

Chapter 1

(Unwritten) Rule No. 9 of the Gibbons Family Handbook:
Learn from past mistakes or history is doomed to repeat itself.

“Well, hel-*lo!*” Cynthia Gibbons uttered slowly. A smile crossed her glossy pink lips.

She spotted him instantly: the six-foot-tall dark Adonis in the dark suit with the iPhone at his ear and a gourmet coffee in his hand. She had been loading grocery bags into her black Lexus SUV when she saw him striding confidently across the shopping center parking lot.

Decades of man-hunting had taught Cynthia to scan potential prey quickly and assess in thirty seconds or less whether they were worthy of the chase. Cynthia noticed that his suit was well tailored and looked fairly expensive. Maybe it was even an Armani, though she couldn't tell for sure from this far away. She also noticed his gold watch and the lack of a wedding ring—though a ring wouldn't have been that much of a deterrent for her. Cynthia didn't care if a man was married or not; if he was, it just meant she had to change her approach, that's all.

She watched as he finished his phone conversation and pulled his car remote from his pocket. She then stood on the balls of her feet to get a better view of him as he walked between a row of cars. She waited to see what car he would unlock. If it was the Honda Civic four spaces away or the Town and Country van next to it, he probably wasn't worth her time. Instead, he unlocked, with two quick beeps, a glistening two-door Porsche roadster.

Bingo, Cynthia thought as she watched him swing open the car door and climb inside.

Cynthia could smell blood in the water, and like a circling shark she went in for the kill. She watched as he drove out of his parking space. Seconds later, she scrambled inside her car, tossed her purse into the passenger seat, and followed him. It didn't take long to maneuver in traffic so that she was in the lead. Now he was on his cell phone again, driving distractedly as he trailed behind her.

“That's right, handsome,” Cynthia whispered as she adjusted her rearview mirror and gazed at him. “Almost there.”

Cynthia had a plan in mind, but she had to be careful. She didn't want to hurt anyone, cause any serious damage to either of their vehicles, or—heaven forbid—cause a roadway pileup! She drove slowly for several minutes, stealthily glancing in her rearview mirror to make sure he was still behind her. Then when they drew near a stoplight, she slammed on her brakes. His Porsche came to a screeching halt behind her, but not before Cynthia heard the telltale *thump*. He had rear-ended her, which was all part of the plan.

Cynthia fought back a smile, undid two buttons on her silk blouse, and pulled open her collar. She glanced at her reflection one last time to make sure her cleavage was on full display and her makeup was perfect. She then furrowed her brows and cringed, feigning

horror and disbelief. She threw open her car door.

“Oh, my God!” she cried, rushing to her rear bumper. Horns blared behind them as the light turned green again. “What happened?”

The handsome driver rushed out of his Porsche. “I don’t know. I was . . . I was on the phone.” He gestured to the iPhone in his hand, then tossed it onto his car seat. “I’m so sorry. Are you all right?”

She gazed at him with wide hazel eyes, nodded, and brought a hand to her breasts. “I . . . I think so.”

“We should exchange insurance information.” He reached for his wallet and flipped it open. He then began to dig through several credit cards. Cynthia inwardly jumped for joy when she noticed a black card in the group. He handed an insurance card to her.

“Derrick Winters?” she said, scanning the name on the paper card.

“Yeah, that’s me.” He pointed down at the text. “And if you call that number, they should—”

“Derrick,” she interrupted, smiling ever so sweetly, “do we *really* have to get insurance companies involved in this?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it was an honest accident.” She took another step toward him and bit down on her bottom lip. “I’d hate for this to appear on either of our insurance records. I’m willing to not let some stuffy old insurance agent get involved in this . . . if you’re willing.”

“So you . . . you want to do this under the table?”

She laughed and batted her lashes. “Well, that’s an interesting way to put it.”

“So you want me to pay for the damage in cash?” he asked, eyeing her suspiciously.

“Well, it’s just a little old dent, isn’t it?”

Cynthia swept her blond locks out of her face and leaned down to peer at her bumper. She inwardly moaned. It wasn’t exactly a “little old dent.” Black Adonis had left quite a gash on her bumper, depositing a great deal of silver mica glossy paint while he was at it.

“But sacrifices have to be made,” Cynthia could hear her mother Yolanda’s voice say in her head. “You have to take some risks to land a big fish, honey!”

Cynthia stood upright. “Yes, it’s just . . . a . . . a little old bitty thing.” She breezily waved her hand. “It shouldn’t cost much.”

He frowned, still contemplating her offer. After some time, he nodded. “I appreciate you doing this, Mrs.—”

“Miss . . . It’s *Miss* Cynthia Gibbons.” She handed him back his insurance card. “But you can call me Cynthia.”

“Well, I appreciate you doing this, Cynthia.” He finally smiled, brightening his handsome face. “Look, why don’t we move our cars out of the way of traffic. If you don’t mind, I’ll give a friend of mine a quick call. He does auto body work for me occasionally.”

“*Occasionally?* Do you have these kinds of accidents often, Mr. Winters?” she joked.

He chuckled and shook his head. “Please, call me Derrick, and, no, I just have a few vintage cars that I’m working on. I like to restore them and my friend helps me. It’s my little indulgence. I’ve got a 1958 Chevrolet Corvette and a 1960 Jag XK 150—both set me back a pretty penny. When you’re dealing with one-hundred-thousand-dollar cars, you don’t trust them to just anybody. My friend does good work.”

Expensive vintage cars? Jackpot! Cynthia grinned. Oh, Derrick had *definitely* been worthy of the chase.

“My friend can make a quick drive here and give me an estimate on the damage to your Lexus. Then I can have him take care of it for you. It shouldn’t take long.”

“Oh, I’m not in a hurry.” She glanced at her watch. “I don’t have an appointment for another few hours.”

“It’ll only take forty-five minutes, tops. He isn’t far from here.”

Cynthia didn’t care if Derrick’s mechanically inclined friend took until doomsday. The ice cream she had bought at the grocery store that was now sitting in her trunk would just have to melt. She had an excuse to talk to Derrick even longer and even more time to reel him in!

They pulled over to the side of Main Street and stood on the curb together, waiting for his friend to arrive.

It was a slow weekend afternoon in Chesterton, her hometown in northern Virginia. The one-mile stretch of roadway was designed to look like an old-fashioned, small-town Main Street, with scrolled Victorian street lamps and striped awnings over two-story brick storefronts. It was summertime, so the oversized ceramic flowerpots lining the sidewalks were filled with newly bloomed lilies and geraniums. The flowers alternated with each season.

Two doors down was an old favorite in Chesterton, Mimi’s Coffee Shop, which was known for its freshly brewed coffee and the cinnamon buns Miss Mimi baked every morning. You knew you were near it because you could smell the delicious aroma wafting out her front door for blocks around. At the end of the block was the bridal shop where Cynthia had purchased her first wedding dress. At the other end of the block was the savings and loan bank, with a clock tower that marked the twelve o’clock hour. Its chime could be heard throughout Chesterton.

Derrick leaned against an old-fashioned mailbox while they talked and laughed for a good

half hour. Cynthia could feel she was making headway with him. She was just about to venture the topic of cooking him a meal at her home as thanks for fixing her car when he suddenly looked up and over her shoulder.

“Looks like my friend’s here,” Derrick said.

Cynthia turned to follow his gaze. She spotted a tow truck gliding toward them with its engine chugging loudly, drowning out the other roadway noise.

The truck was haloed by the afternoon sun. Cynthia raised her hand to her brow to block out the blinding light. She squinted. When she recognized the man in the driver’s seat, her bright smile faded. Her mouth fell open, aghast.

“*That’s* your friend?” she squeaked.

“Yeah, that’s Korey.” Derrick noticed the change in her facial expression. “Why? What’s wrong?”

Cynthia glanced nervously at Derrick as the truck came to a stop not far from where they stood. Her pulse started to race. Her throat went dry. Sweat instantly formed on her brow and underneath her arms. She felt cornered, like a bank robber who had flubbed a getaway after a robbery, had hit a dead end, and now saw red and white flashing lights swirling behind her.

“Are you okay?” Derrick asked, touching her shoulder. “You look flushed.”

“I’m fine,” she lied, clearing her throat. She shrugged off his hand. “I’m fine . . . really. I’m just a little h-hot . . . th-that’s all.”

Derrick stared at her warily.

The driver of the tow truck killed the engine and threw open his car door. Cynthia fought the urge to bolt. Her car wasn’t that far away. She could make it before he even reached them. Instead, she forced herself to stay put and watched as he climbed out of the truck and stepped onto the asphalt. After slamming the door shut, he casually strolled toward them.

God, he hasn’t changed! Even after all these years, Cynthia thought.

Korey Walker still looked the same way he had looked almost twenty years ago when they were in high school together, except now he had a few sprinkles of gray hair on his head and in the beard stubble on his russet-brown cheeks. But he was still tall, still muscular, and still handsome as the devil, which was one reason why she had avoided going anywhere near his auto body and repair shop in Chesterton since he had opened it a little more than a year ago.

Back when they were younger, Korey had been the kryptonite to her Superman, and she had been powerless under his spell. Though decades had passed since those days, Cynthia feared she would be powerless again if she got near him—and she didn’t need the confusion he could bring to her life. Korey was not the right man for her now, just as he

hadn't been the right man for her back then. But there was no avoiding him today.

"Thanks for coming, man," Derrick said, stepping forward. He and Korey embraced, then shook hands and slapped one another's backs.

They were quite the contrast: Derrick in his chic, immaculate suit, and Korey in his oil- and greased-stained navy blue shirt and pants, with grime on his hands and dirt under his nails. But even in his shoddy attire, Korey was by far the sexier of the two.

Hands down, she thought.

"Looks like I've got myself in a real fix, Korey," Derrick said. "I accidentally rear-ended this beautiful lady right here." He gestured to Cynthia.

Korey turned and looked at her. His dark eyes regarded her coolly and then shifted downward by several inches. She followed the path of his gaze, instantly getting an eyeful of her own cleavage. She was spilling out of her top. No wonder he was staring! Now self-conscious, Cynthia quickly raised her hand to cover her breasts.

"Are you sure it was an accident?" Korey asked softly in a heavy baritone she remembered all too well. He was looking at her, not Derrick, as if he was posing the question to her, not his friend.

She looked away, choosing to focus instead on the flower shop across the street.

"What? Are you trying to say I hit her *on purpose*?" Derrick asked with a chuckle.

"No, nothin' like that, man." Korey shook his head, still gazing at her. "Nothin' like that."

Damn it, stop staring at me!

She knew Korey was judging her, as he always had and always would. She could read his mind even now, after all these years.

Still playing the same ol' tricks, Cindy? Still runnin' the same ol' game? Aren't you getting a little old for this? Isn't this getting a little bit tired?

Well, to hell with you, Korey, she thought, raising her chin defiantly and meeting his gaze. She had nothing to be ashamed of. She was a grown woman who lived her life on her own terms! His judgment meant nothing to her. He wasn't going to make her question herself like he had two decades ago. She wasn't that girl anymore.

"So," Korey said, finally returning his attention to Derrick, "let's take a look at the damage." He strode toward her Lexus. "Where'd you hit her?"

"Back bumper," Derrick said, pointing at her SUV. "I left quite a scratch too."

Cynthia watched as the two men leaned down to examine her car. She crossed her arms over her chest and tapped her foot restlessly as they consulted each other, ignoring her.

She wondered why Korey didn't acknowledge that he knew her.

So be it, she thought. She wasn't going to acknowledge him either. She could pretend they were total strangers if that's what he wanted.

Korey dropped to one knee and traced his finger along the gash in her bumper, giving Cynthia plenty of opportunity to further examine him in profile: his long dark eyelashes, high cheekbones, and full lips. The diamond stud he used to wear in his left earlobe was gone. She could remember sucking on that earlobe when they parked in the deserted lot behind an old drive-in movie theater outside of Chesterton. And she could remember eighteen-year-old Korey sucking on a lot more than that while they made love in the backseat of his mother's 1987 Chevy Cavalier. Those passionate moments they shared were not only hot and heavy, but done in secret. Not even her sisters knew about him because Cynthia worried the information eventually would find its way back to their mother. Yolanda Gibbons would have killed her if she knew Cynthia was fogging up the car windows with the likes of Korey Walker.

Cynthia thought back wistfully to those clandestine nights. Just the memory of Korey's hands and mouth on her skin made her shiver. And another appendage besides his hands had been just as memorable. One night, she had playfully nicknamed it "Big Korey." From then on, the nickname stuck, and all she had to do was whisper it in his ear to get his engine going.

She watched as he now stood up. "Yeah, that's a pretty bad dent, but . . ." He winked at Derrick. "I can fix her. It's no problem, and you won't even be able to tell the difference."

"Good! And I get the friend discount, right?"

Korey laughed and nodded. "Yeah, man, you get the friend discount. Though with all the money you make, I should charge your ass extra, not less."

Korey suddenly turned to look at Cynthia, and she felt her body temperature rise again under his warm gaze. He walked toward her, reached into one of the pockets of his stained blue short-sleeved shirt, and pulled out a business card. He offered it to her.

"You can bring it in anytime next week," he said. "I'll take care of it personally."

"Thank you." She took his card and quickly tucked it into her purse.

"We're the auto repair and body shop that's not far from Stan's Bakery. We're on the corner of—"

"I *know* where you are," she said then grimaced. She hadn't meant to admit that.

"Oh, you do?" He inclined his head. "I'm surprised to hear that . . . considering that you haven't paid me a visit the whole time my shop's been here, Cindy."

Derrick furrowed his brows. "Wait! You two know each other?"

“I haven’t had a reason to visit you,” she said breezily, tossing her hair over her shoulder and ignoring Derrick’s question. “Why would I?”

“Oh, I could think of *plenty* of reasons.” Korey took another step closer to her. She saw a shadow of an impish smile tug at his lips and the heat in his dark eyes intensify. “You and I have a lot of history.”

She gritted her teeth at those words.

Cynthia had pushed that “history” out of her mind years ago when she found out that Korey was engaged to Vivian Brady, Cynthia’s old arch nemesis in high school. Vivian had been the ring leader of the pack of girls who had ridiculed Cynthia endlessly about her mother, Yolanda—“the biggest gold-digging ho in Chesterton,” as Vivian and her girlfriends liked to call Yolanda back then. Korey marrying a girl like Vivian had felt like the ultimate betrayal to Cynthia, especially when she figured out later that he had been cheating on her with Vivian while they were together. It definitely made her feel less regretful about dumping him and getting engaged to her first husband, Bill, a millionaire who was fifteen years her senior. She had chosen Bill instead of Korey because he was handpicked by her mother.

“Bill is the *right* kind of man for a responsible woman who wants to ensure her future,” her mother had said at the time.

Cynthia had since heard that Korey and Vivian were divorced, just like she and Bill, but that didn’t change her feelings about Korey’s betrayal. He had hurt her indescribably. She would never forgive him.

“I’ll bring my car in on Wednesday,” she said curtly. She then strode toward her SUV, forgetting Derrick, her big catch, and Korey, the first and last man to ever break her heart. Seconds later, she put her key in the ignition and pulled away, leaving the two men standing on the sidewalk, looking dumbfounded.