

A woman wearing a bright yellow raincoat stands in a snowy, nighttime street. She is holding a large, dark blue suitcase with both hands. The scene is illuminated by warm streetlights, and snow is falling around her. The background shows a snow-covered street with buildings and a street sign.

SHE PACKED CHRISTMAS SWEATERS.
HER SUITCASE PACKED A WALLOP.

ANITA KLUMBERS

THE LADY
WITH THE
ALLIGATOR
CASE

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the Alligator
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The Lady with the Alligator Case
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Dedication

To my husband. He is quite the guy.

CHAPTER 1

When I woke that December morning, I couldn't move. In seconds, memory flooded back with thoroughness I'd never seen in movies. There, people gradually emerge from comas or deep sleep or concussions, in disjointed bits and fuzzy-edged pieces. But first, they look wildly (or fuzzily) around and whimper, "Where am I?"

I knew exactly where I was. In a hospital bed. Pockmarked ceiling tiles sagged above me, suspended between skinny metal grids. Off to the left, humming machines monitored my vital signs with an occasional accompanying click. All around me, I smelled hospital.

My accident had landed me in a hospital bed. I knew that within a split second of regaining consciousness. Although the heart-stopping skid on a patch of black ice and subsequent hurtle through a snow fence into a pole could have happened this morning, or a week ago.

As fast as memory of the accident hit me, and recognition of my location, I was instantly certain of the accident's result. I was in the hospital. I couldn't move. Therefore, I was paralyzed. My throat pricked with accumulating tears. Any second I'd begin to cry over my crushed hopes and dreams. The years

stretched before me. I saw my paralyzed self valiantly maneuvering a wheelchair up ramps and into handicap-accessible restrooms. The tear formed in the corner of one eye. *Be brave, Jemma.* I reached a hand to wipe it before remembering I was too paralyzed to wipe my own tears.

But what was this? Oh, glory! I could move my hand—only slightly, but it was movement! Whatever machine was connected to me clucked in irritation. I didn't care. I tried again. My hand moved. And caught.

Since the paralysis didn't seem total, I tried lifting my head to see my hand. The immediate relief that it hadn't affected my neck was offset by dizziness and nausea. A deep breath through my nose, out through my mouth, and I was ready to try again. An unseen someone spoke.

"You're awake. I'll get him."

Him? A doctor? Or my father, who should be three time zones away in northwest Washington? Did they get Addison's name from my phone? Dread-edged hope battled the rising nausea. Would he come rushing to my side and express a thousand regrets for breaking up with me? Would he vow to nurse me through my paralysis? Wheel me down the aisle?

"She's awake." The same voice now referred to me in the third person. "I need to get back to rounds." The voice receded. "Push the call button if she gives you trouble."

The room's current only other occupant wasn't Dad, flown back from his thirtieth anniversary celebration with Mom. It wasn't Addison. I doubted it

was even a doctor. Not unless doctors were accompanied by static chatter that sounded suspiciously like police squawk box talk. Not unless doctors interrupted the chatter with a click and terse sentences. "She's awake. I'm ready to question her." A pause. Then, "Yep. She's still restrained."

CHAPTER 2

I lifted my head on my non-paralyzed spinal column and caught a glimpse of shiny handcuffs linking me to the bedrail. Then the dizziness and nausea returned with reinforcements. I was sick all over the sheets, hospital gown, and handcuffs.

For several minutes, nursing assistants buzzed around, along with one doctor who peered at me from arm's length. He affirmed I'd probably feel better now and could be cuffed again once the mess was cleaned up. Then, nose twitching, he scuttled from the room.

The man attached to the two-way radio and presumably in law enforcement must have left also. I didn't see or hear him while being wiped down and re-gowned. Someone helped me rinse out my mouth. Underneath me, the bedding was changed while I obligingly rolled side to side. I must have been deemed ready, because a husky male nurse stood near the bed and someone else called, "Come on in. It'll take a while for the smell to go away, but she's clean and ready for the cuffs."

Not until the polished cuffs were secured from my wrist to the bed did the nurses leave me alone with the long arm of the law.

Long arm, long legs, long body—the man in the

dark shirt, dark tie, and dark pants had to be all of six foot five. The monochromatic theme repeated itself in dark eyes and thick lashes and brows, and stopped there. He had no hair.

I should have asked the question that had been building dread in my gut since I saw the restraints. Because I rarely drink anything stronger than cider, don't smoke, or even take ibuprofen, I wasn't cuffed due to illegal or intoxicating substances in my blood. Therefore, I had inadvertently caused great harm to someone. It wasn't a crime to hit a deer. So the only sensible question to ask would inquire about who I hit and how they were.

But there were two bags hooked to my IV pole. One held liquid to keep me hydrated. The other, I had an educated assumption, must be the sort of painkiller I don't tolerate. The same substance that had made me sick moments earlier currently removed all sensible verbal filters.

And so I looked the policeman straight in his dark brown eyes and asked, "Do you shave your head for fashion, convenience, or are you going bald?"

I couldn't clap a hand to my mouth. One was handcuffed to the rail and the other was poked full of IVs. I settled for biting my tongue, and then biting back a yelp of pain. "I didn't mean to say that. It's the drugs."

One dark brown eyebrow arched. I hate when people can do that.

"I meant to say—actually ask, even though I'm afraid I know the answer—the person is dead, right? I

killed them.”

Both brows went into action. Along with the rest of the man. One hand pulled a notebook and pen from a pocket and the other pulled the radio from his hip. I watched in reluctant fascination as he barked into the speaker, “I’m going to need someone else here.”

Squawking response. My fascination turned to disbelief at his next sentence. “The woman just confessed to murder. I haven’t even read her rights yet.”

The painkiller fog dissolved and I was in control of my mind and stinging tongue. “Murder? Accidentally hitting someone with my car, someone I didn’t even see, is murder?”

The man lowered the radio. The brows leveled and he stepped closer. “What makes you think you hit someone?”

Mutely, I raised the hand chained to the rail.

“Ms. Carroll, you didn’t hit anything but a telephone pole targeted for destruction anyway.”

“Then why are you here?”

“When you hit that pole, one of your suitcases, the old brown alligator skin one, must have struck something with enough force to spring the clasps. The suitcase at first glance appeared empty, but the lining is a made of paper. Old paper, and brittle. It ripped. More accurately, it ripped again. It had been glued recently.”

The initial relief that I hadn’t killed someone on a country road in a blizzard was replaced by confusion. I didn’t know what kind of crime I was being falsely

accused of and therefore couldn't formulate a logical explanation. But the officer seemed to expect me to say something, so I plowed into the unknown with all my defensiveness at the ready.

"I do have an old suitcase along. It's not mine, but I didn't steal it! And I never opened it, so I don't know what the lining is like." I looked around the small hospital room. No old suitcase. No personal items at all that I could see, including my purse. "The old suitcase is going to a buyer in northern Wisconsin."

"Oh?"

"My grandmother found someone willing to pay \$250." I thought of that paean of ugliness and marveled again that there was no accounting for taste.

The gentleman of the law seemed to require additional explanation, so obligingly, I continued. "Since I was heading to northern Wisconsin from southern Illinois anyway—that's where I'm from—I told my grandmother I could drop it off."

He looked as skeptical as someone could who'd remained almost silent and almost motionless during my narrative. I couldn't blame him. The suitcase looked tattered enough to qualify for a mercy killing, and that was before it had lurched around my car in the accident. "Your grandmother didn't tell you what was in this case?"

I was tired. I'd been in an accident, hospitalized, arrested, sick, and interrogated. From somewhere I worked up enough spare exhaustion to tire of this skirting around the edges of my crime. "Maybe you could tell me what was in the case, because I have no

idea and neither does my grandmother." I hoped.

The man examined his fingernails for a moment, and I thought he wouldn't answer. When he looked up at me, the acrobatic eyebrow was back in business. "We found several bundles of plant stems in your suitcase."

"So what?" I prayed I hadn't said that out loud. The case looked as though it could be growing mildew, mold, or mushrooms inside. I don't think I verbalized that thought either. Since he was busy with his cell phone instead of frowning at me, I guessed I'd remained silent.

He came closer to the bed and showed me a photo of what looked like half a piece of paper with a few sentences.

"What am I looking at?"

"An invoice. It was folded and I think tucked into the same lining as the plants. Can you read it?"

I leaned forward and squinted at the words.

ENCLOSED: TEN STEMS ROTHSCHILD'S SLIPPER ORCHIDS WITH UNDAMAGED STEMS AND LEAVES. DUE ON RECEIPT \$48,000.00.

CHAPTER 3

This was a misunderstanding of colossal proportions. I told him as much, once I could formulate thoughts into words. The buyer, I repeated, was in northern Wisconsin. And we didn't know her.

"For some indecipherable reason," I explained, waxing poetic, "the buyer wants to gift her husband with a decrepit suitcase whose sole outstanding feature is a particularly pungent aroma."

I saw a flicker of agreement at the mention of the smell and was encouraged to carry on my plea for the defense. "Ordinarily Grandmother—who knows nothing about orchids—would have shipped the case. But you know, Christmas mailings flood every federal and private delivery agency, and no one would promise the case would get there before Christmas."

The officer listened and occasionally nodded, as though encouraging me to continue. I would be as forthright as I could, but I'd need to edit certain details that touched on the real reason for my willingness to act as transportation.

When, last week, my grandmother somehow learned that I was heading into the wilds of Wisconsin, she'd asked if I'd be willing to deliver the case. To a perfectly reputable buyer ("She has a 100% rating!")

who'd seen the case advertised on my tech-savvy grandmother's favorite online marketplace. We'd meet in a publicly respectable place. Since I'd be close to the location anyway, she'd said. Evidently Grandmother thought the entirety of northern Wisconsin to be spitting distance from everywhere else in northern Wisconsin.

I wasn't about to tell her that the meeting place was over sixty miles west of my destination. I love my grandmother fiercely and would do practically anything for her. Except let her know exactly where and why I was going up north.

Grandmother knew me. She knew my imagination. Given a single incident, anxiety, glance, or phrase, I could create woes and calamities by the score. Like total paralysis or prison on a murder charge. But I was equally adept at designing rose-tinted worlds from an atom and a speck. Like the ones that fueled my trip from Springfield, Illinois to the forested flatland of northern Wisconsin.

Was I going to admit every bit of information to the officer? Not the parts that would make me look like a pathetic single woman trailing her ex-boyfriend in hopes of reconciliation. Which, a clinical part of my brain observed, was an apt diagnosis. The shaved officer shouldn't have to take many notes on what I would reveal next.

"Since I was going to be heading north to meet an old friend, anyway, I told my grandmother I could meet the buyer of the old empty suitcase my grandmother is selling." I hoped he caught the

emphasis on “empty.”

The officer, whose name I still didn't know, made some calls, spoke some to the person on the other end and said not a word to me until I asked to call my parents.

He tucked the phone in his pocket and gave me his full attention. “They were the first people we contacted. We have your cell phone at the station, but you can call them from the bedside phone as soon as I leave.”

“How kind! If you could just move it to the foot of the bed I'll try dialing with my toes.”

He seemed almost amused at my appalling rudeness. “I believe the nurse is going to take the IV out when I go.” He kept talking as he removed my cuffs. “Not everyone has their parents designated as Mom or Dad in their contacts. Or wants their parents called in a crisis.” He dangled the cuffs and looked at me thoughtfully. “You may be the first person under thirty I've met who carries a laminated card with emergency contacts, blood type, known allergens and next of kin.”

Ever since I'd seen a Christmas movie about a woman who hit her head, broke her phone, had amnesia and no ID and missed her wedding, I'd carried everything anyone could possibly need to know about me should my head be subjected to the same outrage. But this policeman didn't need to know that either.

He moved toward the door and warned me I was still a person of interest and not to leave the hospital.

To which I gave him what I hoped was a withering look.

He looked slightly taken aback, by which I mean his eyebrows bounced up a millimeter or so before settling into the ready position. "Miss, I'm sincerely sorry about all of this. That you are injured, and your vehicle is out of commission. And apparently you know no one in the area."

"Also I have no clothes, no ID, and no money."

"All safe at the station." He jiggled the handcuffs while contemplating me. Before I could get nervous, he stuck them in a pocket. "Here's what I'm going to do. Go back to the station, make a few more calls, see if anything came up to mar your so-far stellar background check. I'll ask at the repair shop about your car. Maybe," he added ominously, "it isn't as bad as it looked. Then I'll head back here with your personal possessions. Not including the suitcase of contraband orchids, of course. Not sure when the hospital will release you, but you won't be in custody. You'll just have to stay in town."

Then he left without a goodbye and I rubbed my wrist. It didn't really hurt. The cuff hadn't been tight and didn't leave marks. But rubbing seemed appropriate.

The same nurse who'd checked on me when I first woke up came in. "About time they took those contraptions off." She bustled and chattered and freed me from the IV and monitors. "While you were out I couldn't tell if you were dangerous. Or crazy. But once you were conscious I could tell you weren't crazy. And

when you threw up I knew you weren't dangerous. Just embarrassed and so polite. Worried that you were putting us to the trouble of cleaning you up. As if we didn't deal with that and worse every day."

"Do you know how long I was out?" Now that the nurse considered me polite, I determined to reinforce her impression, especially if she'd heard my impertinent remarks to the lawman. "And I'm sorry, I don't know your name."

"Kathy." She strode to the whiteboard on the wall opposite my bed and wrote her name, the name of the CNA and a doctor who'd been tending me, along with the date. Wednesday, December 18. "They brought you in about 11:30 last night. It's 9 a.m. now. You weren't out quite long enough to be too concerning. And you don't have much more wrong with you than bruised ribs and that knot on your forehead. You'll be sore for awhile, but we've seen burns on folks' chests, arms, legs, even faces from airbags. I think you had enough thick clothes on to protect you pretty well."

Thank the good Lord for the apathetic heater in my old car. It kept me well-swaddled when the outdoor temps dropped below freezing.

Kathy checked my pulse, oxygen level, blood pressure, and temperature. "The ambulance drivers saw your medical alert card. No known allergies except to chamomile? New one on me. Anyway, you weren't really conscious, but I was told you seemed to be pretty miserable. Apparently, you're sensitive to the pain killer though. Sorry about that, but," she said, entering my vital signs into the computer, "everything

looks good right now.”

I called my parents from the bedside phone and assured them I was fine and they were not, unless they heard differently, to cut their anniversary trip short. They promised to call my siblings and promised not to call my numerous extended family or the church prayer chain. I washed more thoroughly and brushed my teeth with a flimsy hospital-issue brush and miniature tube of toothpaste. The worst was dealing with my hair. My arms and midsection hurt and the comb provided by the nurse was no match for the snarls. When the officer walked in with my purse, tote bag, and suitcase, I could have cried with the relief.

Kathy waved him out to the hall while she helped my slightly wobbly self get dressed.

“Is all you have Christmas sweaters?” She scuffled through the small pile of tops she pulled from the suitcase.

I was too tired to defend my holiday spirit. So I mumbled an apology, and she told me not to be silly because they were cute. We settled on a white turtleneck under my midnight blue, snowflake-sprinkled cardigan. Zipping and buttoning my black jeans made me wince. “If I’d known I was going to crash my car and mash my midsection,” I told Kathy, “I would have packed sweatpants.”

When I resumed the attack on my hair, Kathy took over, making certain to keep the brush well away from the swelling below my hairline. Once more she accompanied action with commentary. “Your hair color is nothing to write home about. Medium brown

you see everywhere. Hope you don't take offense at that." The nurse arranged my bangs gently over my forehead and tucked the brush in my tote. "Because it shines like summer and is thick as maple syrup." She called the officer in. "She's ready. Could you bring her boots?"

"Her boots?"

"My shoes are OK too," I told him. "They're waterproofed." I'd taken note of the fat snowflakes falling outside the window.

"You didn't have shoes in your luggage?"

"They were in the back of my car."

"I honestly didn't think to look for shoes." He turned to Kathy. "Don't you have her boots from when she was brought in?"

"They sure aren't in here." Kathy looked at a list on a clipboard. "EMT's cut her coat and clothes off her. She came in wearing several blankets and her unmentionables. Nothing about boots."

The officer looked at the corner of the ceiling as though expecting to find the boots there. Kathy and I waited. He shrugged slightly and turned the dark eyes on us. "It appears that Cadwallader's police department and its county hospital have lost your footwear. On behalf of us all, please accept my apologies."

CHAPTER 4

Which is why I left tiny Cadwallader County Community Hospital wearing jeans, my snowflake sweater, a letter jacket the sheriff lent me, and blue hospital booties. The officer escorted me through spirited snowflakes into a very official-looking vehicle. I buckled myself in and waited until he'd done the same.

"Nice jacket." Twisting my head, I read the sleeve of my borrowed coat. "Cross country champion. Congratulations. And you graduated Cadwallader High last year, I see?"

He was checking his blind spot so I couldn't see his expression. "Nephew's jacket. He left it at my house, and I'm trying to remember to return it." He turned on his windshield wipers. "Snowing harder," he said unnecessarily. Then he sighed. "I can't put it off any longer. My name's Elihu Farragut Orwell. And you are, in actuality, Jemima Prudence Carroll." He glanced at me. Empathy winked from those dark brown eyes. "Did our parents hate us?"

The ice was, if not broken, at least chipped. I could get on with more immediate matters. "Thank your nephew for the use of his jacket, please." I paused, my previous uncharacteristic bluntness dissipating with

the medication. I was back to cushioning conversation in layers of tact. "I'm not sure where we're going. Maybe you told me and I missed it. Hopefully somewhere that won't require much walking." Although I'd been trundled from a wheelchair into the police car, I doubted my blue booties would provide much warmth or traction over long distances. "My parents would come get me but they're on the west coast for their thirtieth anniversary. Oh, you know that already. Most of my friends live out of state. Out of this state. And I went to college in Iowa. And my siblings are all busy." I had to quit this or I'd start sharing details of where each friend lived and why each sibling was so busy. "It sounds as though my car isn't drivable, and anyway, I believe you can't let me leave until this orchid business is settled. Right?"

"Let me answer in reverse order. Right. Next. You are eventually getting around to the Cadwallader Hotel. It's clean, reasonably priced, and the only hotel that isn't off the interstate. With no vehicle you'll probably want to be in walking distance of restaurants, coffee shops, bookstores—pardon?"

"You heard that sigh? You said the three magic words. Restaurants, coffee shops, bookstores."

His face relaxed into another near-smile. "That's four magic words." He turned the wiper speed up a notch and continued. "There's a big box store by the interstate too. About ten miles north. But the five-and-dime in town has everything you could need. Including boots and shoes. According to my sister, they keep up with styles pretty well."