

DANGEROUS INTERSECTIONS

CHAPTER ONE

There's nothing like the sound of metal scraping against metal to jolt a person's thoughts back to reality. Jen would have sworn she hadn't looked away for more than five seconds. She cringed as she watched the driver of the vehicle she'd rear-ended climb out of his car, rubbing the back of his neck – and looking ominous.

Not now, she thought. *Please, God - not now*. Hadn't this day brought enough misfortune her way? Jen struggled to hold back her tears as she exited her car. As the man approached her, his body language clearly mirrored the tenor of his mood. Jen knew there was no way she could cope with a hostile confrontation right now. She simply had no patience left for diplomacy or turning the other cheek.

“What the hell were you doing back there?” The man towered over her, clearly trying to intimidate her with his height and muscle.

“I am *so* sorry,” Jen said without hesitation. “It was all my fault. I looked away for one second and apparently everything came to a stop in my, uh ... absence.” Having worked in the legal profession for some ten years, Jen was well aware she was violating one of the primary rules of conduct in a situation such as this: *Admit nothing. Say as little as possible*. But it *was* her fault. She just wanted to get this unpleasantness over with as quickly as possible and go home where she could finally release the floodgates.

Oh, Tom. But, in the face of this current crisis, Jen tucked that thought away, willing herself back to the present. The man was actually yelling at her. *Insensitive clod.*

“... How difficult can it be to avoid the car in front of you when traffic is moving all of fifteen miles per hour ... tops!” Just when Jen thought he was done, he started up again. “‘Your fault.’ Damn right, it’s your fault!”

“Really. I’m very sorry,” she said, making another attempt to appease him. “Let me just give you my ...”

“‘Looked away, you say?’” he said, cutting her off. “Lady, you weren’t just ‘looking away’ and you *know* it! You were texting someone. Admit it. I saw you in my rearview mirror just before you hit me. You were looking down. Don’t try to deny it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

His eyes narrowed. “You know exactly what I’m talking about. Of all the asinine, idiotic ...”

“There’s no need for name calling,” she interrupted. “I’ve already admitted it was my fault and I’m very sorry.” But he had pushed her too far and now Jen couldn’t let it go. “And what makes you think I had to be texting just because you saw me looking down?” *Circumstantial evidence*, she told herself, ever the lawyer.

He glowered at her. “You were either texting or you were dialing. I saw the phone in your hand. You *are* aware California has a law against using your cell phone while driving?” Then *he* went too far. His blue eyes blazing, he added in a condescending tone, “And I doubt very much if any court is going to accept ‘I was having a blonde moment’ as an excuse!”

Jennifer McCady saw the contempt on his face. She flushed in anger, but instead of making a clever retort to his misogynistic remark, to her mortification, Jen burst into tears. God how she hated to show this ... this jerk her vulnerability. But his utter rudeness was just more than she could bear

on top of everything else. Her tears were far in excess of what the situation merited. It was a fender bender, for God's sake. By now they should have exchanged insurance information and both been on their way, but for his boorish attitude and bullying.

Oh, Tom, she silently mourned through her tears.

To Jennifer's dismay, her unbidden tears hadn't escaped the man's notice. He scowled at her. "Oh, that's just rich." He glanced over his shoulder at the patrol car pulling up and watched as the patrolman stepped from his vehicle and approached them. "Good timing. Do you think that ploy might work for me too?" he hissed just before the officer came within earshot, "because, hey, I'll try anything."

The officer took in the scene. Although he had not heard the words spoken, he *had* seen the look on the man's face, as well as Jennifer's obvious distress. "Let's just calm down, Sir." He gave the man a reproving look. "I need you to step over by your vehicle, please." He spoke in a calm but authoritative tone as he skillfully put some distance between the two drivers. He then turned his attention to Jennifer. "Are you all right, Ma'am?"

She nodded. It was a relief to have an intermediary. The policeman's commanding but polite demeanor calmed her. Even though the accident was clearly her fault, he had spoken words of comfort to her, in sharp contrast to the man whose car she had hit.

After obtaining her license and insurance information, the officer returned to his squad car where he remained for what seemed like an hour, but in reality was only a matter of minutes. Finally, he went over to hear the other driver's version of the incident. Jen heard only snippets of their conversation, but it was enough to tell her the guy was still angry. "... Wasn't even looking," she heard him say at one point, then "texting ...". The officer maintained the same calm demeanor with the other driver that he had with Jennifer, patiently hearing him out. She did notice him wince

disapprovingly at one point at an exceptionally harsh remark. The officer responded to what he had said and Jen watched the man's shoulders gradually relax. "Michael," he said respectfully, at one point. "Michael Bannister."

Michael Bannister accepted the paper the officer was holding out to him – Jen's insurance information. She barely remembered giving it to him. She felt like she was watching the whole scene from afar, like it was a dream.

Then she heard the policeman say, "You *can* make a claim for your damages if you choose, Mr. Bannister; however, I won't be issuing a ticket on this. These fender-benders are a common occurrence in this stop-and-go rush hour traffic, especially in this traffic circle. I think everyone just needs to cool off here and get on with their day."

"What?" Bannister exclaimed in disbelief. "She was texting on her cell phone, for God's sake! You're telling me you're not even going to give her a ticket?"

"Mr. Bannister, that is my call, not yours. Now, I suggest you get in your car and be on your way. Traffic has already been tied up far too long over this." The officer looked at him sternly as he handed back his driver's license; then he stood and watched as Mike Bannister got back into his car and pulled away. Finally, with a nod to Jen, he returned to his squad car.

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Only an hour earlier, Jen had been sitting at Tom's bedside, and he was alive. Not vibrant or strong by any means, but that miraculous life force was still with him. She could almost see it seeping out minute by anguishing minute, taking with it the man with whom she'd spent the better part of the last ten years of her life.

The room had been darkened – the medication always made him sensitive to light. It had been his wish to leave this world quietly, just as he had entered it. No drama. Just the tranquility of

this hospice room, and *her* holding his hand – the feel of her warm skin his last memory in a life that was slipping away all too quickly. Jen had caressed his cheek and whispered soothing words in his ear, and finally had felt his hand go slack as he faded slowly out of existence.

Jen had shed no tears over his passing. The empty numbness that came with sharing those last few hours of his suffering had temporarily stayed her tears. All she had wanted was to go home where she could mourn in private.

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Jen sat in the over-stuffed chair in her bedroom, her legs tucked beneath her. She took another sip of wine. She was still unable to cry. *Easy enough when you don't want to*, she berated herself, thinking of the humiliating scene at the traffic circle earlier in the day. Now, when she really needed to have a good cry, she just felt numb.

She thought of Tom's last words to her. *Was it really just this morning?* "It's okay. The hard part is done for me. It's you I worry about. I wish you happiness, Jen." He had given her hand a barely discernible squeeze. "Please, be happy."

Well, what did that mean? Beyond the fact he was laying there dying, and beyond the fact that I've spent the last two years of my life adjusting to his infidelity and our divorce, ... beyond that, did I seem inordinately unhappy to him?

She patted the throw pillow to better shape it to her head. *Then, when we finally find a fit that's comfortable and become best friends, you go and die on me.* Jen punched the pillow once more. Then again. "Damn you, Tom McCady!" Finally, she threw her face into the pillow and sobbed away her anguish. She fell asleep curled up in the armchair.