

CHAPTER TWO



Cassie had seen a lot of strange things in dumpsters since starting work at “Triple R,” as she called Reuben’s Rubbish Removal, but she decided this one definitely took the cake. Her brain went through a series of attempts to handle the shock. First she had to avoid losing her morning coffee and croissant. Then she studied the corpse.

Though she couldn’t see his face, Cassie noted his fair hair with no gray in it. Surely he was too young to be a resident at Silver Dawn Estates. He was dressed in faded blue jeans, a black jacket, and running shoes. Before she could pin down an estimate on his age, she noticed dark red stains on a white garbage bag near him and her brain began sending new signals.

What are you doing? The police need to investigate this, not you. You’re probably messing up the crime scene.

Hastily, she made her awkward way over the garbage bags and loose refuse to the ladder and climbed back out of the truck.

“Well?” Kieran asked breathlessly.

“Um, yeah ... you were right. There’s a guy—a man in there. He’s dead.”

“Whoa,” Kieran said, apparently at a loss for further eloquence. He took a shaky step backward.

“I think I’d better call my dispatcher.” Cassie returned to the cab of her truck trying to respond to yet more messages from her stunned mind. She reached for the radio then thought better of it. No sense letting the entire fleet of RRR drivers hear this. She took out her cell phone.

Hearing Mac’s voice at the other end snapped her out of her stupor at once.

“Sandi?” Adam MacAllister asked with a touch of surprise. Usually he was the one calling *her*—and over the radio. “Have you left Silver Dawn yet?”

“Um ... no, but—”

Adam rolled his eyes. If she got behind schedule again today, Archie would blame *him*, and he’d taken the blame one time too many. “I don’t want to hear it. I want you on the road five minutes ago and counting.”

“Mac—”

“Look, I know people have problems. You like to help. Hey, I like to help too. But you know what? You can help on your own time. It’s always the same at that place. One of the old folks sinks their hooks into you, and then the whole bunch of them walks all over you. Your trouble is, you need to learn to say no.”

It sounded harsh, but it was true. Ever since Sandi started working for the company, Adam had been reduced to playing radio tag with her each time she stopped at the senior complex. It was his job to make sure the drivers kept moving. Getting in her good deeds was nice, but it seemed as if Sandi always had a mammoth excuse ready for this particular stop. Adam was convinced she procrastinated on purpose.

“Yeah, but would you—”

“No, I wouldn’t.” Adam knew he shouldn’t cut her off, but Sandi had rubbed him the wrong way for too long. “I wasn’t impressed the time Ethel needed her light bulb changed—”

“Lucy,” Sandi corrected him.

“Whatever. Or the time what’s-his-face shot his TV set during a cowboy movie. It’s not our problem, okay?”

“What if the problem is in *our dumpster*?”

Adam sighed. “What kind of problem?”

“Like ... a body problem.”

“What?”

“There’s a dead guy ... in my truck, actually. But he was in the dumpster. I didn’t see him and I ... I dumped the body into my truck.” Her voice trailed off into a husky whisper.

“Oh, boy ... please, tell me he was dead before you dumped him.”

“He was,” Sandi said quickly. “He’s already cold.”

“You touched him?”

“I thought he might just be knocked out or something, so I checked. Please don’t yell at me, Mac. I’m not having the best day.” She sighed. “What should I do?”

A little unsure of the answer himself, Adam opened his bottom desk drawer and pulled out a little-used manual of the company’s emergency procedures. He should have known something major was wrong when Sandi called in on the phone instead of the radio. With her track record for non-emergencies, he hadn’t thought about it.

As he flipped the pages of the manual, he told her, “Well, call the police for sure. Leave your truck where it is and stay where they can find you when they show up. And don’t touch anything else!”

“Okay, okay. I don’t *want* to touch anything else.”

Sans any suitable warning, she hung up. Adam huffed out a breath. Once again, she had not followed protocol. Nothing new there. Sure, she was under stress, but these little annoyances were just part of the big pain in the neck that made up Sandi.

As he looked over the emergency procedure leaflets, Adam thought to himself that of all the people for something like this to happen to, it *would* be Sandi. It was too ironic. She’d run out

of excuses to fall behind schedule, so Providence had landed one right in her lap—well, her dumpster. Of course, it wasn't every day a Reuben's Rubbish Removal driver had to deal with a corpse. That had to be a shock. The itty-bitty guilt grew larger. He didn't want to think he might be too harsh with Sandi.

But dumpster hauling was really a man's job anyway, wasn't it? Why would any woman want to do a dirty grunt job like hauling garbage when she could be doing something more sensible like secretarial work or teaching? He knew that was a stereotype, but he liked the idea that someday when he met the right woman, she would be quiet and polite. Intelligent, of course, but not too proud.

Adam ran a hand through his hair, ashamed of his thoughts. He didn't want to be that kind of a boss, or even that type of man.

Somehow, whenever he started down this avenue of thought, Adam remembered Cassie, the new young woman at his church. He didn't know her well yet, but from what he had seen, she had all the qualities he was keeping an eye out for—poise, manners, godliness.

Cassie was talented too. Someone had discovered that she played the piano, and Pastor Nickerson had already asked her to play an offertory. Adam wished she could have kept playing—the music seemed to pour out of her fingers and not from the piano.

He told himself to focus. He had some red tape to deal with. And maybe some yellow crime scene tape.

Living in town had conditioned Cassie to the wail of sirens, but now the morning air seemed much too silent without one. How long would it take the Knottsville Police to arrive? It wouldn't be so bad if Kieran weren't the only one to talk to. Or rather, listen to.

Looking past her truck, she saw the Silver Dawn residents bunched together, whispering. The knot of senior citizens, as a unit, moved a step closer.

“You okay, Cassie?” called Gerald, the retired music teacher. She recalled his saying he had tuned the piano at her church on occasion.

Not knowing what to say, she nodded and waved. She wasn’t sure how much the residents had seen or heard by now. Kieran left her briefly to “inform them that there’s a situation.” Who knew what he would actually tell them?

At last she heard the blare that ordinarily annoyed her so much. The arrival of the police brought the rest of the senior residents outside to see what the commotion was. They formed a little crowd around the truck and dumpster, watching and calling out greetings to Cassie and conjectures to each other as the two officers began their work.

“Excuse me, folks,” the younger policeman called, “you’ll have to move back.”

The seniors, as one, took two giant steps away, as if they were playing a backward game of *Mother, May I*.

Cassie barely heard herself talking as she explained to the older officer about finding the body. She heard the younger one using the car’s radio to request backup and a medical examiner.

Kieran, though he meant to help, had the opposite effect. He energetically told his small part in the drama, of seeing the body fall and alerting Cassie. He insisted that Cassie looked as though she was in shock and should probably lie down for a while.

He leaned toward the police officer and said, in a man-to-man tone, “I could escort her to a suitable place, away from where it happened.”

“I’m fine, Kieran,” Cassie snapped. “I’m not going to faint or anything.”

Kieran clamped his mouth shut and edged away.

In the huddle of onlookers, one of the residents raised

clasped hands behind Kieran as if to say, “Rah, Cassie! You tell him.” It was Nita, the bead shop owner. So, the discovery of the body had kept her from rushing off to open her shop. Cassie felt a twinge of guilt, as if it was somehow her fault.

She shifted her gaze to the young policeman, who eyed her uncertainly.

“Really,” she said. “I’m fine.”

“Good. Then let me get your contact information in case we need to reach you later.”

Cassie gave him her name, address, and cell phone number. She hoped Kieran wasn’t taking notes.

A plain, dark sedan with a huge radio antenna pulled up, and a man wearing a suit got out. The older police officer walked toward him with a tense smile. “Detective Mitchell.”

“You going to handle this?”

“That’s right.”

An SUV rolled into the driveway and came to a stop beside the detective’s car. A gray-haired man emerged, carrying a black leather carryall.

“And here’s the doc,” Mitchell said.

Cassie sucked in a breath. This was getting a little too real. Detectives, medical examiner. The hearse would be next.

Sure enough, Kieran sidled up to her and nudged her with his elbow. “Look, here comes the undertaker.”

The white-haired doctor stood near the side of Cassie’s truck, eyeing the little ladder on the side and shaking his head.

“Nope. I’m not climbing inside any garbage truck.”

“Oh, come on, Doctor,” the detective said with a charming smile. “It won’t take you long.”

“Nope. Bring him out, and I’ll make my preliminary exam here. I’m not getting in that compactor. Period.”

Cassie lifted her hand, about to step in and explain that she’d locked the compactor mechanism in the off position, but Detective Mitchell had already given in.

“All right, if you say so.” Mitchell swung around and locked

eyes with the driver of the hearse, who was just climbing out of his conspicuous vehicle. “You. Can you get the victim out of the back of this truck if these two officers help you?” He pointed to the uniformed patrolmen.

The man from the funeral home nodded uncertainly. “I have a stretcher if we need it, and a body bag.”

Cassie edged farther away. She didn’t want to witness the removal. She’d rather try to blend in with the flock of oldsters and listen to their chatter.

Unfortunately, Kieran moved with her.

“You sure you don’t want to sit, at least?” Kieran asked. “You probably shouldn’t watch them moving him.”

“I’m fine.” Cassie clenched her teeth. It galled her that he’d zeroed in on her feelings when she didn’t want to admit them.

Kieran gasped. “Oh, man ...”

“What?” She whirled and looked back toward the truck, where the officers were lowering the dead man to the ground.

“I think that’s ...” Kieran licked his lips. “It looks like this guy I knew ... Jeff. He went to my school.”

“Oh.” Cassie swallowed hard. She hadn’t considered that someone in the housing complex might actually know the man. “Maybe you should tell the police that. They’ll want to know who he is.”

Kieran hesitated, running a hand through his prematurely thinning hair. Ordinarily eager to follow any of her suggestions, he hung back, staring as the detective searched the dead man’s pockets. The doctor knelt beside the corpse and checked for a pulse.

“Right,” Kieran said at last. He made his way toward the detective, who had retrieved a wallet and a few other small items from the victim’s clothing.

Cassie stayed where she was, and the elderly people closed in around her, murmuring sympathetic comments, but mostly watching in rapt silence.

In a surprisingly few minutes, the doctor allowed the funeral

director to load the body into the hearse and take it away. The two patrol officers taped off the area surrounding the dumpster. Cassie wondered if she could get away now. Her part was over, wasn't it?

"Excuse me, Officer," she said to one of the blue-uniformed men. "Is it okay if I move my truck now? I need to go back to work. You don't need me for anything else, do you?"

"We need to empty your truck so we can check through the contents," the policeman said. "Then you can be on your way, if you're feeling all right."

Shooting Kieran a dirty look he didn't see, Cassie said, "Yeah, I feel okay. Good thing I haven't made many stops yet—you'd have a lot more to go through."

Another car arrived, and three people got out and donned white sterile outerwear, booties, gloves, and hoods. Crime scene investigators, Mitchell told her. She supposed they were going to look for a weapon in amongst the trash.

While Cassie stood by and waited for the truck to be emptied, the senior residents oozed forward and again surrounded her, offering their comfort and theories.

"Poor dear," Nita said, squeezing her shoulder.

"What exactly happened?" Gerald asked.

"Well ... I was picking up the dumpster as usual," Cassie mumbled, not sure how much she knew that they didn't. "When I dumped it into my truck, Kieran saw the ... the dead man—Jeff, or whoever—fall into my truck. I think he'd been dead a while, but I'm not sure how he died or anything. That's pretty much all I know."

"Must have been quite a shock," said Hal, a woodworker who had recently made pet caskets his specialty. "Seems a shame to treat someone like that after they're dead too ... dumped in a bin and then into a truck ..."

"Oh, don't, Hal," pleaded an older woman, Flossie, as she patted Cassie's arm. "Besides, Cassie didn't do it on purpose."

DOWN IN THE DUMPSTER

“If you ask *me*,” put in Lucy, a widow whom Hal obviously admired, “he didn’t look like a nice sort at all ...”

Nita agreed. “I wouldn’t waste too much pity on him. Probably a heroin addict.”

“I’m surprised at you,” said Flossie’s husband, Ed. “He might have just climbed in the dumpster for a nap and died there.”

The statement evoked nothing more than a shrug from Nita.

Cassie almost laughed, but the seriousness of the situation kept her silent. And she didn’t mention the smears of blood she’d seen on white trash bags inside the truck.

When it was finally emptied, Detective Mitchell walked over to Cassie.

“You said you live in Knottsville. But this Reubens Rubbish Removal headquarters is in Ellsborough, right?”

“Yes. Well, on the edge of the city. It’s about ten miles from here.”

He nodded. “You can leave now. If we need any more information from you, we’ll be in touch.”

“Thanks.” Cassie walked on tree stump legs to the door of the truck. She forced herself to bend her knees, climb in, and close the door. She wouldn’t give Kieran the satisfaction of looking at her friends and waving. He’d assume she was waving at him.

Though she hated to, she knew she should call Mac to let him know she was back on the job.

Before reaching for her radio, she breathed quietly, “Please help me finish the day, Lord. Just get me through it.”