

CHAPTER ONE

My name is Vivianne Murphy and, with my best friend, and business partner, Venice Martino, we started our own brokerage, Rainbow Realty. We had our Grand Opening last summer. My sister Kat, with her daughter Nellie, as well as my Mom, Tess and stepdad, Wes, flew in from New York for our event. My cousin, Skylar and I were the only ones in the family who had left New York for greener pastures. Skylar moved to Washington, D.C. many years ago and still lives there with her husband, Jock. And he is quite the Jock. However, there are no pastures there, green or otherwise.

Venice and I live in Havenville, in the northwest part of Washington State. We met when I sold her the house across the street from mine. I live with Sassy, short for Sasquatch, a rescued terrier mix, and Venice is owned by Betty, a Border Collie, and Mr. Snigglebottom, who seems to be mostly Jack Russell, right down to his stubbornness. Venice and I complement each other, she with dark hair and olive skin, I, with red hair and fair skin. Italian and Irish, we incorporated the best of both ethnicities.

My Mom and Wes had gone home the day after the Grand Opening because, while she was here, she was diagnosed with a heart problem and she wasn't feeling well. She was going to have her mitral valve replaced next month. It should've been sooner but my Mom does what she wants on her own terms, in her own time. I also think she'd been in denial. The only reason she was having it done now was because she was tired of being tired. Mom was a force, usually to be reckoned with. We were all a little afraid of her. Except me, I was *very* afraid of her. Nellie, who would be thirteen this year, got along with Mom better than any of us ever did. Mom adored her. Maybe it was the first and only grandchild that did it but being a girl was a definite plus. She was the only human who seemed to be able to ignore my Mom's dulcet screeching, which was mostly directed at Wes.

Last year while still working for Morgan, Cromwell and Chase Realty, Venice and I sold an \$8,000,000 house, or mansion would be more like it. The commission from that sale was what gave us the capital to open Rainbow Realty. What goes around comes around and, in this case, it was the mansion. John Berkman, the owner, gave us the listing. Since the debacle last year, which resulted in his divorce, he now loathed the place. He had been staying in a very nice rental which gave him time to decide where he wanted to live. He had other houses in other countries but he wanted something here, in the Pacific Northwest. He had grown to love this area.

The mansion's infamy, coupled with the price, made it more difficult to sell than usual, however, an offer had just come in. I would call John and run it by him after I had my coffee and became semi-human.

My phone chirped, I had a bird call for my ring except for my Mom and then it belted out, "The Bitch is Back."

I recognized the number; it was John Berkman. He must have read my mind.

“Hi John, I was just about to call you.” I was lying, it was only 8 A.M. for God’s sake.”

“We received an offer on the mansion,” I said.

“Excellent, and what would that offer be?”

We had it on the market for \$9,000,000 because some updates had been made after the purchase, one of them being a brand-new kitchen. The old kitchen was pretty spectacular, I didn’t see why it had to be renovated but it was none of my business.

“The offer is \$8,500,000. I know it’s not full asking price but it’s been on the market for a while so they’re hoping to get a deal. What do you think?”

“I think we should counter back at \$8,750,000 just for the hell of it. Tell the agent I’m splitting the difference,” said John.

I wish I could be so cavalier about that much money. Ah, what’s \$250,000 give or take? To John, a mere pittance, to me, a fortune.

“I was calling to see if you or Venice could show me that waterfront listing? The one on Sandy Point Road? I would love to get out of this rental and be in my own place again. If I don’t find something here soon, I’m off to my house in Ireland.”

“Let me take a look, hang on a minute...it’s still active but the owners are currently living there and they require a twenty-four-hour notice to show. How about tomorrow morning at eleven?”

The Sandy Point home was \$3,200,000, mainly because it was no bank waterfront. You could literally walk out the back slider and bury your toes in the sand. It was a magnificent house with 4200 square feet of living space on two acres. Why a single man needed all that room was beyond me but who was I to question his wants and needs as long as he could afford it. And he most definitely could. We’d get another hefty commission from this so I didn’t care if he bought it and tore it down. Not only was “no bank” a rare find here, this house also came with a dock. The dock was a big deal because you could no longer get approval to build one. He wouldn’t find another property like this. And I knew John had lots of boy toys, a speedboat being one of them. This would be perfect.

I called the listing agent who insisted on being there during the showing. This wasn't the protocol, but given the price and the fact that the owners still resided there, it was a precaution. They didn't want looky-loos traipsing through the house, and possibly stealing things. I didn't mind at all and an appointment was available at the specified time and date we wanted.

I'd ask Venice, if she'd like to show it with me. We shared all the commissions anyway. I had to make a duty call to my Mom but I wanted to talk to Venice first.

It was a little after 9 A.M. and I knew Venice would be up. She was an early riser, unlike myself. I walked over and knocked. Betty and Mr. Snigglebottom were out in the fenced yard. When they saw it was me, they smiled. And yes, dogs smile, but only if they like you. I could see homemade muffins on the counter. Venice was an excellent baker and last year had come up with the idea of baking cupcakes and decorating them to fit the businesses she was giving them to. For example, cupcakes that looked like dogs and cats for *Paws*. She had her realtor labels on the cupcake boxes and also handed out her business cards. Surprisingly, she got quite a few listings out of her unique marketing, as well as a few buyers. That was the catalyst that opened the door for her and now she was doing very well.

I saw her through the glass sliding doors, walking toward me. Acting like the adult I am I pressed my nose to the glass and puckered my lips. Venice was laughing when she let me in.

“Now look what you've done, there's lipstick on the glass. And how old are we today, twelve?”

Chuckling I said, “I've got good news or what could turn into good news.” I told her about the impending showing with John. “I was wondering, if you'd like to go with me. It's a lovely house and I think you'd enjoy seeing it.”

“I was going to tell you; I won't be in tomorrow. I'm taking the day off. I have a date.”

“A date, like with a man and a woman date? I real date as in 'out to dinner?'”

“And why is that so surprising? Do I look like Godzilla or something?”

“No, no, it's just that...I don't know. I didn't think you were even looking. I guess I'm surprised.”

“You know Viv, I wasn't looking, but I was thinking about it. I was so busy with house buying, renovating, selling my aunt's house, settling in, taking the real estate course, and getting my license. Don't forget all the time and work it took to start Rainbow Realty too. With all that behind me now, I feel like I can breathe. I was even considering joining a dating site.”

“YOU JOINED A DATING SITE? WITHOUT ME?” I yelled.

“No, no, I didn’t actually join yet. I was going to ask you to help me write my bio and answer the myriad of questions they ask. I figured you’d be better at getting me up and running since you’ve done it before. And there would have to be a good photo of me and the dogs. I looked at the site and it’s very intimidating. But we can put that on hold for the time being.”

“Oh? You met a man in the outside world then? A real man, not a digital one?”

“Yes indeedy. I was in the supermarket yesterday and dropped a can of crushed tomatoes and a very nice man picked it up for me. We got to talking and he asked me out to dinner.”

“You’re kidding me? Do you know how many times I’ve been in the market and have yet to meet anyone? I even read that food stores are very good places to find a man. I think some big supermarket chain made that up so more single people would shop there.

“I have this little game I play when shopping, it makes it less boring. If I see a nice-looking man alone, I glance in his cart. I can tell by what’s in there if he’s shopping for one. You know, single serving frozen dinners and nothing too fancy or nutritional. If there’s a sporting magazine thrown in, I’ve hit the jackpot.”

Venice said, “And how’s that working for you? Here’s a muffin, let’s head to the office and I’ll tell you more later.”

“Just one more question. Is the date why you’re taking off tomorrow? Not that you need permission, I’m just being my typical nosy self. All right, I have two questions. Why didn’t you tell me you met someone? It’s been weeks and I’m only hearing about it now?”

“I’m taking off because I don’t have work to do tomorrow and I need a day to get beautiful for my date. And I *wasn’t* asking permission, I was simply being considerate and letting you know. And, Ms. Drama Queen, it hasn’t been weeks, I just met him yesterday.”

I acquiesced, put Sassy in the car and off we went. Sassy now thought of the office as her second home. She got lots of attention and she was well behaved. My Sassy had manners, sometimes more so than humans. Everyone found her adorable, how could they not?

I had fenced in a small portion in the back so she could hang out and I wouldn’t have to walk her all the time. Venice also brought her dogs to work if it was going to be a long day. We should have named the place, “Rainbow Realty *and* Dogs.” My kitty Lola didn’t like the car and she

couldn't have cared less that we were leaving her. She usually slept most of the day anyway but insisted I put on saved episodes of Animal Planet. She especially loved the big cats and would caterwaul every time they made an appearance.

Venice came into my office and plopped her ass down but not before she handed me a coffee.

“Okay, I know you're dying to ask me a million questions, I won't make you wait until lunchtime,” she said.

“Nope,” I said, “I have not one question.”

That deflated her. “What do you mean you have no questions? You're the nosiest...I mean the most curious person I know. Is that you Viv or have you been taken over by pods?”

“I said *I* have no questions but Sassy has many. She'd like to know his physical attributes, his financials, his marital status, widow, divorced? Oh, and his voice, does he have a deep timbre to his voice? Sassy loves a deep man-voice.”

Laughing Venice said, “I only met him briefly in the market. And that sounds suspiciously like the list of attributes you'd like in a man. This one is mine, find your own. When we have dinner tomorrow night, it will give me plenty of time to interrogate him in the guise of conversation.”

“But you just met him. Why the rush?” I asked.

“I believe that's what you do. You meet someone and then you spend a little time with them to see if you want to spend more time with them. That's called dating, Viv. And I *am* free tomorrow tonight.”

“No Venice, you're certainly not *free* you're *available*. Must I teach you everything? I guess I don't have much time to prep you on the vagaries of dating so we'd better leave now for lunch.”

“Viv it's only 10:30 A.M. It's too early for lunch. But we can go to lunch at the Hamburger Haven when it's a little closer to noon, what do you say?”

“I've got nothing on the docket so it's a date. Oh my, you have two dates in one day.”

“I doubt very much,” said Venice “if you’re the same kind of date I’ll be on tomorrow evening. You’re a friend date, he’s a man date. Oh, mandate. It’s mandated I go on a man date.” And she convulsed in laughter.”

“Not only are you clever today, you seem downright effervescent. If you got any happier, I’d have to smack you. He must be quite the looker for this level of joy, or is it the fact that you haven’t had a date in forever?”

“Now, now, don’t be jealous. As your Mom would say, ‘It doesn’t become you.’”

We both went to our respective offices and worked until it was lunch time. I spoke to Annie, our spikey haired receptionist who we’d come to love and rely on for everything. She was our Gal Friday. Today her hair was a vivid pink. Naturally, her attire matched her hair as it always did.

“Annie, what time are you taking lunch today? Venice and I are going to the Hamburger Haven but we’ll work around your schedule.”

“It doesn’t matter to me. Just let me know what time. I have snacks if I’m starving.”

“Do you want us to bring you back a hamburger?”

“Ugh, did you forget I’m Vegan?”

“No Annie, I just thought maybe you’d come to your senses and decided to eat some real food for a change. I don’t know how you live on that stuff. I don’t even want to tell you what those fake hotdogs look like but it’s kind of similar to what comes out of Sassy’s rear end.”

“Gee, I thought you weren’t going to tell me what they looked like. Thanks so much for sharing. I can’t believe you eat animals given your love for them. And everything you own is leather or something made from animals. At least you don’t wear fur.”

“My Mom does. One time she was out in her mink coat and some animal rights people threw fake blood on her. I thought she was literally going to bludgeon them to death with her leather purse. Wes pulled her away just in time. And you know, minks are raised on farms for that sole purpose. Or should I say ‘stole’ purpose. Get it? Stole, like a mink stole?” Venice’s puns were contagious.

Annie looked annoyed. “Yes Viv, I get it. You are such the comic.”

“Not that farming the animals makes it better but as long as I don’t have to know the process of a cow becoming a hamburger, I’m good. So, let’s make a deal. I won’t comment on your eating habits if you won’t comment on mine.”

Annie shook her head, “You do know you started this? But it’s a deal. One I have a feeling you’ll break, Ms. Boss Mouth.”

“Now that’s just impudent young lady. Have you never heard of ‘respect your elders?’ So, how about we bring you back a salad. However, that would be killing veggies.”

Annie sneered at me.

Venice and I left for lunch a little before noon. We ordered our drinks and then I pummeled her with questions. Sassy’s, not mine.

“Start at the beginning and tell me everything and don’t leave out even the most inconsequential detail, it could be important.”

“Important to what? Or whom? If you don’t approve what are you going to do? Tell me to go to my room and ground me?”

“Now that’s not a bad idea. Not only ground you but NO dinner, and NO video games.”

“You’re so silly. You know I don’t play video games. Now let me tell you what happened.

“I went over to Park Hollow to go to the big pet store and while I was in the neighborhood, I thought I’d stop at the really nice upscale supermarket...what’s it called again?”

“You mean ‘Yummies?’”

“Yes, that’s the one. I wanted to pick up some of that delicious ground sirloin and I was low on crushed tomatoes. They have the brand I used to buy in New York. So, in I went. I had my cart filled with more than I planned on buying but you know how that goes. I reached for the big can of tomatoes and dropped it. Missed my foot by an inch. The can ended up rolling halfway down the aisle. That’s when Bryan, of course I didn’t know he was Bryan yet, picked up the can and walked it over to me. I took in so much at that first glance and it was all good. Tall, muscular, blonde hair with a tiny bit of gray but abundant and wavy. With that hair I doubted he’d ever go bald. Oh, and no wedding ring.”

“You noticed all that? At just a fleeting glance?”

“Yes, and when he started walking toward me, he had a good gait. Long legs, great posture, nice smile. Good teeth too.”

“A good gait? What the hell does that even mean? And good teeth? Are you sure it wasn’t a horse you were inspecting?”

“You’re just a riot.. Now will you let me finish or maybe you would rather not hear any more about my horse date?”

“No, no, by all means continue. I’ll try and keep my mouth shut. At least until you’re done. I can’t imagine there’s too much more to this story unless he threw you down on the market floor and had his way with you.”

“VIVIANNE! Really! You’re so bad. When he handed me my errand can he said in a John Wayne accent, ‘Thought this needed rescuing little lady.’ I then swooned and he caught me in his big strong arms, threw me over his shoulder and had his way with me in the meat section. How apropos.”

Now I was on the floor laughing. “Venice, you’re killing me. That was hysterical.”

“What makes you think I’m not telling the truth? That could have happened,” she said with a straight face.

“Yes, you’re right, it definitely could’ve happened...when hell freezes over.” And that only started me laughing all over again.

“I guess you have a point. Okay, no swooning but I did return his smile, with one of my own. The biggest and best smile I could manage without splitting my face. He stuck out his hand and introduced himself as Bryan Davidson. Nice name too, I thought. I shook his hand back, telling him my name, and oh, his hand was big, with a firm grasp but not crushing and definitely manly hands. Honestly, I don’t know what came over me. I was smitten to say the least. We chatted a bit and he asked me if I would have dinner with him. Smitten or not I wasn’t going to be *that* easy. If he meant that very evening, I would have declined. After all I didn’t want to appear desperate, or available at a moment’s notice. We exchanged numbers and he said he’d call. And he did, last night.”

“Here’s what I gleaned from our phone conversation. Not married, not seeing anyone. Divorced. Oh, and he’s moving to Arizona.”

“He’s moving to Arizona?” I asked. “So why are you going out with him? Please don’t tell me you’re thinking of moving to that inferno. You do know it reaches over a hundred degrees in the summer. Most of the people who live there go to cooler climes in the late spring and don’t go back until October. Where in Arizona is he planning on living?”

“He told me Sunshine City which is not far from Phoenix. I’ve never been to the state so I don’t know what that even means. Is that a good area?”

“And I have no intentions of moving in with him. I haven’t even gone on the first date yet. Don’t you think you’re overreacting?”

“You’re right. As far as Sunshine City, I have no idea. Skylar and Jock would know. They got married in Tucson, at their friend’s house, Linda and Mike. We all went, Mom, Wes, Kat and Nellie. It was lovely and since it was winter it was a perfect venue for their nuptials. At 80 degrees during the day, it sure beat winter here. I stayed for a week but never ventured far from Tucson so I can’t tell you about any other area. I’ll call her tonight and ask about that place.”

