

# A Deadly Change of Luck

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A Deadly Change of Luck

## *Prologue*

Lou Winnomore slapped the lottery ticket down on the counter, grinning from ear to ear. "You're lookin' at a winning ticket, right there," he bragged to Casey, the young grocery clerk standing behind the counter.

Casey eyed him suspiciously. "Yeah, right. Like last time when you won five bucks?"

"Better than that. Go ahead. Run it through your machine right there. You'll see," Lou insisted.

Casey wiped her hands on the green apron hung around her neck and shuffled over to the lottery machine. She accidentally bumped a display of key chains and knocked them on the floor. She set the ticket down on the counter and began picking up the key chains.

Lou wagged his head from side to side. "Get that later, Casey! Check the numbers first."

"Hey, Lou!" a man called as he appeared from the storeroom carrying a case of cat food. The man was as big as a house and carried himself like a professional wrestler, strutting down the aisle with his arms bulging under his shirt. He had a slight under bite and his eyes bulged a little, making him look like a bulldog. His bald head was freshly shaved and buffed to a sheen. He wore a green apron just like the one Casey had on.

"Morning, Otis," Lou said.

Otis noticed Casey huddled over the pile of key chains. He set the heavy box down. "Here, I'll get that, Casey. Go ahead and take care of Lou."

Casey straightened up, rolled her eyes and yawned as she slipped the ticket into the slot of the big green machine. She inspected the polish on her fingernails while she waited for the results to display. A number finally flashed on the screen. She glared at Lou.

"You won twenty-five bucks. Big deal. I could have finished picking up this mess," Casey complained. She opened the cash drawer and pulled out his prize money.

Otis hung the last key chain on the rack and frowned at Casey. "You better work on your customer relation skills, young lady."

Casey slammed the cash drawer closed and handed Lou his money. "Congratulations, Lou. Here's your twenty-five bucks. Don't spend it all in one place."

"Cheer up, Casey. You don't know how lucky you are, having a dad like Otis."

"You mean *the Dictator*?"

Otis gently yanked a tuft of Casey's hair. "That's enough. Now, ring him up."

Lou set his grocery basket on the counter. "How's business?"

"Oh, I can't complain," Otis answered.

Casey rolled her eyes. She always reminded Lou of a little pixie with great big green eyes and red hair cut short like a boy. The top of her head barely came to her father's elbow, and Lou would have been surprised if she weighed more than ninety pounds. Her fingernails were chewed down to tiny pink stubs. She picked a can of beans out of Lou's basket, searched for the UPC code and ran it across the scanner. Otis ignored her apparent irritation with him.

"How's retired life treating you?" Otis asked, pulling a feather duster out of his back pocket to knock down a cobweb that caught his attention.

"Oh, I don't know. Gets a little lonely, ever since Maggie passed away. Always thought we'd get to spend a few years together after I retired, you know, maybe travel a little."

Otis nodded as if he understood, but of course, he didn't. He understood balance sheets and profit margins, but not feelings of loss and sadness.

Casey glanced at her father as she pulled a bottle of vitamins from Lou's basket. She was curious to see if he'd have any kind words for Lou. As she expected, he remained mute.

Lou felt Otis's discomfort and changed the subject. He'd spent so many months moping about Maggie's death and bringing people down that he felt like a boat anchor. He sensed that people wanted to run the other way when they saw him coming, afraid he'd start going on about how much he missed her. He forced a big smile from somewhere within. "Joey's taking me fishing tomorrow. Gonna be gone the whole weekend. Going up to Big Bear. One of those father-son bonding trips. Hear there's some pretty good fishing at the lake."

Otis smiled, relieved he didn't have to deal with any touchy-feely talk. "I pulled a ten-pound trout out of Big Bear Lake last summer," he boasted.

Casey placed the last of Lou's groceries in a paper bag. She grimaced at her father. "You did not. There's no such thing as a ten-pound trout. What a big liar you are."

"Hey!" Otis boomed, pointing his finger in Casey's face. "I've had about enough of your smart mouth. Don't you talk to me like that. You may be in college, but you still live under my roof, and you'll treat me with respect," Otis demanded.

Casey shot him a curt smile as she removed the plastic shopping basket from the counter and stacked it with the others on the floor. She turned her attention to Lou. "That'll be twenty-six eighty-seven," she announced, giving him the same plastic smile she'd just given her father.

Otis hoisted the heavy case off the counter and headed toward the pet-food isle. "Good seeing you, Lou. Have fun fishing," he called over his shoulder as he disappeared behind a display of toilet paper that was stacked like a pyramid.

Lou handed Casey his lottery winnings and dug into his pocket for the additional dollar eighty-seven. She held her hand out, waiting for the rest of the money. As he counted out the change, he placed an extra dollar bill on the counter.

"I almost forgot. I need to buy another ticket for tomorrow night's game."

Casey handed Lou his receipt and softened her expression. "You want to try a quick-pick this time?" she asked.

Lou shook his head. "You know I never leave chance to chance. I got my numbers right here," he said as he quickly selected six numbers from a lottery slip and pushed it across the counter toward her.

Casey slid the paper into a slot on the lottery machine and retrieved a ticket. "Good Luck," she said, handing it to Lou.

Joey Winnomore pulled his pickup into his father's driveway at three o'clock on Saturday morning. He almost honked the horn to announce his arrival, but then remembered the hour and the sleeping neighbors. It didn't matter. Lou had been up and waiting for his son for nearly an hour. He peered out the window and spied the headlights in the yard. He rushed to the door, as excited as the first time his own father took him fishing so many decades ago. He hoisted a bag over his shoulder, grabbed his fishing pole and tackle box, locked the door and rushed down the steps, taking them two-at-a-time.

Lou and Joey barely said two words to each other during the long drive to Big Bear. Lou sensed something was bothering Joey, but he didn't want to push. If Joey had a problem, he'd find a way to bring it up.

Lou directed from the dock as Joey backed the small fishing-boat trailer down the ramp into the lake. They loaded the aluminum boat with fishing gear and an ice-chest full of sandwiches and beer. After Joey parked the truck and trailer, the pair motored away from the boat dock, in search of the perfect fishing spot.

The little boat glided into a small cove on the opposite side of the lake. Joey cut the engine and dropped a small anchor over the side. "This looks like a pretty good spot," Lou said with approval.

Joey studied the landscape and nodded. "As good as any, I guess."

Worry lines appeared in Lou's forehead. Joey had lost a lot of weight lately, and he didn't have much weight to spare. His pants hung loose, and without the belt, would have slid right down his narrow hips. His shirt hadn't been laundered for weeks and was missing half the buttons. His face was gaunt and his brown hair was dull and unkempt. His dark eyes were usually alert and focused, but now they were bloodshot and heavy. Lou watched as his son reached into the ice-chest and retrieved a beer.

"It's seven in the morning," Lou reminded him.

Joey twisted the cap off the bottle and tossed it into the bottom of the boat. He took a large swig and wiped his sleeve across his unshaven face. "So it is. What difference does it make?"

Lou sat forward on the bench seat and looked his son square in the eye. "What's going on, Joey? You look like death warmed over. Is everything okay at work?"

Joey let out a cynical laugh and took another drink. "Everything's fine at work. Officer Winnomore never reports for duty under the influence, if that's what you're worried about."

"I'm worried about *you*, Joey. Tell me what's on your mind."

Joey reached into a paper sack next to his tackle box and pulled out a container of worms. "Fishing's on my mind. Want me to bait your hook?"

Lou studied his son's behavior. He knew better than to push. He grabbed his pole and picked the hook out of the cork handle. "No, I can manage," he said, picking a wriggly worm out of the container.

Over an hour passed before another word was spoken. Finally, Lou broke the silence. "You know, I won a little money in the lottery yesterday."

Joey barely reacted. "No kidding. Am I a rich man's son?"

"Na. Twenty-five bucks. I always play the same numbers. I use the days from my kids' birthdays, your mother's birthday, and our anniversary."

Joey thought for a moment. "That's only five numbers. Where do you get the sixth?"

Lou smiled. "Scotty's birthday. He's my only grandson. Wish he could've come with us on this trip. Too bad he came down with the flu."

Joey stared at the red-and-white plastic float bobbing on the surface of the water. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, then took the last swallow from his third beer of the morning. "Scott's not sick. I just told you that so you wouldn't ask why I didn't bring him along."

Lou shifted in his seat. He sensed more to come, so he remained quiet and let his son build up courage to speak the words he'd found so difficult to say. Both men stared out at the glassy surface of the lake. Finally, Joey opened his mouth.

"I'm in trouble, Dad. I don't know what to do."

"I'm listening," Lou encouraged.

"Me and Bridgett, we haven't been getting along too good lately," Joey started.

Lou felt a twinge of relief. He and Maggie had worked through plenty of problems, but they always came through hard times with a stronger marriage and even more commitment for each other. This was something he could relate to, and maybe even provide some help. He'd felt so useless since Maggie died, but now he had something to offer. "Trouble with your marriage? You can work it out, Son. I'm not saying it'll be easy, but—"

"You don't understand. We haven't been getting along for a long time. I'm afraid it may be too late to fix."

Lou put a hand on his son's shoulder. "It's never too late."

Joey reached for the ice-chest again, but Lou put his hand on top of it, preventing him from starting on another problem-numbing drink. Joey didn't fight him. He had no strength left to fight. He turned his eyes back toward the lake. "You were wrong, you know."

"About what?" Lou asked.

"About only having one grandchild. You're going to have another one in a couple months."

Surprised, Lou gave his son a confused look. "But I thought you just said—"

Joey's eyes met Lou's. In an instant, he understood. "Not Bridgett?"

Joey shook his head. "No. Someone else."

"Does Bridgett know?"

Tears began rolling down Joey's face. He couldn't speak. He just nodded.

Lou removed his fishing cap and began massaging the spot on his forehead where a pounding headache threatened to make the morning even worse. He had to fight the urge to grab his son by the collar and shake him violently. He wanted to know how he could do such a thing, but he also knew that being judgmental wouldn't solve any problems. He ran a few questions over in his mind: How could you be so stupid? What kind of an idiot are you? Didn't you think about the consequences? Then, he finally settled on a safe one. "What are you going to do?"

Joey wiped the tears from his face. "I don't know. Bridgett wants a divorce. She won't let me see Scott. She won't let me in the house. I'm gonna lose everything."

Lou nodded. "Probably. What about this other woman? Do you love her?"

"Love her? I barely even know her. She's a regular at that bar I told you about, where some of the guys from work hang out. She's giving me even more grief than Bridgett—making all kinds of threats if I don't do what she wants."

Lou combed his fingers through his gray hair then replaced his fishing hat. "What does she want?" he asked.

Joey stared blankly out at the surface of the water. A pair of ducks, leading a dozen fuzzy ducklings, swam past the boat. Joey wanted to smile at the sight, but he couldn't. "Everything I can't give her." Joey broke down and sobbed, his tears

falling like raindrops on the floor of the boat. Lou sat next to him and searched for words that could help, but nothing came to him.

The weekend passed and Lou and Joey managed to get through it with a few fleeting smiles and a string full of fish.

Joey dropped Lou off at his house late Sunday night. Before letting himself out of the pickup, Lou put a hand on Joey's shoulder. "Try not to worry too much, son. I know it doesn't seem like it right now, but everything will work itself out. You're gonna have to be strong. I'll be here for you if you need anything. Okay?"

Joey gave his father a weak smile. "Thanks, Dad. You're about all I've got right now."

Lou watched the pickup drive slowly down the street, picked up the Sunday paper that had been tossed onto the front lawn, then he headed for his door. He patted his pockets, but couldn't find his keys. Eventually, he realized he'd left them on the kitchen table. In his excitement, he'd forgotten to pick them up. He reached as high as he could to the trim over the door and felt for his spare key. He'd locked himself out a few times over the years and always kept a hide-a-key for just such emergencies.

He dropped his duffle bag on the back porch and left his fishing gear propped against the wall. He'd deal with putting everything away in the morning.

He'd spent the entire weekend worrying about Joey and still couldn't get his son's problems out of his mind. He plopped down in a chair at the kitchen table and rested his chin in his palms, staring out into space. He glanced at the Sunday paper he'd placed on the table and reached for it. He knew there was no point in trying to go to sleep right away, so he opened it up and spread it out on the table. A story about a string of home invasion robberies in his neighborhood concerned him. He got up and checked that he'd locked the door after he came in. He returned to his paper, skipping over most of the stories since his eyes were beginning to get heavy and the words were starting to run together. He perked up when he turned to the section that reported the lottery results. He decided he'd check the numbers then go directly to bed.

Lou honestly didn't know why he bothered to buy lottery tickets. He'd convinced himself he was the unluckiest man in the world. He had a recurring dream that he was stranded in the middle of Death Valley with only one can of soda. When he opened the soda, a little speaker placed in the can would announce, "Congratulations. You have just won a million dollars," but of course, there was no soda in the can. In his dream, he crawled across the sun-scorched desert searching for water, but never found it. The last scene from his dream was always of a pair of buzzards circling overhead as he took his last breath. He shook the unpleasant thought from his head.

Adjusting his glasses, he squinted at the small numbers printed on the page. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. It couldn't be right. His mind was foggy, he told himself. He checked again. The first number was the day of Frankie's birthday. The second was Nellie's, and the third was Joey's. The fourth matched Maggie's birthday and the fifth was their wedding anniversary. But what about the sixth mega number? Was it really Scotty's birthday? Could he be dreaming? He checked again. There was no question. He'd just picked all six numbers in the California Lottery, worth over fifty-eight million dollars. His heart raced and nearly pounded out of his chest.

The clock on the wall said it was nearly midnight. There was no one he could call at this hour to tell. He thought of calling Joey, but wasn't even sure where he was staying since his separation from Bridgett. He wanted to dance around his kitchen, but the dark cloud of Joey's bad news kept him from floating off the floor. He felt like an oaf for not asking Joey if he needed a place to stay. Lou would love to have his son's company. He'd been so lonely ever since... well, anyhow, he'd call Joey at work in the morning to tell him the good news. Then he could convince him to move back home into his old room until he got his life in order. They could cheer each other up just by keeping each other company.

Suddenly, he wasn't sleepy anymore. He walked around the house three times, wondering what to do. In the morning, he would call the lottery officials to find out how to claim the prize money. A sudden fear overtook him. He stared at the newspaper. Home invasion robberies in his neighborhood occurred every night for the past four nights. The homeowners were tied up and gagged while the robbers cleaned them out. Lou removed the lottery ticket from his wallet. He just knew that with his luck, tonight would be the night his house was hit, and they'd steal the ticket. He nervously paced the house, searching for the perfect hiding place until he could get it safely to the claims office to collect his winnings. He finally decided on a place he was sure no one would ever look. After he finished hiding it, he paced the house another half-dozen times.

"How am I ever gonna get to sleep?" he asked himself. He wandered around the house, performing his routine chores in order to save time in the morning and, hopefully, to tire himself out so he could fall asleep. He poured himself a glass of milk, remembering something he'd read about how calcium could help relieve insomnia.

He grimaced at the price tag stuck to the lid of a bottle of calcium supplements. Then he laughed. He couldn't believe he was getting all worked up about a few dollars when he was now worth over fifty million.

He danced around the kitchen and sang the name of every model car he intended to buy. Then he began naming cities where he'd like to have houses—one for every season. Then he remembered a yacht he'd seen in a magazine that he

would love to have. He and Joey could go deep-sea fishing. He danced and laughed so hard the muscles in his stomach hurt and tears rolled down his face. He caught his reflection in the toaster on the counter and laughed at how red the distorted image of his face was. He looked like a clown. He doubled over in the middle of his kitchen, wiping the tears from his eyes. He could barely catch his breath. Then, he felt a tremendous pressure around his upper torso. He felt like an elephant was sitting on his chest. He collapsed on the floor, clutching his shirt collar. His last conscious thought was that he really was the unluckiest man in the world. He'd just won fifty-eight million dollars, and he was going to die of a heart attack before he could claim it. It was just like his Death Valley dream, only it wasn't a dream at all. It was very real and he was going to be very dead.

## *Chapter One*

I had an appointment to meet Fiona Oliviera at her real estate office early on Tuesday morning. Fiona was about ten minutes late, so I waited in my car, listening to the radio until she arrived. A classic rock radio station played a little louder than someone my age should probably listen, but I didn't care. I unconsciously tapped my foot to the beat. The music took me back to the seventies, when I was a skinny teenager with nothing but horses on my mind.

My name is Devonie Lace-Matthews. I live in Del Mar, California, with my husband, Dr. Craig Matthews. I'd made a decision a few years ago that I didn't have the right temperament to have a boss or a customer, not because of any specific aversion to them, but because I will nearly kill myself to perform to their expectations—or my perception of their expectations. A minor heart attack and a stern order from my doctor to do something about the stress in my life prompted me to make a major life change. In order to maintain my health and sanity, I dropped out of the rat race and opted for a simpler life. I quit my job as a database administrator for a major telecommunications company, sold my house and lived on a sailboat for a while. Since I married Craig, I no longer live on the boat, but it is docked at our home and we enjoy it as often as we can. To earn a living, I search out bargains at auctions and probate sales and do my best to turn a profit.

I'd nearly lost track of time, singing along with an old favorite, when an older Lincoln Continental came barreling down the boulevard and swerved into the parking lot, nearly hitting me broadside. As it screeched to a halt, I wondered if I should just start my engine and go home.

The woman driving the car shoved the heavy door open, banging it against the wall of the building she had parked next to. She spent two minutes gathering armloads of folders and binders and her purse before she piled out of her car. I opened my door and stepped out.

"Are you Devonie?" she asked, flustered and out of breath.

I smiled. "Yes. And you're Fiona?"

"That's me. Fiona Oliviera. Come on inside," she said, dropping one of the binders on the ground, scattering the papers in all directions.

I began stepping on the sheets to keep them from flying away, then picked them up as quickly as I could.

"Thanks, toots," she said as I handed her the crumpled stack of papers. She smiled, exposing a gap between her front teeth that a Popsicle stick could fit through. Somehow, she managed to squeeze her size ten body into size eight Capri pants. It was a feat many women attempted, but not many achieved. She wore a low-cut tank top under a faded cotton work shirt that she tied snugly at her waist. I don't know why I thought I'd be meeting a professional woman in a conservative business suit when I made the appointment with her over the phone. She definitely was not what I expected.

She unlocked the door and I followed her into the Fiona Oliviera Realty office. She dropped her armload onto a desk and motioned for me to take a seat. After plopping down in a chair opposite me, she began spreading papers out in front of her. I couldn't take my eyes off her hair. It was ash-brown and looked as though it had been curled with soda-pop cans, but not brushed out completely. Something else was wrong with it. Then I realized it was a wig, and it was slipping off to one side. She noticed my stare.

"What? Is it this crazy wig again?" she said, using both hands to smash it down on her head, wiggling it back and forth until it seemed to be centered more or less on her skull. In that process, I noticed she was missing six of her false fingernails. The four remaining were painted bright pink except where they were chipped at the tips. I smiled, not sure what to say.

"How's that?" she asked, waiting for my approval.

"Better," I answered. "But, maybe just a little more to the left."

She adjusted it one more time before rifling through the mass of papers on her desk. Then she took a pencil and slipped it under the wig, scratching her scalp. "I hate this darn thing. Itches like crazy," she complained, rubbing the pencil up and down, pushing the wig out of place, again. "But I can't grow a decent head of hair since I turned sixty. Without it, I look like a radiation fallout victim."

I frowned. She seemed to be fighting the aging process with the determination of a Hollywood star desperate to remain young.

"But you couldn't give a hoot about that. You're here to see the bank repo," she continued. She put her pencil down and rearranged the stack of papers on her desk.

Her phone rang and she stopped to answer it. "Fiona Oliviera Realty. Fiona speaking.

"You're kidding.

"No. The people withdrew their offer last week. They got tired of waiting.

"Great. Fax it over. Thanks, Chuck"

Fiona hung up the phone, leaned over on her desk and grinned as though she was about to reveal the secret whereabouts of Elvis Presley. "Toots, this is your lucky day."

"Really?"

"Yes. That was Chuck... oh, what's his last name?" Fiona snapped her fingers repeatedly as if the action would cause the man's last name to magically pop into her head. "Doesn't matter. He's the executor to an estate I've had listed for, let me see, must be almost six months now. Thought I had it sold, but the people got tired of waiting and found something else. It's a great deal. Better than the repo."

Fiona continued rummaging through the stack of papers on her desk, pulling one out to the top. "Here it is," she said, placing a black-and-white photocopy of an old house in front of me. "It's got potential, but it needs some TLC. That's tender loving care in real estate talk."

I nodded with understanding as I inspected the picture. The house was cute. It had a lot of curb appeal from what I could see from the photo.

"What it really means is the place is a wreck and after you've finished fixing everything that's wrong with it, you'll swear on a stack of home repair books that you'll never do it again."

I chuckled at her directness. "Is it that bad?" I asked.

"Let's just say it's more than new paint and carpet. If you're handy at all, you can flip it and make a nice little profit."

I squinted at the photocopy in my hands. "Can you show it to me? I'd like to see what's involved."

Fiona smiled, revealing a thousand wrinkles on her over-tanned face. "Good. I had a feeling you weren't one of those gals afraid to break a nail or two. Let me get the key."

I rode with Fiona in her huge boat of a car. The springs on the old Lincoln felt like they hadn't been replaced since it was new, at least thirty years ago. She took the corners like a policeman in hot pursuit of a bank robber. I gripped the door handle and tried to remember that the car was built like a tank and could probably survive anything short of being broad sided by a semi-truck. "Come on, baby," she coaxed as she pressed her foot into the accelerator to climb a steep hill. We nearly ripped the door off of a car as some poor unsuspecting man pushed it open into Fiona's lane. I cringed as she swerved to miss it at the last second, honking her horn as she blew by him.

"Another graduate from the moron school of driving. I didn't know you could get a driver's license from a box of Crackerjacks," she complained, leering at the man in her rear-view mirror. I shrunk down in my seat and peered into the side-view mirror, just in time to see the alarmed man shake his fist at us.

As we crested the hill, she pointed to a house on the right. "See that house? I just sold it last month. Cute little place, but the people who bought it—crazy as loons. Two bedrooms, one bath, and four kids—all girls. Can you imagine? Where are they all gonna sleep? Six people and one bathroom? The poor father will never see *that* room."

I shook my head, but before I could say anything, she was pointing to another house on the other side of the street. "Sold that one, too. And over there? That's my listing," she said as the Lincoln drifted into the oncoming traffic lane. The car coming the other way blared its horn at her, causing her to swerve back to her own side of the road. She made the maneuver as though it were a common occurrence.

When we finally pulled to a stop in front of the little old estate-sale house, I peeled my fingers from around the door handle and rubbed them to try to get some blood flow back.

"This is it," she announced, pushing her door open to bang against a tree she'd parked too close to.

I eyed the house. "It doesn't look bad," I said, noticing that it appeared to be well maintained, except for the overgrown yard.

"The outside is fine. It's the inside that's the problem," Fiona explained.

I followed Fiona through the yard gate and up the path. The house was old, probably built in the fifties, but it fit right in with the other *mature* homes in the neighborhood. It was painted Nantucket blue and white. Neat little shutters added charm to the front of the house, which would have been too boxy and plain otherwise. The gingerbread trim reminded me of visits to my grandma's house when I was a little girl. I half expected Grandma to greet us at the door in her apron. At one time, there were flowers and shrubs in the flowerbeds, but they had died of neglect. A bougainvillea, displaying massive clumps of bright pinkish-red petals, flowed over the fence from the neighbor's yard. I could smell jasmine in the air. This would be a nice place for anyone to call home.

Fiona opened the front door, and I blinked a couple times to make sure my eyes weren't deceiving me. The scene was such a sharp contrast to the outside that I couldn't believe it. Holes in the walls. Cupboard doors ripped off. Carpet torn up. Vent covers mangled and bent. It looked like someone had turned a herd of angry bulls loose inside the small house and then waved a red flag.

"What happened?" I muttered, gazing around the ruins.

"Vandals broke in. Darn shame. From the looks of the outside, it was probably a cute little place," Fiona explained.

"Vandals? Is this a bad neighborhood?" I asked. I knew that no matter how good the house was, if the area was bad, then I shouldn't waste my time or money.

“Not really. Oh, there was a rash of break-ins a few months back, but those turned out to be a couple of under-disciplined kids. Police caught them and scared some sense into them. Haven’t had any trouble since.”

I wandered through the kitchen, calculating in my head what repairs needed to be made--new appliances, new cabinet doors, patch and paint the walls. As I continued through the house, I couldn’t figure what the vandals had in mind. It seemed almost as though they were looking for something, but I couldn’t understand why they’d punch holes in the walls. Fiona followed me through the house, pointing out every positive feature she could.

“Now, close your eyes,” she said, taking me by the hand to lead me out to the backyard. “This is the best part.”

I obeyed her order and let her guide me through a doorway and out to a yard of overgrown grass and weeds. She put her hands on my shoulders and turned me until I was in just the right position. “Okay. Open your eyes,” she commanded.

I opened my eyes to a huge patch of bamboo that covered the entire back fence. It was at least eight feet tall. “Bamboo?” I questioned.

“Not the bamboo. It’s what’s on the other side of the bamboo,” she said, parting a clump of the overgrown greenery to give me a glimpse of the view.

I strained to see through the small opening she was able to provide. “Is that the ocean?”

“You know what that view is worth? Fix this place up, cut down these chopsticks, and you’ve got yourself a goldmine.”

I pushed my way through the thick growth to the back fence and brushed the tangle of leaves out of my face. “Wow. It’s beautiful.”

Fiona headed back toward the house. “Put some French doors here, a bay window over there, and voila, instant ‘sells itself’ charmer.”

I followed Fiona back inside. This house seemed too good to be true. The asking price allowed more than enough for the repairs needed to make it marketable, plus a very nice profit. “What’s the story on this place? Why hasn’t some investor snatched it up?” I asked.

Fiona grinned at me. “Wait till you hear this story. You’ll think it came right out of a bad soap opera.”

“Really?” I said, waiting with anticipation for her to continue.

“You hungry? I’d kill for a breakfast burrito.”

“I had breakfast, but if you—”

“Great. Come on. I know a great little place. My treat,” she said, herding me through the house to the front door. I waited on the porch while she locked the door. “I’ll tell you all about this place over breakfast.”

I watched Fiona smother her scrambled-egg burrito with hot salsa while I sipped my grapefruit juice. She glanced around the restaurant coyly, then reached down and unbuttoned the top button of her pants. "These darn things are cutting me in half," she complained. "They build clothes for Barbie dolls, not for real women."

I smiled and nodded. I could probably tell her if she had salsa on her chin, or even if her wig was slipping, but I couldn't suggest that she buy a larger size, or even a style more appropriate for her age. Who's to say what women should wear, anyway? Right? But comfort should definitely be considered. "I found some great Capri pants over at the mall, and they're stretch. The most comfortable pants I own," I offered.

"Really? Stretch? I should try them. I can barely breathe in these," she said. "So. What do you think about that little place?"

"I like it. You were going to tell me its story?" I reminded her.

"Right. You're the first one to see it since Chuck got things straightened out. It's gonna go fast. Thought about picking it up myself, but I'm too busy right now. Chuck's the executor, I think I told you. Previous owner died about five or six months ago."

"Heirs?" I asked.

"Plenty, but that's where it gets complicated. Man's wife was deceased. Had three kids—two sons and a daughter. Oldest son is committed to some institution somewhere. Locked him up after he wouldn't stop threatening to assassinate the president."

"President?" I questioned.

"Of the United States. Don't remember which one. He's been in there twenty years or more."

"Oh, my," I said. "That's a long time. Guess he's not cured?"

"Not hardly. But his share will go into an account to help pay for his care. The daughter is in the Peace Corps somewhere in Africa. Took months to find her. She was notified but said she didn't want any part of the estate."

"What about the other son?" I asked.

"He committed suicide right after his father died. Real sad story."

I frowned. "No other heirs?"

"The son who killed himself—he was a policeman. He had a son with his wife, Bridgett was her name, I think. Anyhow, that boy stood to inherit his father's portion of the estate. But this is where it gets complicated. Mr. Policeman had a mistress—Raven Covina was her name. She and Mr. Policeman had an illegitimate son together. Named him Bahama Breeze. You believe that? Hanging a name like that on a poor kid? Some people shouldn't be allowed to reproduce. Anyhow, when Raven found out that Mr. Policeman's legitimate son was going to inherit his

father's share of the estate, Raven got herself a lawyer and demanded an equal share for young Bahama Breeze."

I shook my head. "I bet that didn't go over too well with Bridgett."

Fiona snickered. "Like a blimp full of bowling balls. That woman refused to sign any papers. She didn't care if her son didn't get anything — she was not going to raise one finger to help Bahama Breeze get a penny of that estate."

"So how'd you take care of it?" I asked.

"Chuck had to set up a legal guardianship for Bridgett's boy. Hired a lawyer. Ran notices in newspapers. What a mess. It's taken all these months to get everything in order so we could sell it. That call from Chuck was to let me know he finally had everything straightened out."

"There aren't any backup offers on it?"

"Well, we had a couple offers when it first came in, but the buyers got so disgusted with all the legal hang-ups that they gave up. You just happened to be in the right place at the right time. I know Chuck will accept an offer close to the asking price. It's a real bargain."

Fiona drove us back to her office. My right leg felt a little weak from pressing on my imaginary brake pedal.

We resumed our positions at her desk, still cluttered with masses of paper.

"So?" she asked.

A fleeting thought raced through my mind that I should probably consult with my husband first, but I knew this place would not be on the market long, and I didn't want to risk losing it. Besides, this was my project and he trusts my judgment. "I'd like to make an offer, but it's a little shy of the asking price," I answered, confident that the house was a great buy even at full price.

"Super! Let's write it up," she said, rummaging through her desk drawer for an offer form. She snatched a pen from an old coffee cup that housed about twenty such writing instruments and started scribbling.

Fiona skimmed over the paperwork she'd just filled out. I'm sure I initialed more paragraphs than are in the U.S. Constitution. I noticed the name of the deceased man on the paperwork — Lou Winnomore.

Fiona tried to call the offer in to Chuck while I waited, but there was no answer. She sent me home to wait.

I couldn't settle on any activity adequate to distract me from the anticipation of knowing if Chuck accepted my offer. "What did he say?" I blurted into the phone when the call finally came through. I knew from the caller ID screen that it was Fiona.

"When can you close?" she asked.

I smiled. "One week."

"Get down here and sign some more papers, girl. You just bought yourself a little goldmine."

## Chapter Two

I drove my husband, Craig, by the house no less than five times while we waited for the escrow to close. I had affectionately named the place Rancho Costa Little. He was impressed with the deal I'd made and was anxious to help me get started with the repairs.

He came home from his shift at the hospital to find me coloring yard-sale signs on the floor in the living room.

"Are we selling the yard?" he asked, kissing the top of my head as he passed through on his way to the bedroom.

"Yeah. What do you think we can get for it?" I replied, winking at him.

He continued down the hall, whistling a tune from *Snow White*.

"I picked up the key for Rancho Costa Little today," I called to him. "I ordered a big garbage bin from the sanitation company, too. They should deliver it next week."

He returned to the living room, still in his green hospital scrubs, with a stethoscope hanging around his neck and a tool belt around his waist. "Great. I'm ready. Let's go over there now."

I smiled at his enthusiasm. "Dinner's cooking. How about after we eat?"

He frowned, stroking the new hammer he'd bought for the occasion. "Okay," he said, sounding a little like a small boy who's been told can't have his pie until he's finished his spinach.

When we pulled into the driveway of Rancho Costa Little, the sun was already setting. Something caught my eye as we stepped out of the car. "Did you see that?" I asked, motioning toward the window facing the street.

"See what?" Craig asked.

I blinked my eyes. "I could have sworn I saw a light in that window. Must have been a reflection," I concluded. I shoved the car door closed and laced my arm around Craig's as we skipped up the walk to the front door. I slipped the key in the knob and turned it.