

*A4-in-1
Collection*

a **YEAR** *of*
FLOWERS



**SUZANNE
WOODS FISHER**

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE SWEET LIFE

a **YEAR** *of*
FLOWERS

A 4-in-1 Novella Collection

**SUZANNE
WOODS FISHER**



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2024 by Suzanne Woods Fisher

Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan
RevellBooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Control Number: 2024033380
ISBN 9780800742348

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Author is represented by Joyce A. Hart.

Cover photograph © Jane Morley / Trevillion Images
Cover design by Laura Klynstra

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24 25 26 27 28 29 30 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

An Apology in Bloom	7
A Bouquet of Dreams	81
A Field of Beauty	169
A Future in Blossom	255

an
APOLOGY *in*
BLOOM

Cast of Characters

Jaime Harper—(age 25) raised in the South, now a floral designer for Epic Events, a wedding and event planning company based in New York City

Liam McMillan—(age 30-something) owner of Epic Events

Rose Reid—(ageless) owner of Rose’s Flower Shop in Sunrise, North Carolina

Harrison—(don’t ask) artist and neighbor to Jaime in NYC

Sloane—(age 40ish) project manager for Epic Events

Mrs. Zimmerman—(somewhere in her sixties) a critical client for Epic Events (literally and figuratively)

Todd—(age 22) unpaid intern for Epic Events

Floral Glossary

- fillers**—material used to fill gaps or empty spaces
- focal point**—the area of dominance or emphasis where the eye naturally travels
- foliage**—greenery, such as plant leaves
- forage**—harvesting free material, such as blooming forsythia branches, taken from private properties (*only* with permission, please!)
- mechanics**—the hidden foundation that holds flowers in place (such as flower frog or chicken wire)
- negative space**—a planned open space within a design that contains no flowers or foliage
- recipe**—a set of instructions to prepare a specific arrangement
- vendors**—sources for flowers (local growers, farmers' market, a wholesaler, or international)
- vessels**—containers to hold arrangements (such as vases, urns, compote bowls); all kinds of objects can become vessels to hold flowers—mason jars, bottles, crocks

*Flowers always make people better, happier,
and more helpful; they are sunshine, food,
and medicine for the soul.*
—Luther Burbank

one

*You're only here for a short visit. Don't hurry, don't worry.
And be sure to smell the flowers along the way.*

—Walter Hagen

Jaime Harper stepped back to examine the bridal bouquet she'd created for the Zimmerman-Blau wedding. She had to get this bouquet right today. Did it seem balanced? Was anything sticking out? A bridal bouquet was the most photographed floral piece of an entire wedding. Nail it down and everything else would fall into place.

This was the sixth mock-up. All previous ones had been shot down by the mother of the bride. These mock-up meetings were critical steps in the planning process. And Mrs. Zimmerman was a critical customer. She had a way of making Jaime feel like a rooster one day and a feather duster the next.

The Zimmerman-Blau wedding was going to be the highest-profile wedding yet for Epic Events. Sloane, the project manager, reminded her that it was such an important wedding that Epic's owner Liam McMillan was leaving an initial design consultation with a prospective client to be at this flower mock-up with Mrs.

Zimmerman. “Liam asked me to make lunch reservations at his favorite restaurant,” Sloane said. “A congratulations lunch,” she added, crossing her fingers. “Today’s the day.” Final approval from Mrs. Z, she meant.

“Let’s hope so,” Jaime said, but she wondered. She’d been tinkering with the arrangement all morning. Her mind kept wandering, and she had to keep tugging herself back to the here and now. When she was distracted, she missed things. When she missed things, bad things happened. She knew that for a fact. “Do you think it’s too, too . . .” Too much? Too little?

Sloane rolled her eyes. “Stop sounding so pathetic.”

“I can’t help it,” Jaime said. She had a better sense of the terrible things that could happen in the world than most people did.

“Hurry and finish and clean up your workshop!”

Jaime looked at her and sighed. “I don’t know why y’all are always in a rush.”

Sloane turned from the door and winked. “My little Southern belle, have you still not realized we have only one speed? Express.”

Jaime listened to the sound of Sloane’s staccato heels doing their fast-walk down the hallway. Why did New Yorkers go through life like their hair was on fire? And for what? She got the same results by taking her time.

In the mirror, she examined the bouquet one more time. Was it as good as Sloane said? She hated that her first thought was no, that she never thought her work was good enough. She didn’t know what took a greater toll on her sense of well-being—her own self-deprecating thoughts or high-maintenance clients with way too much money. Something was still cattywampus with the bouquet, and Mrs. Zimmerman would notice that indescribable *something* and reject, yet again, the design.

For most weddings, flowers took about 10 to 15 percent of the total budget. Clients were delighted to cut down on costs and waste by letting the ceremony flowers do double duty at the reception space. The welcome arrangement from the ceremony could be

reused at the table seating display. Or the bridal bouquet could be put in a vase and used as the sweetheart table arrangement. But there was no such skimping for the Zimmerman wedding.

Flowers, Mrs. Zimmerman insisted, were to be the main décor for her daughter's wedding. She loved flowers and wanted lavish displays to fill every space in the venue, the New York Botanical Garden—a beautiful oasis in the middle of the Bronx. All in all, the flower budget for the Zimmerman wedding came to a staggering sum. That was the reason there was such heightened concern at Epic Events to get Mrs. Zimmerman's approval on the flowers. Sloane couldn't start billing until Mrs. Z signed off, and Jaime couldn't order the flowers without paying a sizable deposit up front. So today was the day. She had to get the mock-up bouquet right today.

She took a picture on her phone of the bouquet and sent it to Liam. A minute or two later, Liam texted back *Subtract*, and of course he was right. He was always right. Jaime had a tendency to jam-pack so that blooms competed for space as they expanded in the heat of the day. What looked to be a perfectly balanced floral arrangement in the cool of the morning would look stuffed and tight by evening. So she subtracted by pulling stems and removing materials, until she thought it thoroughly resembled Liam's recipe.

That man had some kind of superpower in how he could read his clients' minds. He was able to visualize and articulate what the clients wanted even if they didn't seem to know themselves. This was the sticky-floral-tape thought for Jaime: How to put into reality the creation Liam had imagined. That was the secret sauce for everyone at Epic Events—to think like Liam McMillan thinks and execute like he executes. He *was* the brand.

She went over to the mirror again to hold the bouquet low against her belly, the way a bride would. She rotated the bouquet to see it at every angle, examining different viewpoints to make sure it looked balanced. Photographs exaggerated the depth of field, so it was wise to note whatever might jut out.

Everything looked good. Better than good. Jaime exhaled a sigh of relief. Time to stop. Knowing when to stop was critical.

Jaime taped the stems and set the bouquet in water in the walk-in cooler to keep it as fresh as possible for the meeting.

Before closing the cooler, she breathed in deeply the perfume of fresh flowers, letting their scent calm her nerves. Whenever she paused to soak up the fragrance of flowers, she was instantly transported to the sweetest, happiest time of her life. Back in high school, working afternoons and weekends in Rose's Flower Shop in a tiny town in North Carolina with her two best friends, Claire and Tessa. Mentored in the art of flower arranging by Rose Reid, the shop owner, who had the patience and kindness and generous nature to teach the three girls everything she knew. Flowers were the business of happiness, Rose had often reminded them. They brought joy and comfort to people.

Rose Reid had been on her mind all morning. She was the reason Jaime felt as if tears kept threatening. The reason she felt emotionally wobbly. It was hard to squeeze shame back into its box. Even harder to keep it from spilling out again.

When Jaime had arrived at work this morning, a registered letter was waiting for her. Instantly, she recognized the elegant handwriting, the pale pink stationery. She hurried to the workshop and sat right down on a stool, her chest stinging with pain. How had Rose found her? It was the first time there'd been contact between them since that terrible August day. She cringed at the memory she'd tried so hard to forget. Hands trembling, Jaime skimmed the letter once, twice, then read it again more thoroughly. *All is forgiven*, Rose wrote. *It's time to come home*. And then she outlined a plan for Jaime to return to live in North Carolina, to run Rose's Flower Shop.

Run a little flower shop in that off-the-beaten-track Southern town? Was Rose serious? After all that had happened between them, that offer took gumption. But did she really think Jaime would give up all *this . . . for that*?

Because *this* included quite a bit. A floral dream job led by a

remarkably creative boss. And when it came to Liam, there was potential for romance written all over their relationship. Well, sometimes it seemed to be written all over it. Scribbles, maybe. They had “moments” now and then that made her think something was brewing. She hoped so. Oh boy, did she ever hope so.

Then again, so did most every female who worked at Epic Events. So did every female client.

Jaime closed the cooler door—pushing with two hands because it had a tendency to stick—and grabbed a broom to clean up the stems and leaves and petals strewn over the floor. As she gathered the excess flowers to return to the cooler, she glanced at the large wall clock. An idea had been tickling in the back of her mind for a unique bouquet—a contemporary take on a cascade style. Why not? She had time. Sitting in the cooler were leftover Zimmerman flowers, plus some unusual flowers she’d picked up on a whim this morning at the New York City Flower Market.

First, she began with a dense center: clusters of color for focus. The showstoppers. Café Latte roses, Cappuccino roses, Café au Lait Ranunculus as big as roses. She built intensity by adding pops of color: Black Parrot tulips and Hot Chocolate calla lilies. The black tulips were the color of an eggplant (Mother Nature doesn’t make truly black flowers), petals glossy with a dark luster, tops fringed like feathers—hence the name parrot tulips. The calla lilies were a deep chocolate burgundy bloom.

She brought in texture with trailers of creeping fig woven in through the roses. Next came gradients, accent flowers to bridge the colors—mini Epidendrum orchids, ruffly Lisianthus. Then foliage to fill the gaps. A light hand, though.

She stood back to assess. It felt like it still needed more, but she hesitated, thinking of Liam’s text: *Subtract!* A phrase from Rose popped into her mind: “*Let the flowers speak.*” So Jaime added layer upon layer, letting the flowers do the talking. She stood in front of the mirror, just as she had done with the Zimmerman bouquet, and felt a deep sense of satisfaction.

The door opened and Sloane stuck her head in. Her mouth opened, closed, opened again, then stopped. Her eyes and attention were on the bouquet. “Jaime, it’s an absolute stunner.” She took a step into the workshop. “It’s like an oil painting.” Adding in a warning tone, “But . . . that’s *not* the bouquet that Liam wanted—”

“No, no. Don’t worry. This isn’t the Zimmerman bouquet. That’s in the cooler.”

Sloane crossed the room to examine the bouquet in Jaime’s hands.

“Sometimes . . .”

“What?”

“Sometimes . . . I wish I had your job.”

Jaime’s eyes narrowed in surprise. Sloane was a phenomenal project manager. So smart, so capable. She kept the team on a strict timeline. “I thought you liked doing what you do.”

“I do. Sure I do. I mean, if I want my own company one day, this is the best path. But there’s just something about flowers.”

Sloane bent over to inhale deeply from the bouquet and Jaime understood. There *was* just something about flowers. “I’ll tell you *what!* After the Zimmerman wedding, maybe I can teach you some flower basics.”

Sloane smiled. “I’ll tell *you* what.” She liked to mock Jaime’s Southernness. “You’re on.” She tipped her head. “Are those black tulips?”

Jaime nodded. “Tulips symbolize eternal love.”

“Get a picture of that one. I want it for my wedding.” Sloane rolled her eyes upward. “If Charlie will ever get over his allergy to commitment.” They’d been engaged for seven years. She pointed to the large clock on the wall. “I just heard from Liam. They’re on their way.”

More than on their way. Through the large warehouse window, Jaime could see an Uber pull into the parking lot, followed by Mrs. Zimmerman’s white Tesla. She took a few steps over to the

large window, watching Liam, her heart humming like a contented cat. She enjoyed observing him unawares. Stolen moments, she thought of them.

“Checking out Mrs. Z’s latest ensemble?”

Not hardly. Jaime’s eyes were on Liam. He hurried over to open the door on the Tesla for Mrs. Zimmerman. *Such a gentleman.*

Sloane came up behind her to join her at the window. “What’s she got on today?”

Mrs. Zimmerman, somewhere in her late sixties, had memorable taste in clothing. Today, she wore an orange pantsuit—radiation, glow-in-the-dark orange—and her hair was hidden under a yellow and purple scarf, its tail resting on her shoulder. Sloane whistled, long and low. “I’m still amazed that the flowers for the wedding are subdued colors.”

“She wanted everything in pink, all shades, especially hot pink, until Liam told her that pink was requested all year long.”

Sloane coughed a laugh. “He’s got her figured out. Mrs. Z wants nothing more than to stand out from the crowd.” She gave Jaime a pat on her shoulder and started toward the door.

Jaime was barely aware of Sloane’s departure. Her eyes were still glued on Liam. Mrs. Zimmerman was giggling at something he was telling her. Mothers of the brides seemed especially vulnerable to Liam’s charms. Maybe it was his thick Scottish brogue. There was definitely something mesmerizing about it. Or maybe it had to do with the way he looked at you when he spoke, as if you were exactly the person he was hoping to see and he just couldn’t believe how fortunate he was to find you. She wondered if that characteristic might be true of all Scotsmen . . . or if it was just part of the Liam McMillan magic.

Add to that musical accent his good looks—finely chiseled features, his deceptively casual appearance—and females became captivated. Jaime, especially. If he were tall, he might have been an imposing figure, but his below-average height for a man only added to his appeal. He was so approachable, so inviting. Today,

Liam was dressed in a black merino sweater and olive trousers, Ferragamo loafers. Jaime caught herself calculating how much money his outfit cost—easily between one and two thousand dollars. Right in the range of hers, though everything she was wearing today had been purchased at an upscale consignment store for a fraction of its original cost. It was one of the perks of living in New York City—lots of one-season-wear castoffs.

With that thought, her stomach started turning again. This, she knew, was the core of her insecurity. Pretending to be someone she wasn't.

With a start, she hurried over to the walk-in cooler to switch the bouquets. She pulled at the door with her free hand, but it wouldn't open. "Stupid cooler!" She rued the day she'd bought this cooler. It was a smoke screen—it looked new but broke down regularly. She yanked and yanked, but she'd need two hands to open the stuck door. She spun around to find a place to set the cascading bouquet and there were Mrs. Zimmerman and Liam, staring at her with wide eyes.