MILLS & BOON

The Millionaire's Christmas Wish

Shawna Delacorte

Vintage 90s

Shawna Delacorte

The Millionaire's Christmas Wish

Аннотация

ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS…When millionaire Chance Fowler first kissed the pretty stranger in his arms, he'd only meant to dodge the photographers who'd trailed him. Then she ran off - but he couldn't forget her tempting taste on his lips. So he sought out the tantalizing woman who'd ignited his long-dormant desire… .Lovely Marcie Roper was the first woman to close her eyes to Chance's fortune. And though she'd captivated the jaded tycoon, Marcie yearned for what his wealth couldn't buy - a man who would say "I do" and mean it forever. Could Marcie convince Chance that love - for the right woman - would last a lifetime?

She was certainly different from the type of women he usually encountered Letter to Reader Title Page About the Author Chapter One Chapter Two Chapter Three Chapter Four Chapter Five Chapter Six Chapter Seven Chapter Eight Chapter Nine Chapter Ten Chapter Eleven Copyright

She was certainly different from the type of women he usually encountered

Her eyes sparked with the fire of emotion and her stance declared a very appealing independence. Yes, indeed. Marcie Roper was quite different—a breath of fresh air. He recalled the way she felt in his arms, the taste of her delicious mouth. He fought the almost overwhelming desire to pull her into his arms and kiss her again.

He watched her walk away from him—for the second time since he first encountered her. She had turned out to be a very intriguing woman. He already knew about the golden flecks in her hazel eyes, her soft pliable lips, her addictive taste and how good she felt in his arms. And now he knew she was certainly a challenge—and Chance had never been one to back down from a challenge.

Dear Reader,

All of us at Silhouette Desire send you our best wishes for a joyful holiday season. December brings six original, deeply touching love stories warm enough to melt your heart!

This month, bestselling author Cait London continues her beloved miniseries THE TALLCHIEFS with the story of MAN

OF THE MONTH Nick Palladin in The Perfect Fit. This corporate cowboy's attempt to escape his family's matchmaking has him escorting a Tallchief down the aisle. Silhouette Desire welcomes the cross-line continuity FOLLOW THAT BABY to the line with Elizabeth Bevarly's The Sheriff and the Impostor Bride. And those irresistible bad-boy James brothers return in Cindy Gerard's Marriage, Outlaw Style, part of the OUTLAW HEARTS miniseries. When a headstrong bachelor and his brassy-but-beautiful childhood rival get stranded, they wind up in a 6lb., 12oz. bundle of trouble!

Talented author Susan Crosby's third book in THE LONE WOLVES miniseries, His Ultimate Temptation, will entrance you with this hero's primitive, unyielding desire to protect his once-wife and their willful daughter. A rich playboy sweeps a sensible heroine from her humdrum life in Shawna Delacorte's Cinderella story, The Millionaire's Christmas Wish. And Eileen Wilks weaves an emotional, edge-of-your-seat drama about a fierce cop and the delicate lady who poses as his newlywed bride in Just a Little Bit Married?

These poignant, sensuous books fill any Christmas stocking —and every reader's heart with the glow of holiday romance. Enjoy!

Best regards,

Joan Marlow Golan

Senior Editor

Please address questions and book requests to:

Silhouette Reader Service
U.S.: 3010 Walden Ave., P.O. Box 1325, Buffalo, NY 14269
Canadian: P.O. Box 609, Fort Erie, Ont. L2A 5X3

The Millionaire's Christmas Wish

Shawna Delacorte

www.millsandboon.co.uk

SHAWNA DELACORTE

has delayed her move to Washington State, staying in the Midwest in order to spend some additional time with family. She still travels as often as time permits and is looking forward to visiting several new places during the upcoming year, while continuing to devote herself to writing full-time.

One

Marcie Roper shifted the weight of her packages and cradled them in her other arm as she stared at the slinky evening gown in the store window, each sequin shimmering an iridescent peacock blue. She allowed an audible sigh of resignation as she glanced down at her faded jeans. It was certainly a beautiful gown, but she would never go any place where such a dress would

be appropriate. It was just not the type of life-style she had settled into. She sighed again as she moved along to the next window displaying a red silk cocktail dress. She noted that all the store windows were already decorated for the Christmas holiday season in spite of the fact that Thanksgiving was still a couple of weeks away. A moment of sadness touched her—even though she had friends, it would be another holiday season to be spent alone.

"Hey! Wait a minute!"

The shouted command grabbed her attention. She glanced down the street just in time to see a tall man—in his mid-thirties, she guessed—appear from around the corner. He headed in her direction at an easy, loping gait. His tanned good looks and athletic build were hard to ignore. She stepped closer to the building to clear a path for him.

As he ran toward her, he shrugged out of his red windbreaker, turned it inside out to a charcoal gray color and jammed his arms back in the sleeves. He stole a quick look over his shoulder, then pulled a baseball cap from his back pocket and covered his hair. He turned back toward her and for an instant their gazes locked. Then he came to an abrupt halt.

His sky-blue eyes twinkled with amusement. Her first thought had been that he was in some sort of trouble, but the mischievous grin that tugged at the corners of his mouth told a different story. He reminded her more of a little boy who was about to pull off a prank than of someone being chased by a person or persons

unknown.

The tall stranger stared at her for a moment before once again glancing over his shoulder. Apparently satisfied that he was sufficiently ahead of his pursuer, he sidled up beside her and put his arm around her shoulder. He positioned himself so that he faced away from the corner, and extended an engaging smile. It was the type of smile that said, "Trust me," even though the devilish twinkle in his eyes said something quite different.

"I'd sure appreciate it if you could spare me just a minute or two of your time."

Chance Fowler tossed a furtive glance over his shoulder just as a short, balding man came huffing and puffing around the corner. The paunchy man had a camera bag slung over his shoulder, one camera suspended from a strap around his neck and another camera in his hand. There was no doubt in Chance's mind that the man was yet another tabloid photographer in search of candid shots of the heir apparent to the Fowler family fortune and Fowler Industries.

It usually annoyed him, especially if he was involved in one of his personal projects. His upbringing may have been one of wealth and privilege, but that did not make him immune to the plight of the disadvantaged. With his mother's encouragement he had decided as far back as college that he would give back to society in general what had been handed him simply as his birthright. As far as Chance was concerned, his efforts to provide disadvantaged older youth and high school dropouts with viable

work skills and find opportunities for employment was no one's business but his and the people involved in his training school. He had no desire to put a spotlight on those activities or those he was trying to help.

But every now and then, when he did not have any pressing matters dictating his actions, he liked to make a game of evading the photographers. And today was one of those days.

"Let me go this instant!" Marcie shook off the mesmerizing sound of this stranger's smooth, dulcet tones and engaging smile. She struggled to escape the arm he had draped around her shoulder in the type of familiar manner that said they were longtime friends.

Chance pulled her closer to him and touched his fingertip to her lips to still her words. "Just as soon as this photographer goes away."

Marcie glanced toward the camera-laden man. Her initial surge of fear settled as she realized she was not in any physical danger from this stranger, but was quickly replaced by a flash of anger. "I'll do no such thing! You let go of me immediately or I'll call for help." She began to struggle again while trying to maintain a hold on her packages.

The set of the photographer's jaw and his tight grip on his camera told Marcie of his determination to find his quarry. He looked across the street, into a side alley, then started down the sidewalk toward her and the handsome stranger who continued to hold her within the curve of his arm even though she still

struggled to get free.

The stranger quickly enfolded her in a complete embrace. His words tickled across her ear, the hypnotic quality of his voice lulling her into a momentary state of submission. “I was hoping we could just stand here and pretend to be window-shopping together without any fuss, but I guess we’ll have to do it this way instead.” Before Marcie could react, he covered her mouth with his.

The photographer hurried past them without even slowing down. Shockingly aware of the heated sensuality of this stranger’s kiss—a kiss that literally took her breath away and left her weak in the knees—Marcie barely noticed the man as he rushed down the street. She was having trouble collecting her thoughts.

No one had ever kissed her like that before or totally swept her off her feet the way he just had. If it were not for the fact that he had been holding her, her legs surely would have buckled. She fought to gain control of the thousands of butterflies that flitted about inside her stomach and the increased palpitations of her heart.

As soon as the danger passed, Chance started to break off the kiss, but he allowed his lips to linger against hers a second longer before pulling back. He looked into the startled, uncertain eyes of the woman in front of him, holding her gaze trapped within his for what seemed like an eternity. He was not certain what he was seeing, but he knew in an instant that he liked it. He also knew

that he wanted more of this tantalizing woman. His gaze drifted across her delicately beautiful features to the lush fullness of her slightly parted lips. He wanted to kiss her again. He wanted to continue to hold her.

He tried to swallow the lump that had lodged in his throat as soon as he had broken off the kiss. He wanted to kick himself for having done something so foolish as to have involved this delectable stranger in one of his little games. It had definitely been a rotten idea. It would have been better for everyone concerned if he had just let the photographer take his picture.

A flustered and embarrassed Marcie quickly stumbled backward a couple of steps. She ran her fingers through her short auburn hair in a nervous attempt to smooth it away from her face as she clutched her packages against her body with her other hand. Her legs still felt wobbly, but not so much so that she could not turn and run away from this very bizarre encounter and this incredibly tempting man.

And run she did, as hard and as fast as her legs would take her. It was almost as if her emotional existence depended on getting as far away from this man as quickly as possible.

"Hey! Wait a minute—"

Marcie dashed down the street, her shoes pounding hard against the pavement with each step. She heard him call after her, but she dared not stop. As soon as she rounded the corner she ducked into a large store. Without pausing to look back, she walked swiftly through the store and out the other side to another

street. Only then did she stop and glance back over her shoulder.

As soon as she was convinced that he had not followed her, she leaned back against the building to catch her breath. She juggled her packages, being careful not to spill the contents of one sack that had ripped open.

"Oh, damn!" The words came out loud and clear, her irritation audible for anyone within earshot. Somewhere during her flight from that absurd encounter with that very disconcerting stranger she had lost one of her packages—the one from the bookstore. It contained a special order she had placed two weeks ago. Three of the books were hers, but the fourth was a large volume about the Civil War that she had ordered as a birthday present for her father.

And now it was lost before she could even get it to the post office. She clenched her jaw in anger. It was all his fault. She had been minding her own business, doing a little window-shopping while making her way back to her car, when he had accosted her.

It had all happened so quickly. She had not even gotten a good look at him—about an inch taller than six feet, dark blond hair with sun-bleached streaks that really set off his golden tan, sky-blue eyes with just a hint of wrinkling at the corners, handsomely chiseled features with a small scar on his chin, and an absolutely devastating smile. No, she certainly had not paid any attention to his physical presence and overwhelming appeal—not much she hadn't.

She cleared her throat, glanced around as if to make sure

no one had eavesdropped on her totally inappropriate thoughts, then took a calming breath to ease her embarrassment. A little chill shivered across her nape. She immediately stilled it with her hand. She took another deep breath, held it for several seconds, then slowly expelled it as she shook her head.

It had certainly been a weird day. It had started out with a flat tire before she'd even left home to drive down to San Diego. She had done her shopping, been pulled into a totally off-the-wall encounter with a disconcerting stranger, then had lost a package containing four books.

And now it was time to go home.

She reclaimed her car, then drove north out of San Diego to the mostly upscale bedroom community of Crestview Bay. She had a one o'clock meeting with a prospective client. A ripple of irritation passed through her body. Thanks to him she would have to skip lunch if she was going to be on time for her appointment.

Much to her chagrin the heated desire produced by his kiss still lingered in her consciousness. Irritably, she tried to shove it aside, but she was not able to totally eradicate the memory.

Chance Fowler pulled into the parking lot of the yacht club, parked his Porsche in his usual space, and hurried toward the sleek sailboat that bore the name Celeste in black letters on a gleaming white background. He had named the racing sloop after his mother—the first of what had turned out to be many women who subsequently claimed the name of Mrs. Douglas Fowler.

"How's it going, Take-A-Chance?" The shapely blonde in the

hot-pink thong bikini waved from the deck of the boat two slips over from his. “Are you entered in the regatta tomorrow?”

“Sure am, sweetheart.” Take-A-Chance...it was a label that one of his classmates had given him during college and it had stuck, even after all these years. Chance Fowler—always ready to take a chance on a new adventure, a new thrill, or a dangerous stunt.

“Then we’ll see you at the party at the clubhouse afterward?”

“I expect so.” He returned her wave, inconspicuously giving an appreciative once-over to her blatantly displayed charms. He thought the temperature was a little too cool for her to be dressed so skimpily, but that was Bambi. She was never one to keep her attributes under wraps.

“It’s about time you got here!” The angry male voice came from the deck of the Celeste.

Chance boarded the sloop. “Sorry, Dave. I got held up avoiding another one of those damned tabloid photographers.” Then, in response to the image of startled hazel eyes surrounded by long dark lashes, he added, “Although it might have been better if I’d just let him snap his picture—it certainly would have been quicker.”

His brow furrowed in momentary concentration as he recalled for at least the tenth time in the past couple of hours exactly how the mystery woman had felt in his arms and the taste of her mouth. And there had been something in her eyes, something he could not quite place. Had it been a spark of passion? A

heated moment of desire? Whatever it was had flickered through her eyes and disappeared before he could accurately read it. He wanted another opportunity to ignite that spark, but she had run off before he'd been able to discover who she was or where to find her. By the time he had gotten to the corner, she was nowhere in sight.

He closed his eyes and visualized her delicate features. When he had stared into her eyes, he'd been captivated by tiny golden flecks that sparkled brighter than the light glinting off the water in Mission Bay on a bright sunny day. Her lips were full and lush, her mouth—

"Earth to Chance..." Dave's irritation broke into Chance's momentary lapse of attention.

"Huh? Oh...sorry. I have several things on my mind."

"I don't have all day. Do you suppose you could narrow that list down to just one item—like maybe tomorrow's regatta?"

"Yeah." Chance extended an apologetic smile. "Sure thing."

"Then let's get under way. Bonnie's sister, her husband, and their three kids are coming over for dinner tonight and I'm going to catch hell if I'm late again."

Chance could not stop the laugh prompted by Dave's complaint. "Bonnie's a lovely lady, but you're the one who was dead set on getting married. I tried to warn you about the pitfalls of marriage, but you refused to listen to me."

Dave glared at his friend. "Give it a rest, will ya?"

The two men quickly got down to the business of preparing

for the next day's regatta and were soon under way as they passed from the yacht club basin out to open water.

Four hours later they returned to Chance's slip at the yacht club. After securing the sloop, Dave hurried toward his car. Chance watched his buddy pull out of the parking lot and head down the street before turning toward his own car. He was not in any hurry. It was Friday night, but he had no place special to go and nothing special to do. He had no desire to hang around the yacht club and socialize with a bunch of people he did not care that much about.

He looked at the package on the passenger seat of his car. The mystery woman had dropped it when she'd run off. He had picked it up, intent on following her to return it, but had lost sight of her when she'd disappeared around the corner. He had stuck the package in his car, with plans to do something about it later.

It seemed that later had finally arrived.

The outside of the sack bore the name of a downtown bookstore located just a block from where he had perpetrated his little charade. He opened the sack, hoping to find something inside that would tell him who she was. He removed four books and set them on the car seat, then reached into the bag again and withdrew a hand-written special order sales receipt. Marcie Roper. Crestview Bay Nursery.

He folded the sales slip and stuck it in his jacket pocket. A grin tugged at the corners of his mouth, leaving him a little uncertain about where it had come from or why. His breathing increased

slightly and a tightness pulled across his chest accompanied by a soft warmth that settled over him. “Well, Marcie Roper...I’ve never had a woman literally turn and run from me before. I guess I’m going to have to see what I can do to change your apparent opinion of me.”

He furrowed his brow in contemplation. He had never had an impromptu kiss grab him like that, either. He could still feel the heat of the moment and the desire that had flooded his consciousness as the enticing interlude played through his mind.

He returned his attention to the package she had dropped. He took a look at the books she had purchased. The special-order item was a large and expensive volume on the Civil War. In addition, there was the latest bestseller thriller, a biography of Catherine the Great of Russia, and a romance novel.

He put the books back in the sack, got out of his car and made his way to the yacht club office. Checking the phone books, he quickly grabbed the appropriate one, and flipped through the Yellow Pages until he found what he was looking for. He pulled the bookstore receipt from his pocket and jotted three names on the back of it. Crestview Bay Florist. Crestview Bay Nursery. Crestview Bay Landscaping. All three businesses had the same address. Then he looked in the white pages and found a listing in Crestview Bay for an M. J. Roper.

The image of her delicate features played across his mind—her kiss-swollen lips, the golden flecks in her hazel eyes. He shook his head as he walked back to his car. The entire incident

had been nothing more than a fluke—a random encounter, a spontaneous moment. So why was it still so vividly real in his mind? Why could he still taste the kiss and feel her in his arms?

"Marcie Roper of Crestview Bay..." He stared at the sales receipt as he uttered the words. "You may have managed to slip away from me today, but it won't be quite so easy the next time we meet now that I know where to find you."

Marcie leafed through the Sunday newspaper while enjoying her morning coffee. It seemed that all the ads featured Christmas items even though the holiday was still almost six weeks away. It was difficult to think in terms of Christmas when the normal San Diego weather was so pleasantly warm and sunny that time of year.

She knew she needed to get busy setting up her displays for the limited number of Christmas items she carried at the nursery—a special line of handmade ornaments, indoor and outdoor wreaths, holly plants and cuttings, evergreen garland, poinsettia plants and Christmas trees. She found the holidays to be a lonely time and so far the spirit of the season had eluded her.

That was the way it had been for the past few years, since the death of her grandmother. In all her thirty-one years, it was her grandmother who had provided the only stable home life she had ever known. She continued to keep in touch with her father, who lived in Illinois, but they had never been very close. She expelled a sigh as she turned the page, knowing that if she did not get those Christmas displays set up pretty soon it would be too late

to bother.

She took another sip of her coffee, but before she could swallow it, a photograph leaped off the page and grabbed her. The mug nearly slipped from her hand, spilling most of its contents on her newspaper. A hard gulp sent her swallow of hot coffee down the wrong way. She fought the choking cough that spasmed in her throat as she tried to get her breath.

She could not believe her eyes. Right there in the newspaper, staring at her with that same devilish smile, was the man who had grabbed her on the street. He was with another man and the two of them were holding up a trophy. There was also a woman in the photograph, her arm linked through his, wearing a very skimpy bathing suit.

Marcie stared at the photograph again. There was no doubt about it. He was definitely the man whose kiss had gone right through her and even curled her toes. She had been trying to erase the incident from her mind, but to no avail. She closed her eyes for a moment as she recalled for perhaps the hundredth time every nuance of the heated instant when his lips had touched hers.

She scanned the caption beneath the photograph, then went back and carefully read it a second time. “Chance Fowler and Dave Stevens display their first place trophy from Saturday’s regatta. This is the third win for Fowler and his racing sloop, Celeste, seen in the background.”

“Chance Fowler.” The words came out in a hushed gasp, as if

she were too stunned to even say the name. Chance Fowler? The man in the photograph was the one and only Chance Fowler? The man who had appeared from out of nowhere and totally swept her off her feet was the heir to the Fowler family fortune, the infamous playboy whose picture graced the pages of the tabloids as often as it did the society pages and sporting news?

Her brow wrinkled into a frown. She knew his type all too well—someone who refused to accept any responsibility and who could not make a commitment. She had once been engaged to a man who suddenly decided commitment was not for him. He had been convinced that marriage would tie him down to a dull daily routine. He wanted to be free to come and go as he wished. She had given him back his ring and told him to go follow his desires. When he said that he might be ready to settle down in a couple of years and in the meantime they could continue to date, she had told him to forget it.

When she married it would be to a man who wanted a stable home life, not someone who drifted from one adventure to another. She wanted somebody who would consider her to be an equal partner, an important part of his life. She did not want a relationship built around the idea that marriage and home was a burden to be endured because it was expected of you, something where you settled for less than what you wanted out of life.

Her father had been a dreamer who had always believed there was a greener pasture just over the next hill. He had pulled up stakes and moved the family so many times that she had not been

able to spend more than a few months at a time in any one school. Her mother had finally sent her to live with her grandmother so she could have a secure home environment and attend all four years of high school at one place.

Her mother had died when Marcie was barely sixteen. She had never been very close to her father, his life-style leaving her with very definite opinions about responsibility, commitment, and what marriage should and should not be. And one thing it should not be was a union entered into with a man who could not commit to the responsibility of maintaining a stable and secure home life.

She glanced at the newspaper photograph again. The caption made no mention of the woman standing next to Chance Fowler, but from the way the woman was staring at him, it was obvious that they knew each other very well. She again noted the very skimpy bikini the woman was wearing. The woman looked exactly like the type she imagined he would be attracted to. "Take-A-Chance Fowler," the tabloids had dubbed him. She touched her fingers to her lips. She could still feel the heat of his kiss even though she wished it was not so.

Marcie slowly sipped what little coffee remained in her mug, leaving the newspaper unread as she became totally absorbed in thought. Chance Fowler... never in a million years had she thought she would ever run into someone like him, but now that she had it was easy to understand why women vied for his attention. A ringing sound startled her out of her reverie.

She grabbed the cordless phone from the base station. “Hello?”

“Marcie...it’s Sandy. I’m afraid I won’t be at work today. I’ve been awake most of the night with the stomach flu.”

It was not what Marcie wanted to hear. Sandy had been a dedicated employee for five years and had proven herself invaluable. Marcie had come to depend more and more on her.

“Okay, Sandy. I’ll see you when you’re feeling better.”

“What about the wholesale flower mart in the morning?”

“Don’t give it another thought. I’ll take care of that. You just take care of yourself and get well.”

“Thanks, Marcie. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

What Marcie had thought would be a leisurely day had suddenly turned into a very busy one. Saturday and Sunday were the busiest days for the nursery regardless of the time of year. Even though the flower shop was Sandy’s primary domain, she usually helped out in the nursery on Sunday when the flower shop was closed. Marcie hurried through her shower and dressed for work. An hour later she was in the nursery preparing to open for the day’s business.

A young man in his mid-twenties walked in the back door. “That does it, Marcie,” he said as he removed his work gloves. “Everything’s watered, dead leaves cut away, walkways all hosed down. I have Don restocking the wild bird feed right now. He’s already straightened the bird feeder display and put out the two new birdhouse designs that came in a couple of days ago.”

“Thanks, Glen. As soon as Don’s finished I’d like the two of you to move the planters on the north side to make room for the Christmas trees.”

Glen laughed as he wiped the perspiration from his forehead. “Being from Michigan I still have a little trouble thinking in terms of Christmas without snow. And a Santa who arrives on water skis, wearing sunglasses and dressed in Bermuda shorts...well, that’s definitely beyond my scope of reality.”

She smiled as she handed Glen an order form. “Could you pull this order together sometime today? Mr. Adams’s gardener is coming by to pick it up first thing in the morning.”

Glen took the order form. “Sure.” He offered her a weary smile that said they were not even open for business yet and already it had been a busy day. “I’ll get to it this afternoon.”

Glen was another one. Like Sandy, he was a dedicated employee Marcie had come to depend on. The expansion of the landscaping business had put an additional workload on the nursery employees. Sandy ran the flower shop and Marcie spent most of her time with the nursery, but Glen needed another person on the nursery payroll in addition to the four other employees who already worked under his supervision.

Marcie had run an ad a week earlier, but none of the applicants had measured up to what Glen considered suitable. He occasionally pulled one of the workers away from the landscaping crew when things got really backed up, but it was not an ideal situation. Glen had said he would rather work short-

handed and know things were being done right than spend all his time following someone around, correcting sloppy work.

Marcie opened the nursery for business promptly at ten o'clock. There was a steady flow of customers in and out all day, keeping her very busy—but not too busy to prevent Chance Fowler from entering her thoughts again and again. It had been a random encounter, nothing more. She would not even have known who he was if his picture had not been in the newspaper that morning.

There was absolutely no reason for them to ever bump into each other again. They traveled in completely different circles. He lived in the heady realm of yacht clubs, world travel, and high-dollar society functions while she belonged to the world of backyard barbecues and walks on the beach. And even if they did meet again, there would be no reason for him to remember her. So why was she having so much difficulty exorcising him from her thoughts? She touched her fingertips to her lips, to the heat of his kiss—a gesture she had done so often the past couple of days that it had almost become a habit.

Marcie glanced at the clock—five-thirty. Another half hour and she could lock up the nursery and call it a day. She started bringing in the plants and various display items that had been placed outside the front entrance. She managed the smaller items by herself, then looked around for either Glen or Don. Neither employee was anywhere in sight, obviously busy in the greenhouse or out in back on the grounds. She shrugged, took a

deep breath, and began struggling with a large planter.

Chance Fowler pulled into the parking lot of the Crestview Bay Nursery. A delightful sight caught his attention before he could even get out of his car. The woman who had refused to leave his thoughts stood next to the front entrance staring at a large redwood planter containing some sort of a bush. She circled the planter, pushed at it with her foot, then stood with her hands on her hips and stared at it Finally she bent over and tried to pick it up.

He shoved open the car door, swung his long legs out, then quickly covered the distance to the front door of the nursery. Her back to him as she grappled with the task she had set for herself, Chance took a moment to visually trace each and every one of her curves with an appreciative gaze before stepping up behind her.

He put his arms around her to grab the planter as he whispered in her ear, "That looks heavy. Let me help you with it."

The words came from out of nowhere just as a pair of strong arms reached around her. She did not know which came first, her surprise or her recognition of his voice. She jerked upright, startled by his sudden intrusion, and whirled around to face him.

His uninhibited laugh filled the air. "Marcie Roper, I presume? You know, we really have to stop meeting like this." He gave her a quick wink followed by a mischievous grin. He glanced around as if to make sure no one could hear him, then lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "If we don't watch out,

the neighbors will start to gossip, then pretty soon everyone will know about our clandestine meetings in out-of-the-way places."

Two

Marcie's eyes widened with shock. His devilish good looks, teasing grin, and tantalizing closeness momentarily drove every intelligent thought right out of her head. She quickly regained her composure. Just because he was the infamous Chance Fowler, it did not mean that he could get away with whatever he wanted. He had thrown her for a loop once with his aggressive and totally inappropriate behavior. She did not intend to allow him to do it again.

"You!" she snapped angrily, her words clipped. "What are you doing here? It's bad enough that you accosted me on the street and were responsible for my losing one of my packages. Was it also necessary for you to track me down and grab me like that...again ? I don't care if your name is Chance Fowler, that doesn't give you the right to—"

He feigned a hurt expression. "You helped me out of a tight spot. I was just trying to return the favor by helping you with the heavy planter."

She glared at him, then placed her hands on her hips and leaned forward. She hoped her aggressive stance covered the out-of-control excitement that raced around inside her. Chance Fowler touched her and she seemed to lose all reason and logic —twice now.

"That doesn't explain your totally unacceptable behavior." She

was determined to stand her ground no matter how tempting she found his touch or how much his presence made her heart pound.

He cocked his head and looked at her quizzically. “It also doesn’t explain how you knew who I was.”

“Humph!” she snorted. The image of the bikini-clad woman hanging on his arm flashed in her mind. She was obviously typical of the type of woman he preferred—footloose and fancy free. “Your picture was in today’s newspaper in connection with the hobbies of the pampered and privileged.” She had not intended to reveal her disgust and disapproval of the idle rich in general, and specifically the life-style he had chosen for himself, but somehow her feelings had slipped past her words.

“Ah, yes, the regatta.” He stared at her for a moment. Her eyes sparkled with the fire of emotion and her stance declared a very appealing independence. She was certainly different from the type of women he usually encountered. They were either insipid clinging vines or manipulative cloyers, and the result was always the same. He felt suffocated and trapped. Yes, indeed. Marcie Roper was quite different—a breath of fresh air. He recalled the way she had felt in his arms, the taste of her delicious mouth. He fought the almost overwhelming desire to pull her into his arms and kiss her again.

“Speaking of newspapers, I’d like to explain about last Friday. There was this tabloid photographer who spotted me and—”

“I really don’t care why it happened, Mr. Fowler. The fact is that it should not have happened at all. You had no right to grab

me like that... no right at all. Maybe that kind of intrusion is normal behavior for your friends, but it certainly isn't for me."

Marcie caught a glimpse of Don out of the corner of her eye and turned her attention toward him. "Don, could you move the rest of these things inside?" She shot a quick glance in Chance's direction, then continued her instructions. She carefully and deliberately chose her words. "Since we don't have any customers, we might as well go ahead and close up."

She threw Chance one last disagreeable look, turned her back to him and went inside the nursery. A moment later she began the closing procedures for the day.

Chance watched her walk away from him—for the second time since he'd first encountered her. She had turned out to be a very intriguing woman. He already knew about the golden flecks in her hazel eyes, her soft, pliable lips, her addictive taste, and how good she felt in his arms. And now he could add strong-willed, independent, outspoken, and deliciously tempting to that list.

As with most people who did not know him, she had categorized him according to tabloid misinformation and exaggeration. He seldom allowed such misconceptions to bother him. He knew who he was, as did the small group of people he counted as his true friends and work associates. He rarely felt the need to explain himself to strangers. Only with Marcie did he find himself in a bit of a quandary.

He had never been one to back down from a challenge, and

Marcie Roper certainly fit in that category. He could still see the intense glare she had leveled at him before turning away. No one had ever told him to go to hell so emphatically without uttering a word. She was unlike any other woman he had ever met. He followed her inside the building, determined to learn more about this fascinating and desirable woman.

Marcie grabbed up a stack of receipts and credit card slips. She could not believe the audacity of Chance Fowler—the man's arrogance was beyond anything she had ever encountered. It was obvious that he was accustomed to getting whatever he wanted. Well, he was not going to get away with that sort of high-handed behavior around her. She paused for a moment as she once again touched her fingertips to her lips. His kiss was also beyond anything she had ever experienced.

"About that little incident the other day... I'd like to make it up to you."

His smooth voice broke into her moment of reflection. She looked up, surprised that he had followed her inside. She quickly pulled her composure together, meeting his captivating gaze with a cool one of her own. "Are you still here?"

He refused to allow her the upper hand. Besides, he had not yet played his trump card. He made an exaggerated show of glancing around, as if attempting to seek out something, then returned his attention to her. "Yep... as near as I can tell, I'm still here."

His response seemed to fluster her. Her gaze darted around the room. He stood his ground and waited, refusing to say

anything to relieve her obvious discomfort. He had to admit, if only to himself, that he was enjoying the moment.

"Well, uh, unless you plan to buy something, I'll have to ask you to leave. We're closing for the day." She returned her attention to the receipts on the counter.

"In that case, I guess I'll have to buy something." He flashed her a teasing grin and gave her a quick wink before turning away from the counter. He surveyed the room for a moment, then inspected the items available for sale. He did not look back at her, even though the temptation was almost too much to resist. He fought the grin that tugged at the corners of his mouth as he picked up a bird feeder and examined it.

"I'll take this." He placed the feeder on the counter in front of her. He looked up, capturing her gaze and intimately holding it for a moment. He felt the warmth suffuse his body. He felt something else, too—a stirring that told him this was more than just a game. This woman had an effect on him far greater than he wanted to admit.

Relationships, commitment...he cynically reminded himself that it was all a sham. He had seen too many bad marriages to believe otherwise, not the least of which had been his father's four subsequent wives after divorcing his mother. No man should be married five times. And with his father's track record there was no reason to believe that the fifth ex-Mrs. Douglas Fowler—a woman who had been relegated to the position after only one year of marriage—would be the last one.

Not liking the path his thoughts seemed to be taking, Chance forced the distasteful topic from his mind.

"What kind of birds will I get with this feeder?"

Marcie made every effort to keep the conversation all-business. She also made no effort to be civil about it. "None, unless you buy some bird feed to go with it."

"What would you recommend?" He was determined to prolong their meeting, as determined as she seemed to be to end it.

She brushed a loose tendril of hair away from her face. Her voice revealed her impatience with him. "Really, Mr. Fowler, is this conversation necessary? Don't you have something important you should be doing someplace else?"

"I find this to be something important." The words, soft and sincere, had slipped out without him meaning for them to. He quickly recovered his breezy facade. "As you said, the bird feeder is no good without something to go inside it. So—" he reached for a ten-pound sack of wild bird feed "—is this what I need?"

"Yes." Her reply was curt. She did not intend to waste any more time on him by discussing the merits of one type of feed over another. She just wanted him to leave. "Will that be cash or charge?"

"Cash."

He pulled his wallet from his pocket while she rang up the sale. She took his money, gave him his change, then placed the items in a box and shoved them across the counter toward him.

She tried to sound as cool and confident as she could even though her stomach churned and her nerve endings tingled with a surge of excitement when she caught a whiff of his aftershave. "Goodbye, Mr. Fowler."

"Goodbye?" He leaned forward, pressing the palms of his hands against the counter. He lowered his voice to a soft, intimate level. "I thought maybe we could have a drink when you finished here. It would allow me to apologize... and give us an opportunity to get to know each other better."

It took all the fortitude she could muster to fix him with a stern look. "I believe we know each other as well as we need to. Goodbye, Mr. Fowler."

He refused to be put off. It was definitely time for that trump card. He picked up the box containing his purchases and flashed a devastating smile. "I'll see you later, Marcie Roper."

She stared at his retreating form, her mouth hanging open in stunned silence. Even though she had accused him of tracking her down, she had been so startled by his sudden appearance that it had not occurred to her to ask him how he knew her name or where to find her. She started to call after him, but quickly closed her mouth. Nothing would be gained by making him think she had any interest in his detective skills.

She watched as he left the nursery and crossed the parking lot to his car, every step and gesture indicative of a man who knew exactly who he was, where he was going, and what he wanted out of life. She hurried to lock the front door and put out the

Closed sign. She paused for a moment and took a deep breath in an attempt to restore some semblance of order to the shambles his presence had made of her routine.

She returned to the cash register and began ringing up the totals for the day's business. The sound of someone tapping against the front window drew her attention away from her work. She looked up to see Chance Fowler motioning for her to let him in. She shook her head and mouthed the words, "We're closed," while pointing to the sign.

He tapped on the window again and triumphantly displayed his hidden prize. He held up the sack so she could see it.

Marcie squinted as she stared at the object, at first not understanding the significance it held. Then the words came into focus—the sack was from the bookstore where she had picked up her order the day Chance Fowler had turned her life upside down. Could it possibly be the bag she had lost? She furrowed her brow in confusion as she made her way toward the door.

Again he motioned for her to unlock the door and let him in. She hesitated for a moment, then complied with his wishes... to a certain extent. She unlocked and opened the door, but did not stand aside to allow him entry. She stared at the sack without reaching for it, then shifted her gaze to him as her curiosity outweighed her impatience. "I'm really very busy right now, Mr. Fowler. Just what is it you want?"

"I believe I have something here that belongs to you. May I come in?"

She hesitated, then stepped aside.

Chance walked across the room and placed the bag on the counter. “You dropped this the other day. I tried to follow you to return it, but by the time I got to the corner you had disappeared.” He reached into the sack, withdrew the sales slip and placed it on the counter. “Fortunately, this had your name on it.”

She picked up the sales receipt and looked at it, then took the books from the bag. Her voice grew soft, conveying just a hint of embarrassment as she inspected the contents. “I—I thought they were lost for good. This one—” she held up the large volume about the Civil War “—is a birthday present for my father.” She ran her fingertips across the cover of the book, then looked up at the very handsome man standing on the other side of the counter.

Her manner softened considerably. “Thank you for returning my books.” Her words were unquestionably sincere.

“I’m just glad that I was able to track you down. I thought it was the least I could do in light of the fact that it was probably my fault that you dropped them.” Her shy smile captured and held him as tightly as if she had physically put her arms around him. A little twinge of longing told him it was an idea that he found very appealing—and definitely an idea worth pursuing. The memory of her taste and how she had felt in his arms told him there was no way he was going to let this just drift away like so many other things in his life.

“Well...” She glanced down, then looked up at him again. “Anyway, it was nice of you to go to all of this trouble. I really

appreciate the gesture."

"Enough to have dinner with me tonight?" He saw the way she stiffened in response to his invitation. The shy softness that had covered her features just a second earlier had changed into wariness.

"That's impossible." Her words were clipped, indicating her displeasure. "I have an employee out sick, so I need to be at the San Diego wholesale flower mart at five o'clock in the morning. That doesn't allow me the luxury of socializing tonight." She hurried toward the front door and held it open for him. "Thank you, again, for returning my books. Good night."

Chance hesitated a moment. There did not seem to be anything to say that would change the situation, so he acquiesced to her wishes. "Good night, Marcie Roper." He flashed a devilish smile that said she would definitely be seeing him again. "Pleasant dreams."

Marcie watched as he crossed the parking lot to his car. The audacity of the man. Her disgust sounded loud and clear in her thoughts. He was obviously accustomed to thinking everyone would simply drop whatever they were doing to cater to his whims. Well, he had another think coming where she was concerned. Unlike other people, she was not impressed with whom he was.

Her fingertips lightly touched her lips. No matter what she tried to tell herself, she could not shake the very real sensuality of his kiss. He personified everything she found unacceptable,

yet she was unable to dismiss him from her mind.

Pleasant dreams, indeed! She returned to her close-out chores as she made yet another unsuccessful attempt at shoving Chance Fowler from her thoughts.

The gray streaks of predawn light had not yet penetrated the black sky when Marcie pulled the nursery van out of the parking lot and headed south toward San Diego. She stifled a yawn, then reached for her travel mug of coffee. The night had been far too short, the alarm jarring her awake way too early. She had gone to bed in plenty of time to get enough sleep... if she had been able to sleep. As much as she tried to ignore it, however, thoughts and images of Chance Fowler kept circulating through her mind.

Regardless of how attractive she found him and how much he heated her desires, she knew nothing would be gained from speculating about where things might have led if she had accepted his initial invitation to join him for a drink, or his later offer to have dinner with him. He was an irresponsible, headline-grabbing playboy who did not know the first thing about hard work and commitment. That was everything she knew about him and it was everything she needed to know.

She drained the last swallow from her coffee mug just as she pulled into the flower mart. She parked the van, locked the door, then hurried inside to make her purchases. She stifled another yawn. It was going to be a very long day.

Chance glanced at his watch. Five forty-five in the morning was a wretched time to be up, but some things were worth a

little extra sacrifice. He spotted the nursery van as soon as he pulled into the parking lot and he quickly secured a parking space for himself. After spending a restless night in an unsuccessful attempt to shove the memory of Marcie Roper's taste and feel from his mind he had come to the conclusion that she was definitely one of those exceptions among women—at least the ones he knew—and it was definitely worth a great deal of effort on his part to get to know her better.

There was something special about her that reached out to him, something that made a direct connection to the place inside him that yearned for more than his relationships of the past had brought him. The kiss they had shared told him there was a very sensual woman beneath that practical exterior. He did not intend to let her slip away.

He wandered around for a bit, surprised at all the activity taking place at that hour of the morning. He finally spotted Marcie. He paused for a moment as he watched her signing something and handing it back to a sales clerk. He studied the way she moved, the way her clothes fit her body, the delicate features surrounded by the softly feathered auburn curls. He took a deep breath in an effort to break the tightness that banded his chest. No other woman had ever affected him in quite this manner and he found it very perplexing—and far too disturbingly real.

He saw her struggle with a large flatbed cart stacked with boxes and he hurried to assist her.

“Let me help you with that.” He immediately took control of maneuvering the unwieldy cart as if there were nothing unusual about him being there. He purposely ignored her shocked expression as he pushed the cart in the direction she had been heading.

He kept the conversation light and upbeat. “I’m experiencing a strange sensation of having helped you move something heavy once before...almost as if it were only yesterday.” He turned toward her and flashed a teasing grin. “How about you? Have you ever had similar feelings of déjà vu?”

“What are you doing here?”

“I thought it was obvious. I’m helping you with your cart.” He reached down and opened one of the boxes, pausing a moment as he inspected the contents. He looked at her questioningly. “Fresh-cut flowers?”

“Hardly unusual since this is the wholesale flower mart and I do own a flower shop.”

“Yes, but you also have a nursery.” He replaced the lid on the box and steered the cart slowly along the aisle.

She walked with him, still not clear as to why he was there or what he wanted. “One has nothing to do with the other. Cut flowers and floral arrangements are a different business from plants and landscaping.”

He extended a warm smile. “That’s gratifying.”

She wrinkled her brow in confusion. “What’s gratifying?”

“Learning something new is gratifying, even at this horrible

hour of the morning."

"Isn't this a little too early for someone like you to be up?" She detected the sarcasm that surrounded her words, but seemed to be unable to stop it. "Or are you still up from last night?"

He stopped the cart and leaned against the handle, cocking his head and raising an eyebrow as he leveled a steady gaze in her direction. He hid behind a neutral mask, his expression revealing almost no hint of what was going through his mind. Only the slightest indication of discomfort darted through his eyes, almost as if he had flinched in reaction to a physical attack.

She immediately regretted her words. It had been uncalled for and unnecessary. His eyes were clear and alert, rather than bloodshot, and he appeared rested. He certainly did not look as if he had been up partying all night.

She glanced down at the floor, then regained eye contact with him. A tickle of embarrassment immediately caught hold. "I—I'm sorry. It was unfair of me to have said that."

"Yes, it was unfair." There was no anger in his voice nor was there any hostility attached to his words. There was, however, a hint of puzzlement. "What made you do it?"

"Well..." Anxiety churned in the pit of her stomach. He had every right to be angry with her, but he seemed more hurt than anything else. "You do have to admit that you have a certain reputation." She felt the heat of her embarrassment flush across her cheeks as she continued to speak. "Heir to the family fortune, member of the privileged elite...well-known playboy."

“You make it sound as if being born to wealthy parents is some sort of sin, or worse yet, a terrible disease.”

“I didn’t mean for it to sound that way. It’s just that your exploits have been pretty thoroughly documented by the press—”

“Oh?” He started walking again, pushing the heavy cart in front of him. “You’re a fan of the tabloids?”

“No. I mean, well...I sometimes glance at the headlines while standing in the checkout line at the grocery store, but so does everyone else.”

“You believe everything you read in the newspapers?”

“Well, no...but—”

“I see.” A hint of annoyance crept into his voice. “Normally you wouldn’t believe everything you read, but you decided to make an exception in my case.”

Marcie knew his words were true and justified, but they did not alter her opinion. “We’re obviously different types of people, that’s all. You have your life-style and I have mine.”

“You make ‘life-style’ sound like some sort of affliction.” An amused twinkle danced through his eyes and a mischievous grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. “I can see that I need to do some serious damage control here.”

He paused a moment as his attention moved to more immediate matters. “Where are we going with this?”

“Where are we going with what?” Was he talking about their conversation? Their situation? He had moved from annoyed to amused to...she did not know what, in less than sixty seconds.

She was not sure exactly what he was talking about.

"Where are we going with this cart? We're almost to the door. Are you through or do you have more to do here?"

"rm finished. I've already charged this to my account. So—" she grabbed the handle to take charge of the cart "—thank you for your assistance. I can manage it from here."

He refused to move aside. "I'll help you out with these boxes." He shoved the cart through the check out area, moving quickly as he headed toward her van.

She hurried after Chance, not sure exactly when it was that she had lost control, or exactly when he had managed to take charge. "Wait a minute." She caught up with his fast-paced stride. She tried to sound assertive. "Really, Mr. Fowler, I can handle the rest of this by myself."

Chance ignored her words. He pushed the cart next to the van, tried the door, then held out his hand toward her. "Keys?"

Marcie hesitated a moment, then unlocked the door for him. A couple of minutes later he had all the boxes off the cart and loaded inside the van. He leaned against the side of the vehicle, noting the way she nervously shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

During the course of their three encounters she had run away from him, ignored him, been rude to him, rejected his invitations and cast aspersions on his character. And still he could not tear himself away from her. He certainly was not a masochist nor was he so desperate for feminine companionship that he needed to

put up with this type of treatment to spend a little bit of time with an attractive woman.

There was no logical reason for him to be standing there, but somehow this woman had reached out and grabbed hold of his senses as no one else ever had. She was her own woman, not what she thought someone else wanted her to be. She had her identity intact, unlike most of the women he knew who would rather attach themselves to his. It was a very appealing aspect of who she was. She was also intelligent, beautiful, independent—very independent. He could still feel her body enfolded in his embrace and taste her mouth pressed against his. She was everything a man could want.

"Well..." She nervously shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "If you'll excuse me—"

He offered an inviting smile. "Let's go get some coffee."

"That's not possible, Mr. Fowler. These are cut flowers, not plants. I need to get them back to the shop immediately and put them in the cooler."

"Okay. We can get some coffee after you take care of the flowers. And please, call me Chance. Mr. Fowler is reserved for dear ol' Dad, the one and only Douglas Winston Fowler."

She stiffened to attention, literally as well as figuratively. "I don't believe I'd feel comfortable calling you by some cute little nickname given to you by the press... 'Take-A-Chance Fowler,' always ready to take a chance on some new adventure..."

Her words trailed off when she saw that look dart through

his eyes, the same one she had seen when she had called him a playboy. Only this time it did not disappear as quickly as it had before.

He looked away from her for a moment, as if collecting his thoughts, then recaptured eye contact with her. “Chance is my legal first name, given to me at birth. It was my mother’s maiden name.”

A stab of guilt caught her up short when she saw his reaction to her words mirrored in his eyes. It was almost as if she had reached out and physically struck him. She spoke with genuine regret as she tried to apologize. “I—I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

He glanced away again before saying, his voice soft, “It doesn’t matter.”

She heard what he said, but she did not believe him. She could tell that it did matter, that it mattered very much. Without meaning to, she had hurt him and she felt bad about it. “I just assumed—”

“You seem to assume a lot.”

Chance had said the words without malice or anger, but he had not been able to hide the underlying vulnerability that seeped into his tone of voice. Marcie felt the pangs of guilt stab deep inside her. She knew she had been less than gracious. That was a laugh—she had been downright rude. Something about this quick glimpse of the man beneath the facade touched an emotional place for her. It was a different place than the excitement caused by his kiss. This was a place of caring, tenderness, and concern.

She took a deep breath, held it for a moment, then slowly expelled it.

"You're right." The sharp edge to her voice was gone, along with her guarded attitude. "I sometimes do tend to make assumptions. It's a bad habit of mine." An additional softness caressed her next words. "I apologize for the crack about your name. It was totally uncalled for."

"I'll tell you what, Marcie Roper." He reached out and ran his fingertips across her cheek, then cupped her chin in his hand. He plumbed the depths of her eyes. He saw uncertainty, wariness, and something else... a warmth and a passion that he very much wanted to tap into. He quickly allowed his hand to drop away as the temptation to kiss her grew stronger. "You can make it up to me by joining me for a drink when you get off work tonight."

She glanced down at the ground, indecision churning inside her. "I—I don't know."

"Now that's what I call an improvement—you didn't reject my invitation outright. You've left it open for discussion." He placed his fingertips underneath her chin again and gently raised her face until he could look into her eyes. "Why don't we try for the next level, where you agree to have dinner with me this evening?"

"You're certainly a fast worker." A shy smile turned up the corners of her mouth. "A minute ago it was coffee, then it became a drink after work, and now it's dinner tonight."

"You should have accepted my invitation at the coffee level. Now, it's too late. Besides, you owe me." He saw her objection

start to form, and quickly cut it off before she could give it a voice. “You owe me the opportunity to prove that your preconceived notions about me are wrong.”

He flashed a teasing grin. “Surely you wouldn’t deny me my Constitutional right of being innocent until proven guilty...” His smile faded as he searched out her vulnerability and caressed the essence of her soul. “Would you?”

“I suppose I do owe you that much.” There was a hint of concern surrounding Marcie’s words. She was not sure exactly how she had gotten herself into this predicament.

“Good.” Chance’s face literally beamed his pleasure at her acceptance. “When will you be finished with work? What time should I pick you up? And where—at the nursery or at your house?”

“No... I mean, it would be more convenient if I met you somewhere.” The last thing she wanted was to be trapped someplace where she could not conveniently and quickly leave if things turned out the way she feared they probably would. She caught herself, putting an immediate stop to the direction her thoughts were taking her. She was making assumptions again. He had been correct, it was a bad habit. It was something she needed to work on.

He hesitated a moment, then gave in to her request. “All right. How about the Crestview Bay Bistro? The food there is good, the atmosphere comfortable, and the ocean view is terrific.”

“Sure, that will be fine.” She wondered if he had picked the

bistro as a convenience for her since it was close to the nursery, or if it was someplace he really wanted to go. “What time?”

“You tell me... I don’t know your work schedule.”

She thought a moment. With Sandy out sick she would not be able to get away early. “How about seven o’clock? Will that be okay?”

He flashed a smile of genuine pleasure. “That will be absolutely perfect. I’ll make reservations.” He reached for her hand and gave it a little squeeze—not what he wanted to do, but it would have to suffice for the moment. “I’ll see you tonight.”

She watched him shove the cart toward the collection point outside the main entrance of the building. A hint of anxiety churned in her stomach. She quickly climbed into her van and headed out of the parking lot before he could return. She had made the commitment to have dinner with him. She was obligated to show up. Another hint of anxiety shuddered through her body. It was not trepidation. She was certainly not afraid of him. But it was anxiety none the less. Could it be her own feelings and emotions that she feared? It was an unanswered question that did not sit well with her.

Chance returned to his car just in time to see Marcie pull out of the parking lot. He was not sure exactly why he was so attracted to her, beyond the obvious of her being a very enticing woman. Was it merely the challenge of charming someone who kept rejecting him, or did it go much deeper than the shallowness of a physical attraction? He was not really sure he wanted to

know the answer to that question, but the possibilities definitely disturbed him and at the same time they excited him.

For the first time in his life he seemed to be treading a thin line between playing a game and being drawn into what could only end up as a serious relationship. There was no doubt in his mind that with Marcie it could never be a casual affair. She was not the type of woman who would be willing to play games just for the fun of it. No matter how many times he told himself to get out and move on to something that was less of a threat, he did not seem to be able to do it.

Three

Chance arrived at the bistro nearly half an hour early. He secured a quiet table in a corner of the cocktail lounge and ordered a beer. It had been a bad day all around, starting with the insistent ringing of his phone as he arrived home from the flower mart.

The phone call had been from Hank Varney, apprising him that one of his students had gotten into trouble again. He had to admit that he was not surprised about Jeff being picked up for car theft, but it still upset him more than he wanted to admit. He knew he could not expect to have a one hundred percent success rate with the program, but when one of his students turned to criminal ways, Chance always took it personally.

Which brought him to another point of contention between Chance and his father. When he'd first come up with the plan to take school dropouts, disadvantaged older teens, and those who

were having a difficult time of it because of an arrest record for minor offenses, and teach them a trade so they could make it in the world, his father had been vehemently against it.

"Can't trust these punks... They'll rob you blind... There will be no sponsorship from any of my companies." His father's words rang loud and clear in his ears, even five years later. That had been the last time he had attempted to talk to his father about it. Chance had gone ahead on his own and implemented his ideas, only on a smaller scale. He had formed a nonprofit organization, then established a working relationship with two contractors, one in San Diego and the other in San Francisco, where Chance maintained a second home.

It had taken all his charm and persuasive powers to convince the city and state officials whose agencies could recommend candidates for his program that he was sincere about wanting to help. It had been the largest hurdle for him—getting them to see him as something other than a spoiled son of a wealthy and powerful man, who was only playing at having a social conscience.

Chance bought fixer-upper houses and his students, under the supervision of a licensed contractor, did the repairs and remodeling. Once the property was sold, the profits were used to finance the next project, including wages for the students. The contractors would then work the graduating students into their respective construction crews as fully paid employees.

For the past five years everything had gone pretty much

according to plan. But every now and then one of his students made a grab for what seemed like easy money rather than perform hard work. He had had such high hopes for Jeff, so it was with a heavy heart that he had left the jail that afternoon after talking to him. There had been no remorse on Jeff's part, only arrogance and defiance. Chance's failures were few and far between, but this particular one had upset him more than the others.

He continued to ponder the unfortunate turn of circumstances as he sipped his beer. Jeff's arrest was not the only upsetting news of the day. He had received an e-mail just before leaving home to meet Marcie for dinner. He unfolded the printout and stared at it again.

Marcie arrived at the Bistro promptly at seven o'clock. She had barely found enough time to go home, take a quick turn through the shower, and change clothes. She spotted Chance seated by himself in the corner of the cocktail lounge. He seemed to be studying a piece of paper. The pensive expression on his face said he was troubled about something. She watched him for a moment before crossing the room to his table.

"Good evening."

Chance looked up at the intrusion into his thoughts. As soon as he saw Marcie he rose to his feet and extended a warm smile. "Hello." He took in the way the soft fabric of her blouse caressed her breasts, how her skirt accentuated her slim waist and the sleek curve of her calf. He glanced at his watch. "I didn't realize it was

seven o'clock already. I'll get us a table for dinner."

They were seated in the dining room at a nice table next to a window with an ocean view. Chance looked at the wine list while Marcie studied the menu. He gave their selections to the waiter, then settled back in his chair. He studied her for a moment. She appeared nervous, continually glancing around the room and out the window.

"You look very nice. Your blouse is a good color for you. It really brings out your eyes." He leaned forward. "And you have lovely eyes."

She could feel the flush of embarrassment spread across her cheeks and the butterflies dance in her stomach. She hoped her voice did not sound as unsettled as she felt. "You're very good at this...knowing just the right thing to say at just the proper moment. But then, I imagine you get lots of practice."

An amused grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. "There you go again...maidng assumptions. I think you have lovely eyes, so I told you so. It was a simple compliment, nothing devious or subversive about it."

The waiter brought the bottle of wine Chance had ordered, poured each of them a glass, then left. Marcie took a sip of her wine, then toyed with the stem of the wineglass and ran her finger around the rim. The lull in the conversation felt awkward to her. Agreeing to have dinner with him had been a bad idea. They obviously had nothing in common.

She nervously cleared her throat. She felt pressured to

say something—anything—to break the uncomfortable silence. “When I arrived, you had such an intense look on your face I was reluctant to interrupt your concentration. I hope it wasn’t some sort of problem or bad news.”

“Well...” He took a drink from his glass. “I guess you could call it the perfect capper to a day of problems.”

She allowed a bit of a chuckle. “Starting with getting up at such a horrible hour this morning?”

He extended a sincere smile. “Not at all.” He reached across the table and covered her hand with his. His gaze settled on her face, then delved into her eyes. His voice was low, his words cloaked in honesty. “That was the best part of my entire day... until now.”

Her gaze shifted away from him as she eased her hand out from beneath his. She picked up her wineglass and took another sip, then feigned an interest in something out the window.

“It’s certainly a nice evening.” She heard the strain in her voice as she attempted to make polite conversation. When he did not respond to what she had said, she turned her gaze back to him. He had the same pensive expression on his face as he’d had when she’d first spotted him in the cocktail lounge. He seemed a million miles away in thought. Again, she was not sure if she should disturb him or not.

“Uh, Chance...is something wrong? You seem troubled.”

His head snapped up to attention at the sound of his name. He had been so absorbed in his thoughts that he had neglected to

hear what she had been saying. He let out a sigh of exasperation as he leaned back in his chair. “Sorry... As I said earlier, it’s been a really lousy day.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” A sudden wave of shy embarrassment swept over her. “I—I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to intrude. It’s obviously none of my business.”

“That’s all right.” A hint of weariness clouded his features for a second. He did not want to talk about Jeff’s arrest. His activities with his “training school,” as he referred to it, were something he kept to himself. But the e-mail he had received from his father was an entirely different matter. He pulled the printout from his pocket and handed it to her. “I’m sure it will be in the newspapers in the morning anyway.”

She unfolded and read the piece of paper. It was a message from Douglas Fowler to his son stating that he had gotten married the day before and had left that morning and would be honeymooning on the French Riviera for the next ten days. She handed it back to him.

The look of confusion on her face told Chance that she did not understand the significance of the message.

“It’s not that dear ol’ Dad has decided to get married again without even bothering to invite his one and only son to the wedding, it’s that this is his sixth trip down the aisle. The fifth Mrs. Douglas Fowler lasted less than a year.”

“You’re kidding!” She could not hide her surprise. “Your father has been married six times?”

A chuckle escaped his throat. It was not a sound of amusement, but one of bittersweet irony. “This one is younger than I am. Care to make any bets on how long she’ll last?”

“Why in the world would anyone want to get married six times?”

“That’s an excellent question. Unfortunately I don’t have even a mediocre answer let alone a good one.” His brow furrowed for a moment, then he flashed an easy smile. “I guess everyone has to have a hobby, and getting married is his.” He tried to sound casual, but somehow it did not quite come out that way. “You see, my family is more akin to life mirroring satire rather than the other way around.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.