

Short Tales: The Language of Flowers

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Jenny stood on the brick steps of the flower shop and watched the morning sun melt across the sky like butter over silver dollar pancakes. Forget-me-nots and yellow daisies cheered her as she set up displays in front of *Mum's the Word*, her sister's flower shop.

The Murrays, an elderly couple in matching tweed jackets, smiled and waved at her as they passed by. They always took the same route for their morning walk. Jenny waved back, watching as the couple strolled, hand in hand, until they disappeared around the corner. She felt a twinge of envy. To distract herself, she knelt in front of a display of asters and began rearranging the blooms.

The small shop was doing wonderfully in the newer downtown district. Jenny worked there part-time while she studied at the community college as an adult reentry student. She had a full life, and she couldn't have asked for more. Even as she had the thought, however, she glanced over her shoulder to the

bakery down the street. The tempting smells of cinnamon and vanilla, and the scent of baking bread, drifted towards her. *The Little Bakery* had opened its doors three weeks ago. Already customers had taken to lining up for sticky pastries and a cup of fresh-brewed coffee on their way to work.

Jenny met the owner when she'd stopped in with a good-luck bouquet of white bells of Ireland to welcome him to the neighborhood. His name was Michael, and she couldn't help noticing that his eyes were as dark as the center of a black-eyed Susan, and that they crinkled at the corners when he smiled. He'd thanked her and handed her a chocolate chip cookie still warm from the oven, melting and sweet,



and then promptly knocked over a display of sugar cookies on the counter. Flustered, he'd shot her an embarrassed grin. Since then, she'd caught his eye a few times across the avenue, and they'd shared a few smiles, but there never seemed to be enough time to do more than that.

Had it been her imagination, or

had his gaze lingered the last time?

She shook her head. She'd never finish the displays if she insisted on daydreaming about Michael all morning. She set her mind back to her task, absorbing herself in it.

"Hi, Jenny. Busy?"

Startled, Jenny looked over her shoulder to see a sandy-haired man standing at the bottom of the steps. She smiled in invitation, her heart doing a little dance.

"Michael." She wiped her hands, grubby from the display containers, on her apron and pushed back her curly hair from her face as she stood. "Nice to see you again."

Michael glanced towards his storefront. Through the window of the bakery, Jenny saw that no customers waited, though it was still early.

He cleared his throat. "I just have a minute, but I thought I'd...um," he glanced around, his gaze landing on the rows of blooms behind her, "buy some flowers."

She chuckled. "Well, you came to the right place." She led Michael into the shop and took up her usual stance behind the counter. "Something for the bakery?"

He squinted at her and shook his head. "No. I'd like a bouquet for a very special lady."

"Oh." Jenny managed to maintain her smile even though her stomach took a dip. "Well, I have lots of arrangements for special ladies," she forced herself to say. *Of course he'd have someone in*



his life. He was too cute, and too nice, not to. “Did you have anything particular in mind?”

He hesitated. “Maybe you can give me some advice. Your shop sells flowers based on the messages they convey, right?”

She nodded, still struggling with her disappointment. “Yes, flowers have a language all their own. The right blooms can say anything from ‘I love you’ to ‘I’m sorry’ if you know which ones to choose. If you tell me what you’d like to say to your lady friend, I’d be happy to make up something appropriate.”

He ran a finger under his collar. “Well, I’m a little shy outside the bakery. I mean, all I really know is breads and desserts. My hours are nuts, so it’s hard to meet anyone nice, and when I do...” He trailed off, his face reddening.

His blush endeared him to her.

“I hear you.” She leaned an elbow on the counter conspiratorially. “Nancy, my sister, says most people don’t understand what it’s



like to run your own business, especially one that begins before sunrise, and yet to really love what you do. Your lady friend must be very special if she understands that.” Jenny hoped she was. She liked Michael, and even if there was no chance for them to get better acquainted, she wanted the best for him.

He smiled, relief evident on his face. “So, what would I buy if I’d just met her, didn’t know her that well, but wanted to get to know her better?”

Jenny thought for a moment. “Well, you can’t go wrong with gardenias. They say your lady is lovely. You could mix it in with purple violets, which means you’re thinking of her, and a nice base of lavender, which says you admire her. Do you think she might like that sort of arrangement?”

He gave her a speculative look. “Would you?”

She smiled. “Definitely. Gardenias have always been my personal favorite.”

“Then that’s the ticket,” he said, and grinned.

Jenny tried to ignore the feeling of warmth that spread through her at his lopsided smile. Instead, she set about choosing just the right blooms for him, moving briskly around the store, working until she’d arranged a perfect bouquet of blossoms tied with a white chiffon ribbon. She rang up his purchase and handed it over, trying not to heave a sigh of regret.

“Well, good luck. She’d be crazy to turn you down.”



He stared at the flowers for a moment. “You think so?”

She nodded her head and hoped her smile didn’t look as wistful as it felt. “Of course. You seem like a great guy, Michael.”

He took a deep breath and looked up. “Then maybe you’d like to go out to dinner with me tonight.” He handed the flowers back to her, his dark eyes mischievous. “And afterwards, I know a place that makes great desserts.”

Surprise and joy leapt through her. Momentarily overcome, she buried her nose in the bouquet, and then lifted her bright gaze to meet his hopeful one.

“I’d like that, Michael.” She smiled shyly. “I’d like that a lot.”



PRO writer TJ Bennett was a finalist in the 2005 Golden Heart Paranormal category.

