the situation, leaving the murder and the police out of it, by saying that I thought maybe a client of mine had a stalker, and would she look up the client's name, see if she had anything on file with anonymous cards, and fax me the information?

She offered to do it then and there, on the phone. I cradled the receiver between my ear and my shoulder as I moved around the back, too stressed to stay still. I checked the mirrors and the door, making certain I was alone.

All the while, I listened to her computer system beep and ping, her fingers tapping lightly on the keys. She would sigh and then sigh again, and finally she gasped.

"Ruth-Anne Grant," Odele said, and recited the address.

I stopped between the blue vases and the white ceramics I bought from a local artist. "That's the one."

"I've sent her something the first week of every month since December."

"On an exact date?" I asked.

She paused for a moment, and I heard the sounds of keys again. "Looks like as close to the third as possible."

Mine were around the twelfth.

"Can you fax me the information?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "It seems private."

"The only private thing on there is Ruth-Anne Grant's address, and I already have that," I said. "The rest has got to be stolen credit cards and false personal information."

Still, Odele hesitated.

"Look, Odele, all I'm going to do is give this information to the police. I hope that they'll go after this guy, whoever he is. Can I at least tell them to contact you?"

"I'll fax you," she said, and hung up. I smiled. I had figured she might respond like that. Odele was, after all, a typical former hippie, aversion to the police and all.

Odele wasn't my only phone call. I contacted all the other florists who shared Stan. A few of them hadn't heard of Ruth-Anne Grant, but a few others had, all of them near my neighborhood, all of them boutique shops like mine.

Each shop had its particular day, and they were close enough that I began to get a sense of what Ruth-Anne Grant had gone through. She was getting flowers every day of the week, anonymously, for five months -- the December offering from Odele being the first.

It was also the most unique: a holiday package of greens, mistletoe, and holly around a large poinsettia.

Along with the plants came a bag of Christmas cookies from a nearby bakery, and various teas from all over the world.

But the centerpiece was Odele's specialty, a large-sized, stunning gift book that she had first bought for the previous Valentine's Day: Elizabeth Barret Browning's *„Sonnets from the Portuguese“*, with illustrations by well-known New York gallery artists.

Love poems, and love art, along with flowers, sweets, and tea. Anyone would have been happy to receive a present like that. And the first offering would have seemed marvelous -- a gift from a mysterious admirer, perhaps even someone Ruth-Anne Grant thought she knew (and secretly hoped cared for her as much as she cared for him).

Over time, though, as the gifts became routine, as she started asking her friends and colleagues who sent them, Ruth-Anne Grant must have realized that the presents which had given her so much pleasure had a sinister undertone to them.

A bell tinkled in the main part of the shop. A young man, no more than twenty-five, stood between the orchids and the eucalyptus, looking lost. He wore a black suit -- a Ralph Lauren knock-off by the way it gathered at the seams -- and a pale pink shirt. His tie combined both colors in just the way a sales clerk might think was attractive.

He didn't have a lot of money, then, but he had a job that required others to think he had.

I sighed and set down the faxes from the various shops. Normally, I would have bounded into the front room. I loved helping customers.

One of my simple pleasures, which might now be gone. Because as I stood in the back, my fingers stained with the ink from my cheap fax, I found myself wondering who this man, this new customer, wanted to hurt.

* * * *

I helped him anyway. I made myself smile as I walked out of the backroom, and I questioned him like I would any other new customer. We talked about his sister, the one with MS, and how much she loved flowers. We talked about his critically ill mother, who was worried about his sister's care after she was gone, and we talked about his budget, which, as I expected, was tight.

Normally the conversation would have been enough for me, but my mood was so odd, my discomfort so great, I flirted with him -- not obviously, but just enough to let him feel the personal interest.

He finally pulled out his wallet and showed me his sister's latest picture. She was younger than he was -- high school, still -- and cute in that way that fresh-faced way most teenagers had.

As I studied her, as I saw that spark of intelligence in her eyes, mixed with a touch of sadness, I realized I had seen a lot of family photos over the years. I was nosy and intrusive and garrulous, and while most of my customers liked that, a few never came back because they didn't want the conversation.

I handed the wallet back to the young man, undercharged him for two arrangements of spring flowers -- one for Mom and one for the sister -- and sent him on his way.

Then I stood near my cash register, trying to identify what I was feeling. It was the edge of an idea, a memory, a thought that I had nearly captured just a moment before.

When I was looking at the photograph. When I was realizing how I interviewed all of my new clients.

I would never have sold that bonsai over the phone. I always made it a policy to hand-sell special items, to make certain the customer saw them, and approved of them.

I had talked to him.

He had told me whatever story he had made up -- or had he made it up? Had he convinced me of his delusion, that there was some special woman out there for him, some woman he was trying to impress, some woman that he loved?

What would I have told him? Bonsais needed nurturing, a tough hand but a gentle one. Bonsai's weren't for everyone, but the person who appreciated them had a botanist's heart.

I wished I had found out more about Ruth-Anne Grant. Something about her, or this sick creep's fantasy of her, convinced him to send her flowers. Convinced him -- convinced me -- that she deserved a plant that required a commitment.

I shut down the register, and hurried to the back, stopping in front of my stack of video tapes.

I had January.

All five weeks of it.

My hand shook as I looked for the date, and when I found it, written across the label in magic marker, my heart nearly stopped.

"Gotcha," I said as I pulled the tape out of the pile. "You son of a bitch, I've got you now."

* * * *

And the hell of it was, I remembered him.

As I watched the tape, images grainy and unfocused, not professional at all, I went back to that afternoon.

It was dark at 3. A storm had threatened all day, and finally hit, mixing rain, snow and sleet. I had stood near the window for a long time, moving plants, wishing that the old building which housed the store had a better heating system and better insulation.

He had come in, black hair dusted with snow, a traditionally handsome man wearing a silk suit which looked, to my inexperienced eye, like Armani. He had the body for the suit, broad-shouldered, narrow hiped -- legitimately GQ.

I'd let him browse a bit -- sometimes the high-end types stumbled into the wrong store to kill a moment before a meeting -- but after a while I realized he was actually shopping, and I went to help him.

He had flirted with me -- it was visible on the tape, his hand on my sleeve ever so casual, the way he tilted his head so that he could look into my eyes, the slight smile.

I remembered him, not just because he fit my idea of gorgeous or because we had flirted, but because I had led him to the bonsai's. I had talked him into it -- for his lover. The lover he had described.

A man.

* * * *

My hands shook as I searched for that original order form in my stack of faxes. Mine were at the bottom, of course. I should have looked for them there. And sure enough, the evidence was before me.

I hadn't sent that first plant to Ruth-Anne Grant. No, it had gone to R.A. Grant at Ruth-Anne's address. R.A. A deliberate lie.

None of the others were lies. Over the phone, he had ordered flowers for a woman. In person, just that once, he'd told me, convinced me, he was ordering for a man.

I sank into my chair. I no longer try to hide who I am. I learned that lesson long ago the hard way, when I was an upscale defense attorney with an infatuation for the civil litigator down the hall.

He had outed me, vindictively, one afternoon in a staff meeting. I had flirted without realizing what I was doing, hoping that no one saw my infatuation, hoping that no one understood.

And his outing was cruel, in an Upstate old-boys club which, in the mid-eighties, wasn't half as liberal as it thought it was. I wasn't fired; I was shunned, given cases so obviously tailored to forcing me out of the firm that I should have fled in panic.

Instead, I decided to retaliate. I invited the litigator's wife to lunch and, instead of eating with her, I gave her flowers. I still remember how her eyes lit up, the way she had smiled at me. It was clear litigator boy hadn't given her flowers in a long time, and she found them special.

And at that moment, I realized I didn't have it -- the balls, the stomach, the cut-throat attitude that made the best attorneys. I couldn't even avenge myself on a man who had made my job hell.

I couldn't take that light from that woman's eyes.

Instead, I decided that I couldn't be miserable for the rest of my life trying to be someone I wasn't and I gave it all up. I sold my house, my wardrobe and my life, and came to Manhattan and bought, on a whim, a flower shop which I made my own.

Flowers saved people; flowers shouldn't destroy them.

And somehow he -- this stalker, this GQ man who was obsessed with another person without regard to that person -- somehow he had known who I was, what I believed in, and he subverted it.

He used it, to play his little games.

* * * *

Sometimes, with the memory of my past, I get a kind of clarity. Not an understanding of who or what I am -- I know that deeply now -- but a way of seeing the world, the patterns I had learned in law school, the ways that I was supposed to view the world in the adversarial system I had found myself in.

The pattern here, the one that I chose to focus on, was a simple one: In the beginning, this jerk ordered in person. I confirmed by looking at the various faxes I collected, and it was clear.

Like my bonsai, like Odele's specially book-bound package, each of those first orders had been difficult, the kind of order that was almost impossible to make over the phone.

And because he wasn't thinking like a criminal then, Ruth-Anne's stalker had to have gone into shops he was familiar with. Maybe he had seen me around or talked to me before. I certainly would have flirted with him.

Odele's store wasn't far away, and neither were the others he had used. He lived near here, and he shopped near here, and eventually he gained a system, a system that involved stealing credit cards and using them to place the orders.

He had to have started that before he saw me, though, because the average Armani owner had no need to steal funds, and probably could think of a thousand other ways to cover his tracks. Like cash, for instance. Cash required no names, and wasn't even remarkable. A lot of people paid cash for a bouquet, only to decide at the last minute, to have that bouquet delivered.

And there were certainly enough flower shops in the Five Boroughs to keep a cash-paying stalker in plants for decades.

No, either he had stolen that outfit or --

I paused, frowned, and went back to my video. The graininess worked against me. I had been so concerned with this guy's face and his expensive clothes that I hadn't looked at his shoes.

Shoes were always the tip-off. Expensive shoes were much more comfortable than cheap ones, so even if a rich guy had no pretensions, he wore good shoes.

To my disgust, the stalker stayed behind tables and large plants. I couldn't get a good image of the shoes -- until the last few frames.

When he came over to pay for the bonsai, his shoes appeared briefly in the center of the image.

They were black. But I couldn't tell if they had been polished or not -- the tape was too dark. However, these shoes, these so-called expensive man's shoes, had an interesting feature.

They had thick soles, nearly tennis shoe thickness, which implied rubber.

Only one group of people wore shoes like that with clothes like his. Waiters. Bartenders. Guys who were on their feet all day. Retail employees generally didn't have to dress up. If they did, they got the shoes too because it was all part of the package.

Only in restaurants did guys have to wear the clothes without the matching shoes. Restaurants often ordered outfits for their staff, sometimes one or two, expecting them to wear the clothing on the job and near the building. But they never bought shoes. The waiters bought the shoes themselves, and of course, they couldn't afford the expensive ones. They went to Jersey, shopped in Payless or Wal-Mart or Target, and bought shoes they could afford. Shoes with thick rubber soles so that their feet wouldn't ache quite so bad at the end of the day.

And what else did waiters do? They whisked away credit cards in little leather receipt books, discreetly running the cards behind the bar or in a back room so that the restaurant patrons didn't have hear the constant chugging of the computerized credit card machine, vomiting out receipt after receipt, authorizing dollars and deducting the amount from a pile of plastic.

An old client of mine used to substitute one credit card for another, giving him a few days of use before the card holder realized that the platinum Visa in his wallet didn't have his name on it. Ruth-Anne's stalker could have done that, or he could have done something even simpler.

If he was a waiter, standing in the back of a restaurant, he could have copied the card number, the expiration date, and the name onto his order pad. Then he could have used those card numbers for phone orders with places like florists. We ran the cards, but we never checked that the person on the phone was the actual owner of the card.

We never checked because who, in their right mind, would steal a credit card and order flowers with it?

At least, that was the assumption. And like all assumptions, it was wrong.

* * * *

I had a full presentation for Detectives Whittig and Barret when they returned: a print-up of the video image, right down to the shoes, faxes of invoices -- all made out to Ruth-Anne Grant, a list of restaurants nearby that required its staff to wear silk suits, and a suggested theory as to what had actually happened.

I actually had her stalker's name, but I didn't tell them because I still knew a few things about the law. Any good defense attorney would make it impossible for the prosecutor to use evidence gathered by a citizen like me.

I had made a print of the best video image and showed it around. It only took me a few days to find Ruth-Anne Grant's stalker. His name was Glenn Haines, and he worked at an upscale restaurant between my place and Odele's. It was called Chez Nouveau.

Maybe I kept the name for security. Maybe I did it so that I could make certain that Whittig and Barret got the right guy. Or maybe I did it because I had an inclination to take care of the matter myself.

Even though I never did. That had been Ruth-Anne Grant's mistake. They indicted her on first-degree murder charges the day before I handed over the stalker information. Whittig and Barret seemed so uninterested in catching the stalker that I thought at first they weren't going to follow up.

But they did -- not to find the stalker -- but to solidify their case against Ruth-Anne Grant. While I'd been thinking like a defense attorney who would use the information to get a jury to acquit, Whittig and Barret were building a case.

If they could prove that Ruth-Anne Grant had a stalker, they had motive for first-degree murder.

Of course, Whittig and Barret never told me that. They just thanked me for the information, did the additional research, and arrested Haines. Then the District Attorney's office, always smarter than I wanted to give them credit for, got an earlier trial date for him.

If he pleaded to the charge or got found guilty, they'd have a paper record for Ruth-Anne Grant's motive.

And I couldn't argue because I got Haines off the street. The only good thing in all of this was that Haines wouldn't hassle anyone else. His stalking days would end -- at least until he got out of prison.

* * * *

But it hasn't ended for me.

I dream about Ruth-Anne Grant sometimes. She never speaks. All she does is slam that box of roses down on my counter, and looks at me, as if I'm the one who stalked her, hurt her, and ultimately destroyed her life.

When I wake up, I try to tell myself that she made the choice. She was the one who didn't do her research to see if Dwight Rhodes had sent her all those flowers. Instead, she had taken her gun and waited for him in the hallway, shooting him before he could even get close.

Her choice, not mine.

But those thoughts never comfort me. Because I remember how harassment feels, how it makes you so

very helpless, and how stopping it seems impossible.

And I know how terror feels -- not for weeks and months and years, like she went through but just for a brief instant, when those teenagers, waving those semi-automatics, came into my store and shouted, _Mister, hey, Mister, open the goddamn cash register_.

I haven't been the same since. I still tense when a kid under twenty comes in, and I look over my shoulder when I lock up at night, and I keep my security tapes, long past the dates the security company says it's necessary.

I know what terror feels like, and it makes me wonder what I would do to those kids if they kept coming into my store, never hurting me, always threatening me.

I'd never feel safe again.

And if I ran into them on the street -- or, God forbid, some idiot told me their names, I couldn't guarantee, even now, that I wouldn't seek them out and give them a taste, just a taste, of what they gave me.

I used to believe in the law, until I realized that the people behind it -- me and that civil litigator -- were just as flawed as the people before it.

I used to believe in myself until I gave an innocent man's name to a woman who wanted to kill him.

And I used to believe in the healing power of flowers until one unseasonably hot May afternoon, when I learned that even the most fragile blossom can be as potent a weapon as a locked and loaded gun.

-- END --