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**”A Flower to Die By”**

“Where’s the order going to the Copley Hotel? It needs to be there by 9am! Who’s stripping the red roses and who’s prepping the boxes? Jesus Christ, get your head out of your asses and move!”

The owner of *Delicately Yours Flower Shop*, Reuben Crench, was in typical form the eve before Valentine’s Day. Flailing arms, screaming at anyone in his path, he made Stalin look like a pussycat. It was the biggest work day of the year and the fifty two year old held no mercy for his employees who were scurrying about filling orders coming in over the fax machine and phones.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Alice? The customer said an exotic arrangement. Does this look exotic to you? Change it now before I put you back in the cooler to fill buckets!” Reuben threatened.

Alice turned back to the stock floor, trying frantically to recreate the bouquet to satisfy her boss. She shivered at the idea of being banished to the cooler where temperatures were bitter cold and wet with overflowing containers of water. Alice Taylor was new to the shop and understood little about the floral industry accept that you worked early mornings and any delusions of the flower business being associated with glamour was simply false. Although she had no experience, Reuben hired the green eyed, twenty one year old immediately, looking over her physique more carefully than her resume.

“Sir, your wife’s on line three,” the designer, Nate Mathews, called out to his employer.

“What the hell does she want? Claire knows I’m right in the middle of holiday bedlam! Tell her to wait a minute!” Crench snapped.

Nate rolled his eyes thinking back to all the eager floral companies, which had attempted in recruiting him after graduating from the top of his class at Ritner’s Floral Design School. Good looking and smart, Nate wished he had made a better decision.

Pushing his blond hair out of his eyes, he made polite conversation until Crench grabbed the receiver and barked, “Claire, something better be on fire for you to interrupt me at work.”

The Mrs. held a slight suspicion, often checking in to make sure he was behaving, although the rest of the world knew that Reuben had affairs on more than one occasion. He would have left her but he was unwilling to allow his meal ticket to walk away with her daddy’s fortune made in the New England real estate market.

“I don’t know when I’ll be home,” he said ogling the new girl who was finishing the last few touches on the new bouquet. “It’s the night before Valentine’s Day, Claire. All the orders have to be ready for delivery by tomorrow morning. I’ll probably end up sleeping on the cot in the office. Yeah, I’ll eat something and don’t wait up.” Slamming the phone down, he shook his head mumbling obscenities while repositioning himself back in front of the printer, which was spitting out a fresh pile of orders.

The door’s welcome bell chimed for the rest of the day, greeting customers who had procrastinated purchasing their Valentine’s Day flowers until the last minute. Packages of roses, orchids and tulips overflowed bundles with brilliant color as Reuben greedily thumbed through the receipts. At 6:00 pm, a loud voice assaulted the chaotic space.

“Crench! Where are you?” a massive man shouted.

Jerry Stark was a wholesaler working in the Boston Flower Exchange located in the south end of the city. Standing at six feet, seven inches tall, he was intimidating to say the least. Every person in the kiosk held their breadth except for Reuben who made his way through the crowd, smiling a saintly grin up into the face of his aggressor.

“Jerry, how are you, buddy? What brings you out here?”

“Don’t call me buddy! Where’s my money? You’re ninety days past due and your time’s up, pal,” Stark said in a fierce tone.

“No problem, Jerry! I’ll have the cash for you next week. Look around, it’s practically raining doe in here. Valentine’s Day is a guaranteed money maker; I’ll take care of my account first thing on Monday, okay?”

“I’d better be first in line, Crench, or you’ll be the next order that I fill!” he said enraged as he stormed out the door.

“Get back to work, shows over!” Crench directed, unbuttoning his collar.

At eight o’clock, the store began to wind down with walk-ins although the crew was still hard at work. In an assembly line, they processed hundreds of stems still tucked in their shipping containers while greening vases and making elaborate floral presentations.

“Get it away from me!” cried the driver, Alex, from the rear workbench.

Over the last ten years, Alex Diaz had done everything from sweeping the floors to washing the vans. Relocating from the African country of Togo, he believed that *Delicately Yours* had saved him from a fate much worse, his hometown, which mirrored sad situations of prostitution, drug warfare and disease.

“What’s the matter, Alex?” Nate said rushing to his side.

“That’s Witches’ Thimble!” Alex yelled in a panicked state.

Reuban walked over to the commotion and picked up the ornamental plant nestled on top of his regular order of roses.

“What is it?” Nate asked curiously.

“It comes from the family “Plantaginaceae”, grown commonly in southwestern Europe, Asia and central Africa,” Reuben said noting to himself that his degree in horticulture from UMASS Amherst wasn’t a total waste of time. “Its common name is Foxglove, grown in New England during the summer months, certainly not in February.”

“Be careful, Mr. Crench! It’s very poisonous!” Alex stuttered. “My Grammy used to grow that in the back of the house. Said it warded off animals likely to eat the vegetables in the garden. Rabbits, mice, there was so much death. It made me afraid to walk in the yard. We called it “Pet Cemetery” but with no proper graves. Bodies just laid everywhere…” he said trailing off as the ­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­­memory slowly drifted away safely from his thoughts.

“Is it really poisonous?” Alice asked enamored by the intricate pattern of freckles splashed across the flower’s pink bells.

“It’s poisonous, alright,” Crench said befuddled as to how the deadly specimen wound up in one of his flower boxes. “You’d have to ingest it but still, florists tend to stay away from this stuff because of liability issues. Just toss it in the barrel and wash your hands.”

Alex carefully grabbed the stem of Foxglove, placed it in the trash and went back to preparing the orders. At nine o’clock, another disruption sounded from the side door, leading to the outside greenhouses.

“Well how ya’ll doing?” a brash voice bellowed, filling the air.

“Candy Newton, what in the hell are you doing here? Even that pathetic excuse you call a flower shop must give you something to do on Valentine’s Day eve,” Crench said with resentment.

Flipping a strand of spiral, black hair behind her neck, she adjusted her stance to signal war was about to erupt. The owner of *Boutique des Fleurs* was the competing florist located directly across the street. Although her designs reflected a “larger than life” style acquired from her roots in San Antonio, Texas whereas *Delicately Yours* utilized the European influence, the two proprietors stopped at nothing to pummel one another at every chance presented to them. There was the time that Candy had poured red dye in the Christmas tree flocking machine, staining the pines in a horrifying blood red hue and the incident when Reuben had cut the heads off of the hydrangea plants Candy had been growing to save expenses for Mother’s Day arrangements. The two enemies were insatiable within their nasty tactics and vicious ploys.

“Easy, honey. Just came to see if you needed any orders for tomorrow. My cooler is stuffed and there just aren’t enough hours in the day to deliver anymore. I figured you could use the extra business when I saw Jerry Stark stomping out of here a little while ago,” she said smiling menacingly.

“What are you spying on me again?” Clench said turning scarlet. “You can keep those lousy, ten dollar orders to yourself and get the hell out my place!”

“Okay, don’t get yourself all in a tizzy, Reub. You wouldn’t want to go and give yourself a heart attack right before Valentine’s Day, would you?” she snickered, making her way out of the store. Shaking his head, Reuben once again instructed the crew to get back to their preparation tasks.

They worked exhaustedly until ten when the last piles of excess foliage had been thrown away and the floor had been mopped. Alex was just about to flip the “open” sign to “closed” when a forceful push from the other side knocked him backwards.

“I want to speak to the owner….NOW!” boomed the voice of Mr. Tony Watkins, a local politician who heavily influenced the on goings of Jamaica Plain’s local businesses.

“Mr. Watkins! How are you, sir?” Reuben said approaching the angry visitor. “What brings you to *Delicately Yours* so late this evening? I believe we already received and delivered your holiday orders. Was there something that you wanted to add?”

“Something I want to add? Crench, you moron! You nearly cost me my marriage and more importantly, my career with your careless mistake!” he said shaking his fist in the air.

“What mistake? Reuben said dumbfounded.

“The cards on the Valentine’s Day roses you sent to my wife and secretary? You mixed them up, Crench!” Mr. Watkins had been keeping secrets of his own for some time and one included the torrid affair he was carrying on with his assistant, Lucy Grisham. Up until now, he had successfully hidden his philandering antics from most, including his wife.

“That’s impossible. I personally made sure both orders went out correctly,” Clench pleaded.

“Then tell me why the note attached to Ms. Grisham’s bouquet said, “*To My Wife on Valentine’s Day*” and the one sent to my wife said, “*Dear Lucy, Happy Valentine’s Day Happy Pants!*”

“I don’t know how this could’ve happened, you have my sincere apologies and you will be fully refunded, of course,” Reuben stuttered baffled by the error.

“Refund? I could lose my position in this city! I have an obligation to present a certain image and the exposed intimacy between Ms. Grisham and I would prove extremely damaging!” he warned, glaring into Reuben’s frightened brown eyes.

“You better pray this doesn’t get out or not only will I shut this place down, but I’ll make sure you won’t even be able to open a lemonade stand within fifty miles of this town!” Huffing through his mustache, the city chancellor stormed through the glass door and down the sidewalk to his Cadillac Escalade.

*This is bad…*Reuben said to himself. He understood only too well how financially crippling it would be to have Watkins petitioning against him. One word to the city commission board and *Delicately Yours* would be ruined for good. Reuben didn’t understand what could have happened since he prided himself on the capability of handling those customers with multiple love interests discretely. He felt that there was no shame in accommodating men like Watkins with prudent and confidential floral services, believing it was economically foolish for certain competitors to refuse orders in an attempt to set a *moral standard* for their establishment.

“Alright guys grab your time cards and punch out for the night. We‘ve got a long day ahead and I want to see you all in here by five am. Anyone who’s late, don’t even think about coming back,” he said cautioning his staff as he watched them leave through the front door.

Walking over to the kitchenette, Crench flipped the “on” switch to the coffeemaker, giving way to dark, caffeinated drippings. As he grabbed a mug, a sudden noise from behind the register surprised him. Looking for the source of the disturbance, Reuben soon caught site of the shop cat, “Frankie”, playing with scraps of wrapping paper underneath the table.

“Damn cat,” he scoffed turning back to his liquid preparations. Placing three spoonfuls of sugar over the freshly percolated coffee, he mixed the brew while looking for one last ingredient. Searching the cabinet, he finally found the small bottle marked “Nutmeg” sitting next to the coffee mate. Adding a liberal amount of the spice to the cup, he placed the bottle back into its usual location next to the sugar bowl. The killer smiled.

Hidden in the darkness of the supply room, two eyes peered on with anticipation as the florist took the fatal sips from his drink. Crench immediately grabbed his neck as the burning sensation began to assault his throat. The look on his face reflected sheer terror as sweat gathered on his forehead and a blurred mask filtered across his vision. He managed to stagger two steps before his body dropped to the cold tiled floor. Violent convulsions started inhibiting his limbs, jerking them back and forth in malevolent movements. Reuben gasped for air as his heart slowed to a stop. With one last look through conscious eyes, he thought it was hallucination as a shadowed figure moved toward him and whispered, “It’s over, Crench. No more Valentine’s Days for you…”

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At five the next morning, Nate pulled his set of shop keys out of his pocket to open the front door of *Delicately Yours*. The bitter February cold pinched his cheeks as he struggled to pop the lock, finally giving way to the inside’s blanket of warmth. Looking around, he immediately noticed that the orders from the previous night had been left out and were still perched on the work benches.

“Reuben, do you want me to start boxing up the deliveries for the vans?” Nate called out assuming that his boss had pulled an all-nighter preparing for the holiday. “Reuben?” Checking the back design area, Nate searched the store until he noticed something peculiar. “Now that’s weird. Why is the back cooler door open?” Stepping slowly up to the compartment, he watched the trickle of water seep from the ice box as he slid his hand through the grip of the entryway, prying it open. Nothing could have prepared him for the gruesome site that lay frozen before him. There laid Reuben Crench in lifeless repulsion, frosted with tiny icicles from head to toe. Nate didn’t have to check for a pulse. He knew his boss was dead.

“Alice? Don’t come back here. Stay where you are!” Nate cautioned.

“What are you talking about?” Alice said as she peaked over her coworkers shoulder to see the ghastly cadaver. “Mr.Crench! What happened?” she managed to ask right before staggering backwards in fear.

“How should I know? I just got here! When I came in, I saw the cooler open and there he was!”

“Hey guys, Happy Valentine’s Day!” a cheerful voice called out, this time belonging to Alex.

“Alex! Something awful has happened to Mr. Clench! He’s dead!” Alice said with urgency.

“Dead? No, what are you talking about?” Alex said just as he caught a glimpse of the stomach churning site. “Mr. Clench!” he screamed bending down in an effort to revitalize the corpse.

“Don’t touch him, Alex! You might mess up the evidence!” Nate scolded his coworker.

“Evidence? You think someone murdered him?” Alice said incredulous of the situation unfolding.

“Well, he didn’t just walk into the cooler and die!” Nate exclaimed picking up the phone and dialing 911. “Yes, police? I would like to report a death. Send someone to *Delicately Yours Flower Shop* in Jamaica Plains right away!” Five minutes later, the sky lit up with red and blue lights from a police cruiser.

“Did someone call in a body?” Detective Mike Hinckley asked opening the door to *Delicately Yours Flower Shop*. Wearing a Stetson hat, cowboy boots and a gallant demeanor, the thirty five year old impressed the room with a modern day Marlboro Man resemblance.

“Yes, I did,” replied Nate gesturing towards the direction of the body.

After the detective quickly surveyed the scene, he jotted down a few notes and resumed an authoritative position in front of the three people who had just made the top of his suspect list.

“Alright, why don’t you all begin by telling me your names and where you were last night.” he said eager to take their statements.

“My name is Alice Taylor and I work here in the sales department. I left with Nate and Alex around ten last night and met a blind date for dinner. Needless to say, it didn’t go very well so I ended up at home a little after 11:30 pm.”

“Where were you last night after you left work?” the detective asked pointing to his next suspect.

“Nate Mathews, I’m the floral designer. After I left here, I went to do some freelance work at *Boutique des Fleurs*. You can call Candy Newton, the owner, to back up my story if you want.”

“Nate, how could you?” Alice said in disbelief.

“I needed the extra cash. Crench wasn’t exactly generous with our paychecks,” he said admitting to the others.

“How about you, Mr…”

“Me? Diaz, Alex Diaz. I was very tired and went straight home to my apartment. I knew I had to be up early and needed to get some rest. I heated up a TV dinner and fell right to sleep.”

The bell jingled overhead from the front door signaling the arrival of the city’s coroner.

“Body’s in the cooler back there, Sam,” Hinckley said escorting the slight man with white shaggy hair and glasses.

“What you got?” the detective asked after allowing the doctor a few moments to examine the corpse.

“Well, it’s hard to tell the exact time of death since the body’s been on ice for a few hours but I’d say it was definitely poison. See the blue ting underneath his nails and the way he’s arched backwards? Toxicology report should give the specifics,” he said picking up his medical bag.

“Did you find anything else?” Hinckley asked hopeful for more information.

“Yes, one thing. The front of his shirt is covered with an industrial cleaner, like something used to mop floors. Most coolers aren’t mopped because the liquid freezes causing a safety hazard. I would say it’s probable that the body was moved here to confuse the time of death.”

“Okay, Sam. Thanks a lot. Let me know if anything new shows up in the lab.”

“Will do, Mike,” he said grabbing his medical bag to leave.

Turning his attention back to his suspects, Hinckley asked, “Was anyone else here last night who might have wanted to bump this guy off?”

Alice, Nate and Alex looked at each other then took a deep breath to inform the officer of the previous evening’s disgruntled guests.

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“Detective Hinckley, how can I help you,” Mr. Tony Watkins said shaking the hand of his surprise visitor.

“I need to ask you a few questions about your run in with a Mr. Reuben Crench late last evening,” he said flashing his badge for verification. “Eye witnesses claim that you had quite a fight with the deceased. Care to elaborate on the details?”

“The deceased?” Watkins said shocked. “Look, I went to that flower shop to have it out with him about screwing up the cards on a couple of orders he sent out for me. I let him know that my privacy was of the utmost importance and must be kept in the strictest of confidence. His incompetence nearly cost me a very unpleasant conversation with my wife not to mention with the city’s commission board.”

“So you threatened him?” Hinckley said reeling in the lead on the case.

“Yes, I threatened him but not with violence. I threatened to financially crucify his business. He got the message loud and clear but I didn’t kill him. Try asking Mrs. Crench where she was last night. Reuben bragged on more than one occasion that he held multiple romantic interests that didn’t involve her,” Tony suggested walking the detective to the door. “If there isn’t anything else, I really do have a busy schedule to keep.”

“Don’t make any sudden vacation plans, got that?” Hinckley said as he exited the office.

Walking down the hallway to the elevator, his cell phone beeped with news from the coroner.

“Hey, Mike, looks like I was right. Tox report reveals that the cause of death was a heart attack caused by a significant dose of digitalis.”

“Digitalis? Let me guess, the source originates from a plant or a flower?” Hinckley asked amused at the irony.

“You got it. It’s absorbed within the petals of Foxglove. According to my tests, the victim’s stomach contents held only coffee and a minute amount of nutmeg.”

“Nutmeg? Thanks Sam, I’ll be in touch,” he said clicking off the call.

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“So Reuben Crench owed you money, is that right, Mr. Stark?” Hinckley asked inside the bustling Boston Flower Exchange, which was buzzing about the murdered florist.

“Yeah, the creep was in deep with me. Thirty grand to be exact,” Jerry said answering the question. “I knew he was bad news but times were tough so I took a chance. Word had it that he had a thing for the ponies and gambled every last cent he made. Lucky for him, his rich wife kept a roof over him otherwise, he would have been out on the street. Now I guess I’ll never get paid,” he grumbled, pulling a case of white Casablanca lilies off the conveyer belt.

“I don’t suppose you have an alibi for after 10:00 pm?” he asked the gruff man.

“Yeah, I was right here unloading a shipment of roses from Ecuador all night. Guys around here will vouch for me. I don’t know why you’re wasting your time on me though. Crench had enemies much worse and here comes one of them right now,” Stark said eyeing Ms. Candy Newton who had just entered the building.

“One more thing, where would a flower named Witches Thimble come from this time of year?” Hinckley asked Stark.

“Witches Thimble? You mean Foxglove?” the wholesaler replied. “It doesn’t grow in New England until around July so you would have to import it from a warmer climate. Funny, though, I had an order for Foxglove going over to Crench’s store the other day. There was a sleeve of it included in one of his cases that we delivered over there, I’m sure of it.”

“Thanks, you’ve been a big help,” Hinckley said anxious to corner his next suspect.

Heading her off at a booth lined with oncidium and phaelenopsis trays, he approached Ms. Newton for interrogation.

“Well, of course, I’ll help in any way that I can. What a tragedy to hear about poor Reuben. We were quite close you know,” the florist said with a bat of her eyelashes.

“Really?” Hinckley said scribing another note in his book. “Several witnesses say that you and the victim were cut throat competitors and had an argument yesterday?”

“Oh, that? Reub and I always bickered and it never meant a thing to either one of us, just a bit of healthy banter,” she said assuring the detective. “But if you want to know where I was last night, I was working next to that hunk of a designer, Nate Mathews. We were side by side all night until five this morning when he went back to work for Crench.”

“So you were stealing the victim’s help? I assume that your shop, *Fleur des Lis*, will do quite well now that the future of *Delicately Yours* is questionable,” Hinckley probed.

“Yes, well I really have to get going. Valentine’s Day rush and all, I’m sure you understand,” she said weary of his implications.

“Make sure you keep yourself available for further questioning,” he said watching her disappear further inside the warehouse.

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*Ding dong,* the chimes rang outside the decadent home belonging to the Crenches.

“Yes?” a teary voice asked opening the door.

“Hello, I’m detective Mike Hinckley, the person in charge of your husband’s case. I realize this is a difficult time but I would appreciate your assistance in answering some questions,” he said as politely as possible.

“Of course, please come in,” she offered opening the door wider. Dressed in a cream colored Ralf Lauren pantsuit draped with a bountiful string of pearls, Claire Crench led the way into the parlor.

“Just a few questions, it won’t take long,” Hinckley said removing his hat. “I understand your husband stayed late at work last night while you were at home?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Claire answered. “I offered to help in the shop but Reuben said that I would just be in the way. He often treated me more like a nuisance than a partner.” she confessed blowing her nose.

“Can anyone confirm that?” he asked.

“Well, actually yes. I did have a visitor at around midnight, a young woman who works for my husband. Her name is Alice. She came here ranting about some ridiculous harassment charge. She insinuated that Reuben had been making advances and that there would be a hefty lawsuit if I didn’t agree to pay her off. I told her there was no way I was handing over a dime. The story was an obvious fabrication so I told her to leave and she did. “

“You didn’t feel any reason for concern after a young woman showed up on your doorstep claiming the infidelity of your husband?” the detective asked in surprise.

“Absolutely not,” Mrs. Crench retorted. Our marriage was as solid as the day we wed,” she said with a hint of insult in her voice. “If that’s all, I’d like to rest now.”

“Sure, I’ll be in touch,” he said exiting her home. There was no doubt in his mind that she had just lied straight to his face.

Climbing back into his car, he ran over the notes that he had collected and mulled them over in his head. It seemed that there were quite a lot of people who had motives to kill the Boston florist including money, lust, exposure and adultery. Hinckley knew that it was time to revisit *Delicately Yours* where he felt sure the missing puzzle piece would be discovered.

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The detective spent an hour re-investigating the scene before he made the calls. At 5pm, all seven suspects obeyed the request to appear back at the flower shop.

“I’ve called you all here to reveal the murderer of Reuben Crench,” he said standing in front of Alice Taylor, Candy Newton, Jerry Stark, Tony Watkins, Claire Crench, Nate Mathews and Alex Diaz.

“The lab results confirm the cause of death to be a fatal dose of digitalis in the form of Foxglove or otherwise known as “Witches Thimble”. After a sweep of the premises, we found where the poison originated from, a bottle of nutmeg that the victim often used in his coffee. After the victim ingested the toxins, he most likely experienced convulsions, dementia and eventually stopped breathing after he went into cardiac arrest. Crench’s body was then moved to the cooler from the work floor where his clothes picked up traces of industrial cleaner, which had been used to clean the floor earlier that day.”

“But why would the killer move the body into the cooler in the first place? We already know that Crench had to be murdered between eleven and five,” Alice said addressing the group.

“That’s true,” Hinckley said pacing back and forth. “Unless the killer’s real intention wasn’t to mask the time of death at all. It was a puzzle to me too, until I did some research on African burial rituals. You see, the icebox wasn’t meant to change the body’s temperature but to preserve the energy of Reuben Crench’s spirit.” Receiving looks of disbelief, the detective continued with his findings.

“Otherwise known as, “Abatuism”, the act of freezing the deceased is believed to ensure the purity of the human soul as it ascends to heaven. The practice is rare but still active in regions of South America, particularly in the country of Togo.” With eyes opened wide, all heads turned to the person who they thought least likely to harm Reuben Crench, Alex Diaz.

“You can’t think that I had anything to do with this?” the driver exclaimed in panic.

“He took you for granted, Alex, leaving you insufficient earnings not enough to accommodate even your modest lifestyle. Abused and berated, you snapped,” Hinckley said taking out his handcuffs.

“Alright, it’s true,” Diaz said in shambles. “He was an evil man who treated his workers badly, cheated on his wife, stole from his suppliers and made dishonest business deals. I figured that with Crench gone, Candy would be able to expand her flower shop and there would be enough jobs for all of us, a new beginning.”

“It was easy for you to secretly add a bunch of Foxglove to Crench’s regular order from Jerry Stark in the flower market,” Hinckley said clasping the rings securely around Alex’s shaking wrists. “Once back at the shop, you ground a few of the petals and placed them in the spice jar. You could assume that your boss would drink coffee since he was working late for the holiday. Pretending to leave with the others, you snuck back through a side door and made sure he consumed the drink. You then dragged the body to the cooler where he was found by Mr. Mathews the next morning.”

“I hated the man but where I come from, we believe that death gives us all another chance in the afterlife. I will certainly be awaiting mine,” Alex said bending his head in shame as the detective led him out of the flower shop for the last time.

THE END