

DOWN IN THE *DUMPSTER*

Dumpster Diva—Book One

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From Page:
For Rossignole: we're having one of our episodes!

From Susan:
To Miriam, my newest grandbaby.

“What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.” -Philippians 3:8, NIV

CHAPTER ONE



Cassie Willis drove her truck into the senior housing complex and lined up to lift the dumpster next to the one-story community center. On a balmy day like this, she could think of a lot of things she'd rather be doing than driving a trash compactor.

A gray-haired man she recognized came out of the community center and waved at her. Cassie lifted a hand and smiled at him. She always looked forward to seeing the friends she'd made at Silver Dawn Estates, but she hoped they wouldn't sidetrack her today. Her dispatcher tended to get cranky if she got behind schedule on her route.

She pulled a lever, smoothly raising the dumpster and carrying it over the top of the cab. It tipped and dropped its contents into the back of the compacting truck with a satisfying *plop-plop*.

As she lowered the container into its place on the ground, her radio chattered. Mac, of course, checking up on her. When the dumpster once again sat solidly in place, where the complex's spry but aging residents could easily access it, she grabbed the radio's handpiece.

"Yeah, Mac?" Hastily she added, "Oh, this is 23." As if he

didn't know that. She made a face to no one. Mac insisted on proper procedure, which included giving her truck number every time she called Reuben's Rubbish Removal's headquarters.

"Where are you, Sandi?"

Cassie gritted her teeth. That was another thing she didn't like about her dispatcher, whom she'd never seen. Mac always called her "Sandi." It wasn't really Mac's fault, though. Archie Reuben, the owner of RRR, had decided when he hired her that her full name, Cassandra, was too much of a mouthful. Had he asked her if she had a nickname? No, he had not. Instead, he'd told the dispatcher to call her Sandi. She'd tried to correct Mac once, but he was pro-efficiency and extremely anti-chitchat on company time, so she gave up and answered to Sandi.

"I'm at Silver Dawn." She glanced at the dashboard clock. "And I pulled in here right on time."

"Good, but it's not the time you arrived I'm worried about. It's what time you leave that place. Make sure you don't stop and gab with those old ladies."

Cassie huffed out a breath. Some days she really wanted to give Mac a piece of her mind. But she needed this job, so she just said, "Will do. Catch you later." She clicked off and replaced the handpiece before he could say anything else and checked her mirrors before putting the truck in gear.

As she rounded the corner into the cul-de-sac, where several of her acquaintances lived, Lucy Jansen tried to flag her down from her front yard. Cassie waved back and resolutely kept going.

"Oh, Cassie! There you are." Another woman had spotted her. Nita Bradley hurried along the sidewalk, her gray curls bobbing as she tried to keep pace with the truck.

Cassie lowered the window and hit the brake. "Good morning, Nita."

"I don't suppose you could help me just for a minute, dear." Nita stopped and stood gazing up at Cassie, hugging herself as she caught her breath.

“Well ...” Cassie hated the feeling these requests gave her. The elderly folks needed some help, and if she had nothing better to do, she wouldn’t mind. But she was on RRR’s clock, after all. “Is it something Kieran could help you with?”

“He’s mowing the lawn on the other side of the complex. It won’t take but a minute. I promise.”

Cassie sighed and turned off the engine, then she swung the door open and hopped down from the cab. Her golden braid slapped her between the shoulder blades as she landed.

“I was so proud of myself,” Nita confided as they walked quickly back toward her bungalow. “I got up early and baked a pie for tonight’s social in plenty of time to have it done and cooling when I left to open the shop.”

Cassie nodded. She’d been to Nita’s cozy bead shop, Bead Dazzled, a couple of times and admired the septuagenarian for having such a well-run and attractive business.

“Well, wouldn’t you know it? The pie ran over.” As Nita opened the front door of her little house, the piercing beep of a smoke alarm hit Cassie’s ears. Nita grimaced. “I couldn’t shut the fool thing off. Can you help?”

“Sure, Nita.” Cassie wrinkled her nose as she dashed across the smoky kitchen. “Can I stand on this chair?”

“Certainly.”

The annoying beep went on as Cassie climbed onto the kitchen chair and fumbled for the reset button on the smoke detector over the sink. The smoke was thicker near the ceiling. Suddenly the beeping stopped, and Cassie dropped her arms in relief.

“There. I think you’re all set.” She stepped down and set the chair back in its place at the table. “Better open some windows.”

“I will. Thank you, dear. I wasn’t sure what to do.”

“I’m glad I could help.” Cassie was also glad Nita hadn’t tried to balance on the chair herself. She’d much rather shut off a smoke detector than find her friend on the floor with a broken hip.

“I need to get over to the shop, or I’d offer you a cup of tea,” Nita said.

“Oh, no thanks. I’ve got to stay on schedule today. Take care.” Cassie hurried out the door and down the sidewalk. She climbed up into her truck and drove the last few yards to where the community’s second dumpster rested—at the farthest point of the cul-de-sac, near the tool shed.

Kieran Harmon approached the RRR truck on his riding lawnmower. Cassie groaned. Kieran was even worse than the old folks when it came to distractions. His father was the complex superintendent, and Kieran did maintenance around the housing complex. When she’d started picking up the trash at Silver Dawn two months ago, he’d taken a shine to her. Nearly every time she made the dumpster run here, Kieran came over and tried to convince her to go out with him. She had nothing against him personally, but he wasn’t her type. His invitations to karaoke sessions and wrestling matches hadn’t changed her mind.

He shut off the lawnmower and climbed awkwardly from the machine. He was a little taller than Cassie and seemed not very athletic.

“Hi, Cassie. How’s the trash biz?”

The window was still open from when she’d greeted Nita, and she couldn’t ignore him. “Hi, Kieran. Same old, same old.”

“Need any help?” His hangdog brown eyes were a little bloodshot this morning.

“No, thanks. I can handle it just fine. It’s my job.”

“Right. Hey, you busy Saturday night? They’ve got a karaoke championship going on at the Blue—”

“Yeah, I’m busy that night. Sorry.”

“Oh. Sure. I’m ... I’m going to enter.”

She forced a smile. “That’s great. I wish you success.” If the whistling Kieran did while raking leaves or puttying windows was any indication, his competitors had nothing to fear.

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Her radio crackled and she grabbed it, uncharacteristically thankful for the interruption.

“Twenty-three.”

“Sandi?”

She closed her eyes for an instant. A gentle spirit was what she needed. “Yeah, Mac?”

“Are you still at Silver Dawn?”

“Uh, yeah, but I’m just about to leave.”

“You’re five minutes behind schedule. What happened?”

“Look, if I take time to explain, it will be six minutes. I’ll talk to you later.”

She ended the call feeling guilty and reached for the gearshift.

Kieran shoved his hands into the pockets of his blue-white-and-black camouflage pants, obviously intending to stand rooted to the spot and watch her dump the container of trash. Several other people—residents of the community—had gathered a little farther down the sidewalk and were watching too. They must be hard up for entertainment around here. She smiled to herself. Maybe she’d advise Kieran to invite the senior crowd to cheer him on at the karaoke contest.

Cassie lined up the forklift apparatus on the front of the truck and locked the container on, then pulled the lever to lift and dump it. She waited while it rose and passed over the cab. *Plop-plop-plop.*

“Hey!” Kieran’s mouth hung open as he pointed wildly upward.

“What?” Cassie yelled.

“Shut it off! Shut it off!”

Cassie scowled at him and stopped the machinery with the dumpster suspended above the cab.

“It looked like ...” His eyes bugged out as he continued to stare, his cheeks going white.

“What is it?”

“I-I think—uh—a person just fell out of the dumpster into your truck.”

A flash of adrenaline made her shake. It couldn't be true. Or could it? She'd heard of homeless people sleeping in dumpsters in foul weather. But this was early June, and it hadn't rained in days.

“Kieran, are you putting me on?”

He turned toward her, his face pale. “No way. It's a—” He gulped.

In the sideview mirror, Cassie could see the knot of residents edging closer to her truck. She stuck her head out the window and called, “Anybody see anything odd when I dumped the container?”

Ed and Flossie shook their heads. Lucy called, “No, Cassie,” so quickly that Cassie wondered if she was hoping Kieran would be caught pulling a prank.

She turned on Kieran. “This is a trick, isn't it?”

“No. Honest.”

What if it was true and she'd started the compactor? Her throat went dry. She lowered the dumpster, returning it to its usual place on the ground, and opened her door.

“You'd better not be teasing me, because I'm already late.”

“I wouldn't do that, Cassie. Not to you.” The way his eyes lingered on her face made her cringe.

She turned her back to him and scaled the ladder on the side of the truck body. If she had to climb down in there, she would scalp Kieran. She hated climbing inside the compactor. Of course, she had to do it at the end of each day to hose out the truck, but if she had to do it an extra time, and with half a ton of garbage in there ...

She leaned over the edge of the opening and froze. A man lay face down, half buried in trash. His unruly blond hair splayed over a black plastic garbage bag, and his arm stuck out above his head. Cassie swallowed back nausea. Was he alive? Quickly, she climbed down and jumped into the driver's seat to

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lock the compactor so it couldn't start, even if anyone tried to pull the switch while she was out of the cab.

For a few seconds she shut her eyes, not wanting to move again. Her stomach roiled, and she found herself praying in panic.

All right, Lord, I could use a little of that power and confidence You promised to give me.

"Cassie? You okay?" Kieran had stepped up to her door.

"Yeah. Let me out."

He moved back, and she got out again then slowly mounted the ladder. She could feel the eyes of the elderly neighbors watching her. At the top, she looked down toward them. Hal Tinley and Gerald Rogers had joined the others. All of them stared at her. Cassie pulled in a shaky breath and went over the side.

Silver Dawn was her second stop of the day, so the truck was only about a quarter full and not too smelly yet. That came later in the day, after she'd started compacting people's leftover spaghetti and used diapers from the daycare center up the street. But dropping down into the truck next to a man who was comatose—or worse—made her feel a bit lightheaded.

What was she doing? She should have just called the dispatcher when she saw the man.

Well, she was in it now—up to her thighs in Hefty bags. Gingerly, she reached out and grasped the man's wrist beside his watchband. She didn't wait to feel for a pulse. Just the cold stiffness of the arm told her. The man from the dumpster was definitely dead.