

The Scent of You

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EXCERPT ONLY

One

Leah's grandfather had always taught her to follow her heart, so why did she feel like she was letting him down? Had she done the right thing by giving up a medical degree to pursue her dreams?

Leah stood in the middle of her new office on the sixth floor of Lake Towers in the heart of Cupertino's Business District. It's been six years since his passing and she was still grieving. That fatal day came only three months after she dropped out of medical school to become a wedding planner. The grief was still fresh and the guilt even more so.

When she was little, she'd told everyone that she was going to be a doctor like her grandfather. After her parents divorced when she was still a baby, she went to live with her paternal grandparents. Her father went off to Europe and her mother remarried. She and her grandfather became inseparable, especially after her grandmother died.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she swallowed a lump that had risen to her throat. Thinking about her grandfather made her chest heavy and her eyes sting. Something dropping on the floor to her left caused her to open her eyes. One of the movers dropped a box.

"Be careful," she snapped.

"Sorry, ma'am," the man apologized.

Leah sighed as she searched the almost empty space for her assistant. *Where is Bridget?* This was their

first day in the new office and Leah's nerves were getting the better of her. After wavering for the better part of five years about moving her business out of her living room, she finally made up her mind. Perhaps, the business growing exponentially made up her mind for her.

"Leah." It was Bridget.

She twirled to face her friend of fifteen years when she came face to face with two new faces – male and female.

"These are the new hire," Bridget informed her.

"Oh," she muttered. "I'm sorry, we're just moving in." Leah took Bridget's arm and pulled her aside. "I thought they were supposed to come in on Wednesday after we've sorted the office."

"I got the dates mixed up, sorry."

The man's voice made Leah look in his direction. "What can we do to help?"

Leah expressed surprise. "Would you? You don't have to"

"Might as well get started," he offered. "The sooner the office is ready the sooner I can get to work."

"I agree," the female said.

Bridget's face broke into a broad smile. "Mike and Cara, right?" They both nodded and Bridget beckoned them to follow her. "Come with me."

Leah sighed. She was pleased with their choice of hiring two more, making Fantasy Weddings a staff of four. Leah had grown famous in as one of Cupertino's top wedding planners. She was known for her unusual venues and exotic type arrangements.

Her slogan, *'Make Your Deepest Fantasies Come True'* wasn't just for sales purposes. One of the many questions she asked her clients was what they dreamed of happening for their weddings. Leah's desire was to make all their dreams come true no matter how peculiar or extreme.

Underwater, parachuting, paragliding, bungee jumping were only a few of the weddings she'd arranged. Because of her original and unusual methods of giving her clients exactly what they wanted, she became a celebrity in her own right. Most of her clients were from the wealthier class and *could* afford to have their *fantasy wedding*.

Another box dropped and something smashed. She rushed to pick up the contents. Her grandfather's

photo frame was lying on the floor, the glass broken into a million fragments.

“Sorry ma’am,” the mover said.

Leah picked up the photo and wooden frame. “Just clean up the glass please, and try not to drop anything else.”

With back stiff and heart heavy, she trudged to the office that was supposed to be hers. The desk sitting in the center belonged to her grandfather. She walked over to it and ran the tips of her fingers along the smooth dark surface.

“I miss you grandpa,” she whispered, her voice thick. “I hope you are proud of me.”

Two

The rustling of papers broke the silence of the seventh floor office in Cupertino. Three tired figures poured over documents needed for an early morning meeting. At some point, the letters and numbers on the pages began to distort. Tired eyes widened in order to focus.

Quinn pressed into his eyes with the heel of his palms as they were burning and threatening to water. During the last three days, he slept little if at all. After a few seconds, he removed his hands and blinked, trying to focus again.

Glancing at his watch, he noted it was 10:53 PM. He'd been sitting at his desk for more than three hours in a meeting with his partner and secretary. Taking over small struggling companies was Quinn's passion. In some instances, he would buy majority shares in the company. Their current focus was merging with a small securities firm.

"Let's wrap this up, shall we?" he suggested.

His associate and best friend nodded. Exhaustion was evident on Alan's face, as they had spent the last few days making certain that all the documents were in order. This was a quickie deal, which he needed to wrap up soon, since there was another company proposal to look through.

Quinn glanced at his secretary. "Are these all the documents?"

"Yes, Sir," she replied. "Those are all the files."

Both Alan and Vita sat in two leather chairs directly in front of his desk. The surface of the solid mahogany gleamed in the fluorescent light of the office. He picked up a mug with coffee that rested on a coaster and brought it to his lips. The coffee was now cold. He replaced the mug and picked up the file he'd been studying.

Against the left wall was a sofa and opposite that was a shelf with a few books. Most of the items on the shelf were sports memorabilia, his awards and two first place football trophy replicas from college. The originals were still in the showcase at his alma mater. Beside the shelf was a portrait of his late father. Behind the portrait hid his personal safe.

Quinn liked his office in the business district. He raised his eyes and peered through the glass panel overlooking the city. Only twinkling lights of Cupertino nightlife returned to him.

Coming back to the task, he flipped the pages of the document. Vita smiled at him in a rather bashful manner. Her brown eyes never met his and this amused Quinn.

He rested his elbow on top of the desk while he absently fingered his scruffy day old beard. With his eyes back to the file in front of him, Quinn refocused his attention on the merger agreement. This was his fifth merger since forming his company eight years ago when he was only twenty-four years old.

By the time he graduated college, he'd saved enough money to start his own business with the direction of his father. Herman Harrison was an Economics professor at UCLA. During the summer and some winter breaks, he tutored privately. Professor Harrison often wrote articles, which appeared in the financial section of the newspaper. Quinn would read these articles, listen to his father while he tutored and asked many questions. This sparked his interest in

investments and finance, which led him to the junior stock market. There he purchased small amounts of stocks in various markets. By the time he left high school, Quinn had made close to half a million dollars trading stocks.

Alan cleared his throat, breaking Quinn's concentration. He looked up from his file at the new stubby growth on the man's oval face. His friend's brown eyes were red rimmed and his brown hair looked like a bird's nest.

"Alan, I can finish up here. Nicole must be worried sick, you go home," he said.

Alan's wife wasn't one to contend with. Quinn knew Alan was scared of her and he would get an earful when he got home. Several times in the past, he'd had to act as referee as Nicole and Alan came to blows. When it wasn't work hours, it was money issues. The woman was a nag.

Alan's face lit up like a bulb. "Are you sure? I think we're set for the meeting tomorrow. I couldn't find anything wrong in the report."

"Yeah, I'll just give them a once over and then make a few calls. I think we're set," Quinn smiled.

“Hey, remember tomorrow after the meeting - match, you and me.”

Alan grinned. “You’re on, old man.”

It was a regular past time of theirs to hit the tennis court together since high school. It kept them fit and helped them bond as friends. Since Quinn suffered a knee injury in his college days playing football, this was the only sport he enjoyed. He sometimes felt the old injury flare up, but he didn’t mind.

He looked over at his trophies and wondered what it would have been like if he’d become a professional football player. Things would have been different. Of course, he wouldn’t be Cupertino’s Executive of the Year three times in a row.

A frame of the magazine cover for the last issue hung beside his father’s portrait on the wall. This was the doing of Terry, one of his women ‘friends’. She had become too attached and he had no idea how to break the connection. He shook her from his mind and went back to thinking about business.

Alan picked up his jacket, which he’d thrown on the sofa and left Quinn’s office. It was always amusing to Quinn when Alan would rush home after work or

skip out on functions because of his wife. He, on the other hand, was unattached and liked it that way. At 32, he did not intend to tie himself down to any one woman. He wasn't even dating exclusively, though there were a number of women waiting for his call.

“Vita, you too. Go on home, I'll finish up here,” he said.

“Yes, Mr. Harrison,” she replied, getting to her feet.

He looked up from his papers again. “How many times do I tell you? It's Quinn.”

“Okay, Quinn. See you tomorrow,” she replied with a demure smile.

In all of the six months that Vita worked with them, she never once called him by his given name, except when he insisted. He knew that by morning it was back to being ‘Mr. Harrison’.

Alan's head popped around the door. “Come Vita, I'll drop you home, it's on my way.”

“Thanks Alan,” Vita replied.

Quinn chuckled. Vita never addressed him as Quinn, but always addressed her other boss as Alan. He could see the fear in her eyes whenever she looked

at him. Did she think he was going to jump her? Not that he wouldn't, but Alan would have his neck if he tried anything with the secretary. It was an unspoken rule between them never to mess with the staff.

He watched them leave the office and his eyes trailed after them. Vita's ass did look promising in that tight skirt she loved to wear. Briefly, he wondered what she would do if he made a move on her. Shaking his head, he returned to his file.

"No, behave yourself Quinn," he chuckled to himself.

Three

A deafening silence followed Alan and Vita's departure from the office. Quinn disliked the deathly quiet of the place. Before wrapping up for the night, he made a few calls, and then checked the files again.

When he next checked the time, it was 11:42. He stared at the watch for a while, remembering his father, wishing he could see his face another time. The Hermes timepiece was a gift from the late Harold Harrison. It was the most valuable item he owned. Not for its monetary value, but because it was the last gift he received from his father.

"All done," he said to himself as he stood and massaged his neck.

He picked up his jacket from the high back of his leather chair. Then he picked up his briefcase. As he gave the room one last scan before he turned out the lights, he noticed the portrait of his father was askew. The safe was

locked, so he didn't bother to check its contents. He straightened the painting, turned the lights out and closed the door behind him.

The building seemed empty as he took the elevator to the sub-level parking. He was thinking of grabbing a bite to eat at a late restaurant before heading home. Alan had opted out of ordering dinner, with the excuse that Nicole would be upset if he didn't have dinner at home. Vita said her mother made roast, so she was going home to have that. He had no one to cook for him so he was left to feel the pangs of hunger alone.

When he stepped out of the elevator, he pulled the car remote from his pocket. As he walked the short distance to where he parked, the clacking of his shoes echoed in the emptiness. Mingled with the sound of his own steps, he was certain he heard another sound.

Quinn paused, cocking his ears for any sound. Emptiness greeted him. As he moved

off again, he was certain that he heard a shuffling. When he strained to listen, he heard nothing.

“Hmm,” he murmured softly, continuing to his quartzite colored Jaguar. “I must be tired.”

A few meters away from the car, he pressed the button on the remote. The only indication that he'd unlock the car was the flashing headlights. As he reached out to open the door, something moved. He paused again and turned. He saw nothing. He was about to open the door when from the corner of his eye, a shadow emerged from behind a column. As he turned to see what it was, someone grabbed him from behind.

A hand clamped over his mouth while another hand held him in a chokehold. The one holding him from behind was as tall as he was, maybe an inch taller. He grabbed at the arm around his neck but the hand tightened.

Another figure stepped in front of him. Before he could get a grip on the situation, something sharp jabbed his right side just under the ribs. Whatever it was, pierced his flesh and sank into him. At first, he was unsure of what happened. There wasn't much pain. The only indication that they stabbed him was the warmth of fluid trickling down his side.

Quinn's eyes widened as he tried freeing himself of the hold on his neck. Before him stood a figure in a black ski mask and navy baseball cap. Trying to twist around to see the one who held him from behind was futile. Somehow he knew there was a third person but could not see him either.

With some amount of strength, he struggled against the hold as pain spread across his lower torso. In the struggle, he moved his elbow. The elbow rammed into something cushiony.

“Oomph!”

The sound only meant he had struck someone. That was good. Quinn pulled on his inner strength and struggled against the chokehold while trying to breathe. It was difficult as he felt the air leaving his lungs.

The grip on his neck tightened the more he resisted. As he fought to breathe, weakness overcame him. While trying to grip the hand that was cutting off his windpipe his briefcase slipped from his hand.

The man holding him was hard and muscular. Quinn knew this by the way his forearm bulged against his neck. He felt the strength of his attacker from behind and knew it was pointless to struggle.

“T-a-k-e wha...,” he tried to say, in a bid to tell them to take whatever they wanted.

Gasping for air was as difficult as trying to talk. His lungs were empty and he found it impossible to inhale. In his struggle, he struck his elbow back, and again it hit something soft.

He wasn't sure what it was, but it wasn't the fellow choking him.

“Say goodbye, pretty boy,” the man in front roughly said.

An excruciating pain rent his rib cage as he felt the knife sink deeper into his flesh. His eyes watered as the pain sliced through him. Another sharp blade pierced the left of his chest. With a groan, he tried to fight against the pain while fighting to remain conscious. The arm slipped from around his neck and he gulped for fresh air.

A wave of dizziness washed over him as he listened to their feet shuffle away. Quinn made a staggering step to reach out and grab the car door. With all his strength, he tried to turn to see his attackers.

Everything was a blur. Weakness overcame him as his knees started to buckle. With all his might, he reached for the car door, but he was tumbling to the ground. As he hit

the cold pavement, his head swirled. In that moment he knew he was about to take his last breath.

The blood oozed from his side, leaving weakness in its place. This was the end. He knew it. Yet, Quinn was not ready to die. In the small space of consciousness that remained, he willed himself to live.

Was that the tolling of bells? Was heaven calling? The sound seemed distant. No, he wouldn't be heading to heaven, would he? A laugh welled in his chest but came out as a soft moan. The sound got closer... closer....

Straining to listen, he thought he heard music. It was not heaven's bells, he concluded. It was heaven's music. The rhythm soothed him. He listened. Tap-tap...tap-tap... it was getting closer. The music was now upon him, louder and faster. Willing his eyes to stay open, he wanted more of the music, but he was fading.

Without notice, the rhythm changed. Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap. It then occurred to him that this was not music. He recognized the sound. *Running!* Then it stopped and there was talking. *Help me!* He screamed but he knew no one heard him.

His eyelids were closing, and then a face loomed over him. With his blurry eyes, he tried to focus. The face danced hazily before him. Music again? No. It was a voice. The face spoke, a sound that seemed to echo and bounced off the walls. His eyes slammed shut and everything went black.