

Chapter 9

It's a Gamble

Buster lapped some water from his bowl, then flopped onto his blanket in the corner of the office. He was exhausted. It had been a full day already and it was nap time. His ears barely moved as the soft, gentle purr of the Rolls Royce pulled into the driveway.

Rosemary knew it had to be her old friend, Pru, whom she had not seen since high school. Naturally, she read about her in assorted newspaper articles over the years. But she was most surprised to receive a phone call from Pru's assistant booking the wedding appointment. Pru was probably unaware that Rosemary even worked at the chapel. She wondered if her friend would recognize her and if Pru was still as beautiful as she remembered.

She was. When the chauffeur opened the door to the Rolls Royce, Pru stepped out looking as serenely graceful and lovely as she always had been. Yes, age had taken its toll, but her kind, gentle face and soft blue eyes were still prevalent features. Her blond hair was now slightly silvery.

Exuding a quiet and calm exterior, Pru had cultivated nerves of tempered steel. Almost twenty years before, her husband had been killed in a plane crash, leaving her a wealthy widow at an extremely young age. She had inherited the vast hotel empire that her husband had forged and worked hard to create. Not having any prior business experience, Pru was forced to learn the business as rapidly as she could, and had managed to maintain the reputation of the hotels as one of elegance and excellence. Given her shy and retiring temperament, it was no small feat. She retained the services of most of her husband's top advisors, lawyers, accountants and management team, whom she rewarded handsomely, though their loyalty, respect and trust was demanded in return. Those who failed were cut loose with the speed of a laser beam. Fortunately, most of the people in her employ admired the business acumen she had developed. They also appreciated her kindness and sense of fairness. Advised of any real hardships that her employees were suffering in their private lives as well as any significant happy events she wrote fitting notes, accompanied by small appropriate gifts.

Rosemary stepped out from the office to welcome her old friend and was delighted at the embrace and remembrance that Pru displayed. Rosemary eyed the young man exiting from the passenger side of the car, struck by his good-looking features. *How nice that her son would be a witness to the wedding*, Rosemary thought, not remembering that Pru even had a son. The young man strode to Pru's side and passionately kissed her on the lips. The man alongside her friend was definitely not her son.

"You must meet my future husband, Chad," Pru enlightened her friend. After the brief introduction, Chad excused himself to the restroom. Pru must have read the expression of concern on Rosemary's face.

"I know. It's a gamble," she stated, as the two locked arms and walked toward the office. "But he does make me happy, Rosemary. And I *do* love him," she continued.

"Well, as long as you love him and he loves you, I guess that's really all that matters," Rosemary responded ambivalently, deciding to keep her many questions and reservations to herself.

It had been a tough time for Pru since her husband died. True, the business was rewarding, but the nights were lonely, and the vast penthouse suite she occupied at her luxury Las Vegas hotel was empty. She had never entertained the idea of remarrying, or even having a lover. She knew she would never have another love like she'd already had with her husband. But then, she had never planned on meeting Chad.

Pru always enjoyed playing Chemin De Fer while staying at one of her casino-hotels in Monte Carlo, and enjoyed Baccarat, its American counterpart, when she was in Las Vegas. Often, when she was feeling particularly lonely, she would signal downstairs to the casino, leave her penthouse suite and head for the Baccarat room, where a seat was always reserved should she decide to participate at a moment's notice, which was often. Without asking, her favorite cocktail, a Cosmopolitan, was always brought to her spot at the table.

One evening, she was barely seated, when she looked across the table and observed a young man, the epitome of a Giorgio Armani model. Chad was impeccably dressed, with well-manicured hands and a suave, rugged masculinity. He had her favorite combination of dark hair and penetrating blue eyes. As he held her gaze, she was embarrassed by her heartbeat and tried in vain to ignore the man, who was clearly

several years her junior. She endeavored to concentrate on her card game, but felt his focused eyes undressing her from afar. She casually glanced at him again and sensed how much he wanted her. She was surprisingly excited, flattered by his obvious attention. He flirted seductively, raising his glass to her whenever she won. She noticed how much he was losing at the table, and admired the nonchalant manner in which he seemed to handle his losses. To lose so graciously exuded class. She had never seen Chad at her hotel before, and her intuition and radar dictated she run a routine background check.

The next day, Pru was disappointed, and yet, somewhat not surprised with the report from her detective. Chad was very well known among many casinos as a very heavy gambler whose debts had been covered over the years by a variety of extremely wealthy widows. A knife struck in her heart. He was the sole person with whom she had an ounce of interest since the loss of her husband, and she discovered that he was nothing more than a common gigolo. A man who earned his living off the misery of women. She thanked her loyal detective for his fast work.

Still, she could not get Chad out of her mind. There was always the possibility that he might not return to the casino. She hoped that this would be the case and that she would be able to dismiss him from her mind so easily.

However, curiosity got the better of Pru, so she returned to the table of the previous evening's encounter. She was relieved, in a sense, when she did not see him seated there, and started to play her cards and sip her Cosmopolitan. Her mind told her it was a good thing, yet in her heart, she was crestfallen. She opened her handbag and pulled a cigarette from the gold cigarette case, and was taken aback as a man's hand flicking a lighter appeared at the end of the cigarette. She allowed the cigarette to be lit, and, recognizing the beautifully manicured hands from the night before, turned her head to view the obvious gentleman, whose subtle cologne she now enjoyed. Chad's smile and those piercing blue eyes greeted her. She admired his perfect chiseled face and his taste in magnificently tailored suits. In all probability, his clothes had been selected by a wealthy widow, she realized. She nodded slightly and thanked him.

"Let me assure you, the pleasure was all mine," Chad responded in his best seductive manner. "May I also have the pleasure of buying you dinner?"

"Oh, I don't think so," Pru responded, somewhat embarrassed.

"Why not? You know you want to," Chad continued, knowing he was in command of the situation and that Pru would not be able to resist him. No woman ever had.

Pru was unaccustomed to such forthrightness. Her mind told her to decline the offer, but her heart instructed her to take the gamble. This time Pru followed her heart. She nodded and gathered her wrap, which Chad placed around her shoulders and escorted her to the five-star French restaurant in her hotel. She was determined he would pay the bill. He would not seduce her to the point where she would be next in the line of wealthy widows whom he had conquered, and presumably whose hearts he had broken. She kept what had been learned of his past to herself, while clearly, he knew exactly who she was. Attempting to remain distant, his very being fascinated her.

The evening was surprisingly enjoyable for her, and the conversation flowed smoothly. They both held a penchant for opera, ballet, and classical music, and they discussed many composers, opera singers, and ballet dancers. She was impressed with his in-depth knowledge. He was the perfect gentleman the entire evening. She was pleasantly taken aback when he hastily reached for the check as soon as it arrived and paid with cash. *Thank goodness it was not the credit card of one of his mistresses,* she thought. He seemed genuinely interested in her, but she was uncertain as to whether that was his style...his technique of luring women into his den. He escorted her to the elevator, where he kissed her hand tenderly, and bade her good night.

Pru tossed and turned in her bed that evening, hardly sleeping at all. She felt lonelier than ever, and hungered for the touch of this man who made her feel so desirable. She wished she knew how sincere his overtures were and how much was just a game to him. She was annoyed at herself and confused, having always been so calm and in control. But where had it taken her? A solitary life in an empty penthouse.

Pru was touched the next day when a huge bouquet of two dozen roses arrived at her office. The card read simply, "Thank you for the pleasure of your company. May I have the honor again soon? Chad." She had to see him again. He had her all tied in knots. Shortly after the flowers arrived, her assistant buzzed through to her office.

“There’s a Chad on the line for you. He says the call is personal.”

Pru took the call. Chad wanted to take her out for dinner again. But deciding to take control of the situation, Pru invited him to her penthouse suite for dinner. There she would be in command, could confront him with what she knew about his life, and see his reaction. She was not like one of his ex-lovers. She was a fairly shrewd judge of character and how he responded to the confrontation would be a measure of whether she would pursue a friendship, let alone anything beyond.

Chad arrived punctually, with a small gift box, elegantly wrapped, for her. Pru opened the gift to discover a small music box with a ballerina on top. When she wound the key to the music box, the ballerina twirled as the music played Chopin’s “Nocturne.” Deeply moved by his thoughtful and charming gesture, she fought back the tears welling up. But before his gift could be accepted, she had to know of his past—and needed to hear it from Chad.

Before she even had time to phrase the question, Chad took her by the hands and looked directly into her eyes, and said “Pru, I have some confessions to make.” Sitting across from her, holding her hands and looking her directly in the eye, he explained to her how he had lived off many women in the past, and also of his fairly severe gambling problem. When he saw her at the casino, he knew who she was, and he had intended to play her like the other women in his life. But somehow she was different. He really liked her for who she was. All the previous women anxiously took him to their bed the first night, and yet she had said farewell at the elevator. He was genuinely attracted to Pru and begged her forgiveness.

“I am not proud of my past. In fact, I’m ashamed of my life and want to start afresh. Above all, I wish to pursue our friendship. Please tell me you’ll give us a chance,” he implored.

She nodded. She found his candor refreshing. He intrigued her. Though initially he came across as very self-assured, there was now a very strong element of vulnerability about him. Pru listened intently, thinking about what he was telling her and willing to take a gamble with him.

Chad was offered a trial position in her customer relations department. Given his abundant charm, he was charged with ensuring that the needs of all the high rollers staying at her hotel in Las Vegas were met. He was to keep them happy at

all costs and she could certainly keep her eye on him. As a condition of his employment, Pru insisted he attend Gamblers Anonymous meetings. Her detective was also commissioned to routinely check on Chad. To her pleasant surprise, Chad attended his gamblers meetings regularly. He also, apparently, was being faithful to her. The private eye reported no romantic dates or dinners with any other females.

As the months passed, she was impressed with the finesse with which Chad handled the problems that came across his desk, and the glowing compliments from the high roller guests were reassuring. He was obviously an asset to the hotel and was having a positive impact.

Occasionally Pru asked Chad to accompany her on trips to her other hotels. Both especially relished the forays to New York and San Francisco, where they delighted in countless evenings attending the symphony concerts and operatic events at the New York Met. Their souls were in total harmony at any musical happening. It was more than a love for both of them. It was a passion. He often surprised her with tickets he had purchased for the Met. She knew they were not cheap and that they consumed a fair amount of his paycheck. Clearly, he was not using her. She allowed him to pay as often as possible, as she knew he was learning how much more pleasurable it was to give than to receive.

After six months of courtship, Chad finally proposed to her. He knew he could offer her nothing that she did not already have. But he was very protective of her and, above all, he was able to give her his undying and unconditional love and loyalty—and he *did* respect her. For his part, he knew he no longer needed to win at cards. He had won her heart.

Pru was willing to take the gamble. Neither wanted a large wedding. Pru was too shy and modest to be the center of attention. It would just be a quiet affair with the two of them.

Now, here they were at the Chapel of Eternal Love. Rosemary was a witness to their nuptials, and was genuinely pleased, if not a little apprehensive, for her old school friend. She felt the odds were for a successful marriage. But then, as Pru had rightly pointed out ... “It’s a gamble.”