



Tina
Murray

A Chance to
Say Yes



A Chance to Say Yes

A Novel By

TINA MURRAY, PH.D.

A Chance to Say Yes

A Novel by

TINA MURRAY, PH.D.

Copyright © 2008 by Tina Murray, Ph.D.

ISBN(10): 1-59507-184-9

ArcheBooks Publishing Incorporated

www.archebooks.com

9101 W. Sahara Ave.
Suite 105-112
Las Vegas, NV 89117

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information about this book, please contact ArcheBooks at publisher@ArcheBooks.com.

This book is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents depicted herein are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

eBook Edition: 2008



ArcheBooks Publishing

Dedication

To the memory of my beloved parents, who were the most wonderful mother and father and my best friends, and whom I dearly miss.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for their assistance in the production and publication of *A Chance to Say Yes*: My inspired publishers Robert Gelinas and Ralph Wolf, and Joanna Gelinas; my insightful editor, Vickie DuBois; my dear parents, Leon Benton Murray and Zena Griffith Murray; Gwen Griffith; Irene Griffith; Stephen Lifschitz, Ph.D.; Linda and J. C. Arlington; Judy Hawks; J. Robert Verbese; John Cooper; Matt Goff; Jordan Hoyt, Mary E. White; Vicki Fillmore, Nancy Burns Rugen; Deborah Angus, Jane Kennedy Sutton, Sandy Lender; M. B. Weston; Prudy Taylor Board, and Cathy and Ed Anderson and Treecie. Heartfelt thanks, too, to the gifted acting teachers in my past: Robert “Buckets” Lowery, Sherman Marks, and Harry Mastrogeorge. A special word of thanks goes to author Pat Conroy, whom I met at a book signing some years ago at the Miami Book Fair, and who encouraged me to persevere as a writer no matter who said what. I can still feel the “buzz” I felt late that night as I rode home alone on the deserted Miami Metrorail, en route to my parked car – and my future career as a novelist.

Others, too, helped my debut novel on its way by offering me aid, encouragement, good wishes, and opportunities to further my book’s success. Please know that I appreciate all of you. I simply am not able to list everyone here.

Tina Murray, Ph.D.
Naples, Florida

A Chance to Say Yes

Chapter 1

Standing upon the riprap seawall, Heston Demming surveyed his new domain, an intimate, subtropical waterfront estate—a small paradise, in fact—complete with mansion and manicured lawn, set like a cultured pearl on silvery Naples Bay. *No one could deny it*, Heston assured himself proudly. His new home—six thousand square feet of sumptuous splendor—was spectacular. So was his panoramic view of the bay, and the condo roofs and wild mangroves beyond it. His heart swelled in his chest.

“Awesome!” he cried, euphorically leaping high into the air and returning to earth too soon. Loose-jointed, he landed

A Chance to Say Yes

with innate grace on his sneaker-shod feet in the thick, springy, weed-free, green grass adjacent to the seawall. What he wanted was to soar. What he did, instead, was to launch into modern dance on the spongy, damp, backyard lawn. He had learned some cool moves in his last Broadway role. A few remained part of him.

“Yeah,” he whispered fervently as he improvised, not caring what the elite neighbors on either side might think, if they should see or hear him through the box-shaped hedges. In his imagination, the morning sun shone like a single spotlight, following him across a dark stage, an invisible audience wildly cheering him on. Breathless, elated, he paused in his impromptu jazz-ballet and closed his eyes. As he stood still, his breathing became slow and rhythmic. Digging his front teeth into his lower lip, he listened, enraptured, to the sloshing sound of waves lapping the seawall. Salt air from the nearby Gulf of Mexico filled his lungs. It was the smell of home. Overhead, a seagull cawed to its mates.

“Tell ‘em, man,” Heston muttered hoarsely. “Tell ‘em all. I’m back and I won.” To his surprise, three seagulls cawed in response, and he laughed aloud in delight.

“I rule!” he bellowed, to the elements, fists raised high into the sky. Now he was king, complete with palace, of a luxury neighborhood, *the* luxury neighborhood of his childhood fantasies, Port Royal. The palace was now real—and all his. He owned every grubbing inch of it. He had fought like a mongrel for every coin it took to buy the place. He had compromised, sold out, sold people down the river, bartered his integrity, slaughtered his own soul in the process, and even drunk himself into an endless stupor. He had done whatever it took to get there. Now, at long last, he had arrived.

Now he was in control. He had returned home the con-

quering hero, and, in his final act of war, he had stormed and taken the last citadel, the bastion of wealth which had excluded him so cruelly in youth. So what if he'd needed a drink to fill the hole in his gut? He had the drinking under control now. He'd been clean and sober for nearly a year. He had gotten his appetite back. At this moment, even his marriage to Malevolent Maude didn't seem so bad. A smile played upon his lips but fell away. Instantly, he beat back the painful memories.

He *needed* this feeling of victory. His heart throbbed in his chest. Breathing deeply, he studied the shimmering bay waters, the brilliant blue sky, the wooden dock that ran from the seawall out into the bay. The dock slip was empty and waiting. Soon his new sailing yacht, *Windswept*, would arrive. Scanning the horizon, he searched for a sign of the vessel. He saw other watercraft—tiny sailfish and motor boats, but no sign yet of his yacht.

As he turned towards the mansion, his gaze followed the row of stately, column-like royal palm trees leading to the south side of the westward-facing British Colonial mansion. He scanned the green -asphalt tennis court, and then followed the long lanai which ran the length of the back side of the pale-yellow stucco mansion. Gazing upward, he admired his new home's color scheme.

The three-storied house was trimmed in white and crowned with a white tile roof. Its window shutters were colored the deepest hunter green. *Florida tasteful*. He approved. He couldn't decide which view he liked better, this back side of the house or the front, with its imposing façade, its wide flight of entryway steps, circular stone driveway, tiered fountain, and screen of giant, leafy, multi-trunked banyans on either side of the brass-barred gate.

A Chance to Say Yes

His gaze lowered as he heard a familiar giggle.

He spotted his tiny, blonde daughter, Winnie, rolling croquet balls across a sliver of manicured lawn. Closing his eyes, he mouthed a silent prayer to the Greater Power. He would remember this moment for the rest of his life. The best part was that he could continue to make reparations, now, to the people in Naples whom he had wronged. Hard as it was, he had to do it. His rehab program demanded it.

“Daddy, watch me!” cried Winnie, throwing down a hard, round ball.

“Attagirl, Winner!” responded Heston, opening his eyes. He shuddered in gratitude.

Now he, Heston Demming, was an international celebrity, acclaimed the world over, and *these people* would clamor for *his* attention, for *his* respect, as he had once clamored for theirs. . He had shown them all, all the rich kids who had lorded it over him in school. He had grown up less than five miles away, on the wrong side of U.S. 41, in a modest but respectable section of town known as Lake Park. Now his servants would live in Lake Park. He would hold court on exclusive Galleon Drive, in a designer-decorated castle sequestered at the tip of the premier bight and lodged along a secluded bay-front cul-de-sac.

“We have guests arriving, Heston!” Maude called from pool deck, breaking his reverie. “They just phoned. I hate it when nosy pests drop in uninvited.”

Maude Winston Demming—strawberry-blonde, thin, and lanky—was dallying at the outdoor table in the shade of the lanai. Maude, he, and their daughter, four-year-old Winston, had just taken breakfast for the first time in their new home—egg-white omelets, fresh berries, and hot tea. Darjeeling wasn’t Johnny Walker Blue, but this morning it seemed just

as heady to him. Even his wife, a former model, had managed to nibble a few bites of solid food.

Today Heston didn't want guests any more than Maude did. He wanted to savor his kill. Swiveling full circle, he raised his hand to block the sun's glare. Gazing out at the bay, he saw light flash on the water's surface. Could it be his yacht approaching?

"Daddy! Daddy!" Winnie scampered towards him across the grass.

As his daughter reached him, he swept her up into his arms and hoisted her onto his left hip. Giggling, she pecked his face with small, dry kisses.

He laughed. "Can you see our big sailboat yet, Ladybug?" he asked her, pointing towards the sparkling water. Rubbing the sunlight from her eyes, Winnie shook her head.

"No, Daddy."

"Me neither. Not yet. But she's coming."

"Can we ride her, Daddy?"

"You betcha," said Heston, chuckling with delight. He couldn't wait to take her out. The change would be good for Win. He had been worried about his daughter lately, especially since returning home from his most recent job, shooting the ribald comedy, *Mars to Earth Men*, in Vancouver. The picture had wrapped a month ago.

What was that? He did a double-take at the bay waters, disappointed when he realized that the flash of light had been only a jet ski, reflecting the sunlight as it skimmed towards Gordon Pass, the waterway leading from Naples Bay into the open Gulf of Mexico. Restlessly, his eyes searched for the sailing ship, until Winnie's small fist pummeled his shoulder.

"Look, Daddy—peoples." Winnie pointed towards the lanai.

A Chance to Say Yes

Glancing back towards the house, Heston saw, indeed, that visitors had arrived. Maude now stood talking to a man and a woman; whom she was inviting to sit down at the outdoor table.

The svelte woman dressed in resort-casual he recognized as his ex-wife, Inez. *Who could forget that body?* During their four-year marriage, it had almost made up for her relentless willfulness. During the past week, while house-hunting in Naples, he had been keenly aware of Inez's renewed sexual interest in him.

True to form, Inez was bedecked now with gold jewelry, costly bangles which glittered, even in the shadows of the lanai. Heston recognized the dark-haired, panther-like man with her as Danny Vega, Inez's stepson, whom he had met a few times over the years. Like the smooth real-estate professionals they were, Inez and Danny sat down at the patio table and began chatting with Maude. Something—someone—was missing...*Franco.*

Heston heard Inez and Danny declining refreshments as he approached the lanai, daughter Winnie still perched on his hip. Maude waived the maid away imperiously. He hated the way his wife treated the servants, as though they were a sub-human species. He had learned the hard way that Maude lacked empathy. It was a hard quality to endure in a mate. He should have realized, early on, that her glittery, powder-blue eyes, and affect-less countenance had signaled trouble. Infatuated, and on the rebound once again from Montserrat Flynn, he had seen only vacant bliss in those rocky shallows. *What a joke.*

"Hess! Hello, my handsome ex-husband!" said Inez, rising to air-kiss his cheek. "Hello, again, precious little one," she remarked to Winnie.

Shyly, Winnie buried her face in Heston's shoulder. With a good-natured shrug, Inez sat back down and crossed her lithesome, suntanned legs.

"Good to see you, Inez. Danny." Heston grabbed Danny Vega's outstretched paw and pumped it vigorously. "Where's my son, Inez? Where's Franco?"

"At his middle school, Hess," laughed Inez. Her eyes swept over his body.

Heston knew he was in better shape now than when they'd been married. His trainer kept him in perfect condition.

"Bring him this afternoon," said Heston.

"This afternoon he has soccer practice," whined Inez. "Franco's a devotee. A real soccer fiend. Nothing interferes with his practice, not even his movie-star papa."

"Especially his movie-star papa. I want you to bring the boy around, Inez," Heston demanded sincerely. "I want to spend time with Franco. It's one of the reasons I've moved back to Naples. I want my son to see *this*. I want him to see what he is heir to. Winnie needs to know her big brother, too, don't you, sweetie-pie?"

Winnie nodded, her face still buried. He fingered her fine blonde hair. Inwardly, he hoped his bravado masked his uncertainty. He and Franco had never really *connected*. Franco made him uncomfortable. He felt the boy disliked him.

"Hey, Cuteness," growled Danny Vega to Winnie, who had peeked around cautiously. Teasingly, Danny poked a sausage-like forefinger into the girl's ribs. Winnie flashed a smile at Danny and buried her face again, giggling. Gratified, Danny sank back in his chair and stretched lazily. Slipping into a chair at table, Heston deposited Winnie onto the ground. Instantly, the child sped back onto the lawn and resumed

A Chance to Say Yes

chunking croquet balls into the thick grass.

“Beautiful. Like her mother,” Danny said, eyeing Maude cavalierly. Only the faintest smirk crossed Maude’s full lips.

Watch out, Vega. Heston had often seen his wife toy with new prey. On the other hand, maybe this cat-like man was up to the game.

“How nice of you to come,” said Maude icily to Inez. “This is lovely weather, isn’t it? For January, certainly.” Maude secured a lock of straight, pink-blonde hair behind her left ear. He could feel Maude’s irritation. Everything irritated Maude now. Her powder-blue eyes stared cool and hard as sapphires.

“We came to make sure you’d settled in properly,” Inez announced. “I also had a few more papers for you to sign.” Inez tapped the zippered portfolio case in her lap.

“We’re waiting for my new yacht,” he announced proudly. “The delivery crew’s bringing her in this morning.” He was glad his ex-wife, Inez, was here to see his winnings. It made his triumph even more glorious. *Eat this, Inez.*

Guiltily, Heston rebuked himself in silence. Curious, Danny picked up a slick brochure from the table top. A grand sailing vessel was pictured on the front page.

“*Windswept,*” said Heston, pointing to the picture.

“What a beaut” whistled Danny. “She yours?”

“She is now,” he replied, his mouth widening, his grin unstoppable. “My version was custom-built. Do you sail, Vega?”

Danny glanced at him sideways. “My sport is tennis”

Heston expanded, peacock-like. “*Windswept* is a 56-foot cruiser, an aft-cockpit ketch with three staterooms below deck, all polished brass and teak. I based her detailing on a sailing yacht I crewed during high school and college, a ketch called *Lover’s Folly*. We roamed the Caribbean Sea like pi-

rates.” He laughed, abashed. “Otherwise, she’s state-of-the-art.”

“There’s the smile the world pays to see,” observed Inez to Maude.

He stabbed Inez with a petrified grin. *Still the condescending bitch.* “Are you sure you won’t have a drink before you leave?” he asked her bluntly.

Danny raised his eyebrows and put down the brochure.

“I was paying you a compliment, Hess,” placated Inez.

“Well, it is true, Heston,” observed Maude dourly. “The world does pay to see your every move.”

“And yours,” Danny said to Maude.

“Yes,” agreed Maude arrogantly. “But not as much as it pays him. Haven’t you heard? Heston is Heaven’s Gift to the Women of Earth. Seriously. That’s the part he played in the movie he just shot. I’m not joking.”

“Enough, Maude,” Heston ordered, his jaw locked.

“I can’t wait to see it, Hess. I see all your films,” said Inez.

“Was it like that before he was a star, Inez?” asked Maude. “Did the girls come crawling out of the woodwork back then, too?”

Inez raised a penciled eyebrow. “The girls and the boys. I couldn’t keep rivals away from him. Even at his poorest, they wanted him.”

“Unlike you?” Maude said acidly.

“Inez, do you ever see Poppy Craft?” Heston asked quickly, diverting the women’s attention from the rancor of their impending cat fight. He heard the sharp intake of breath from Inez as the name registered. Three faces turned towards him.

“Poppy and I were kids together,” he explained, raising his eyebrows in feigned innocence. “Do you ever see her?”

“Why, no,” Inez said, her earrings shimmering. “Why do

you ask, Hess?”

He knew the mention of another woman had hurt Inez. He wished it had hurt Maude, too, but his second wife knew little about his past. He had never trusted her enough to share himself, and she had never cared enough to ask.

Danny snapped to attention. “You mean Poppy Craft-Talbot, the local art dealer?” he asked pointedly. “She’s the only Poppy I know.”

Inez glared at her stepson, but managed to tame her frown.

Amused, Heston sensed that Danny relished his stepmother’s discomfort.

“Oh, yes, I know *of* her—but I rarely run across her,” Inez lied, admiring her own nails.

Heston’s pulse raced. “You talk to Poppy sometimes? Where is she? How can I get in touch with her?” he demanded. He would make peace with himself or die trying. This was just another step on that road.

“Poppy owns a gallery at The Village on Venetian Bay. It’s called Poppy Wallace Fine Art. How I know? She’s my best-babe Sasha’s best girlfriend,” Danny explained.

“I need to talk to Poppy,” Heston said. “I need to look her up next. For the same reason I looked you up, Inez. To make reparations. Of course, I was also looking for the best real estate agent in Naples. You’re good. I’ll give you your due.”

“I’m damned good,” Inez fired back. Cattily, she leaned forward and said in a confidential tone, “Everyone in town knows you treated the Craft girl shabbily, Heston. You do owe the poor dear a few kind words. She’s in a loveless marriage, you know, with a humdrum accountant, a great oaf of a Texan. He’s long on security, but short on *va-va-voom*.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Worse, she’s barren. Life has been less than kind to the poor, homely thing.”

“You’re all heart, as usual, Inez,” he observed wryly, his heart twisting inside him.

“Poppy’s okay, Heston. Ignore this blather. So you’re on the wagon, eh, man?” Danny asked him, out of the blue. Scandalized, the two women snickered at one another, rolling their eyes. “What? I read it in the Star,” Danny glowered hotly.

“The whole world knows my business,” grumbled Heston, throwing up his hands.

“Daddy, look!” cried Winnie, pointing, from out on the lawn. “Big boat coming!”

“Oooh, Hess!” squealed Inez insincerely as *Windswept* motored into view. “She’s divine!”

“Yep! That’s the word for her, Inez. Divine,” he radiated, as he and Danny charged down to the dock. Taking Winnie reluctantly by the hand, Maude meandered across the grass lawn, while Inez high-stepped prissily behind the two men, the unneeded pouch of papers tucked beneath her arm.

Heston’s heart raced at the sight of his yacht’s billowing sails. *Windswept* was beautiful—tall, elegant, magnificent in her potential mastery of the sea. Closing his eyes, he recalled the thrill of riding the high seas when he had taken her for a stormy test sail only days earlier in Fort Lauderdale. Now he was welcoming the vessel to her permanent home.

Gathering at water’s edge, the spellbound party watched as the gleaming vessel glided towards them, across the bay waters and motored into the slip. *Windswept*’s wide deck was white; her long hull, navy blue. Feverishly, Heston watched the delivery crew secure her moorings. He had hired two crew members of his own, both of whom were also on board.

A Chance to Say Yes

Taking possession of the adventure ship was the culmination of Heston's lifelong fantasy—one of them, at any rate. Only winning the heart of Montserrat Flynn, the Irish-Catalan beauty who had eluded him since youth, could have given him greater satisfaction.



Twenty-four hours later, three miles to the north, Poppy Craft-Talbot entered the door of Rainbow's, and her world exploded.

"Hey, Poppy! Have you heard the news?" cried perky Cookie Lee, waving from behind the counter of her popular, upscale coffee shop. Rainbow's on Fifth—known simply as Rainbow's by the affluent year-rounders—was the caffeine hub of downtown Naples.

"What news?" Poppy asked, cocking her head brightly.

"Your old boyfriend—that movie star, Heston Demming—the one you dated in high school, remember? He's moved back to town! Can you believe it? I've been waiting for you come in, just so I could tell you!" Cookie's golden ringlets danced as she chattered. "Want your usual latte, Poppy?"

Instinctively, Poppy nodded 'yes,' but she could not utter a sound. Her mouth was suddenly sandpaper. Her cheeks flamed. Her heart was pounding a hole in her chest. Customers in the coffee bar swirled into pinwheels of color. Melting before her eyes was the life she had built for herself, so painstakingly, over the past twenty years. Heston Demming *couldn't* be coming back into her life again. *He just couldn't be.*

"Fat-free milk, right, Poppy?" she heard Cookie bleat loudly from somewhere. She heard a strange, breathless swooshing noise as Cookie frothed milk in the steamer. Out-

side, a siren screamed down Fifth Avenue South, the scream echoing in Poppy's ears like past secrets racing back to haunt her.

"Uh-huh," Poppy heard herself utter. Her body felt numb yet bruised, as if the police car tearing past had crashed the window of Rainbow's coffee bar and run her down. Her legs quivered beneath her.

"The sugar's over there. Oh, you don't use sugar. I forgot," beamed Cookie, shoving a hot paper cup filled with espresso and steamed milk under Poppy's nose. Poppy arms wouldn't move, any more than her mouth would form words.

"Say, I like your new hair cut. Chin-length is good on you. Poppy! Hey, girl! Wake up!" snapped Cookie cheerily, setting the cup down on the counter. "I have other customers. That'll be three dollars and 18 cents, please ma'am." A few of the patrons tittered.

"Oh, of course," blurted Poppy, surprised to hear words coming from deep inside her own throat. Her cheeks burned. Somehow, she found her arm and hands.

Fumbling through her straw bag, she felt the sharp edge of her plastic debit card. Grasping the card, she tried to swipe it through the machine on the counter but could not locate the slot. The intense odor of old coffee grounds hung heavily in the small shop. Her stomach lurched.

It must be a mistake. Why would Heston move back to Naples? Heston Demming was rich and famous now. He could live anywhere he wanted, anywhere in the world.

"Here, let me," said Cookie, grabbing the card from Poppy. Expertly, Cookie ran the card through the machine, and dropped it back into Poppy's open purse. Poppy's stomach flip-flopped ominously as she watched the simple action.

Fingers trembling, she managed to grasp the paper cup on

A Chance to Say Yes

the counter. She lifted the jiggling cup to her dry mouth. She gagged as the liquid touched her lips. Her fingers slackened. The warm cup slipped from her fingers, plopping onto the floor. Hot, milky, pale-brown liquid splashed across her slim ankles. The shock brought her back to reality.

“I’m sorry, Cookie,” she croaked to the server, who quickly rounded the counter and soaked up the spill.

“Forget it, kid,” said Cookie, her face worried. “It’s my own fault. I upset you. I didn’t mean to upset you. I shouldn’t have dropped that bombshell on you. I should have warned you up first. Like a teapot.”

Dazed, Poppy watched from on high as Cookie dabbed a paper napkin against her wet ankles. Milky liquid stained her flat taupe sandals.

“Ruined in an instant—like my life,” Poppy whispered.

“What’s that?” asked Cookie, grabbing hold of the counter’s edge and hopping to her feet. “Would you like another latte—on the house?”

“No...no...thank you, Cookie. Caffeine isn’t what I need right now.”

Cookie nodded her curly head. “Ask me, what you need is a stiff drink, honey,” she said compassionately.

“At 10 a.m.?” Poppy eyed the wall clock above the counter. What she needed was to escape the building. *Right away.* Her churning gut urged her towards the front door of the shop. Her skin felt clammy.

“Too early for that apple-tini, eh? Well, you got a credit here anytime,” Cookie said kindly.

Somehow, Poppy’s feet began to walk. Her fingers found the glass front door. Placing her hand on the cool pane, she steadied herself. She had to ask one question.

“Cookie,” Poppy ventured, “How do you know Heston is

coming home? I thought he had settled in California or Aspen or somewhere.” Her stomach was a cyclone. But she *had* to know.

Cookie chewed her plump lower lip before answering. “Oh, honey. I saw him. He was in here day before yesterday. I talked to him. See? He autographed this menu for me. I’m gonna have it framed.” The spidery black words would not focus. The print ran before Poppy’s eyes. Droplets of dew beaded her upper lip.

Cookie continued. “He was here with his new wife. You know, that gorgeous supermodel—she’s an actress now—Maude what’s-her-name, Winston, that’s it, skinny as a rail, and, if you can believe this, they were both in here with Heston’s *first* wife, Inez, the one who still lives here in town, that go-getter real-estate broker you can’t stand. Both wives at once! Pretty cozy, eh? Oh, honey, I’m sorry. They all ordered cappuccinos. They sat right out there on the sidewalk, at that very table, everybody asking for his autograph. Seems Inez has been showing him—and his new wife—swank homes all over Port Royal. For the past week. They say he bought one.”

Bought one? “I thought Inez hated Heston,” said Poppy, eyelids fluttering involuntarily.

“You know that gal,” shrugged Cookie. “Anything for a buck. You look sick, honey. Let me help you sit down.”

“No, please!” Poppy was absorbing the truth. He had come back. Her whole being screamed for escape. Thank Heaven it was Monday. Her gallery was closed on Mondays. She could go home, crawl into bed, pull the covers over her head, and have a good cry. She might even have that stiff drink Cookie prescribed. James would never know or care or bluster about her lack of responsibility. He had moved out three months ago.

A Chance to Say Yes

“I’m sorry, Poppy,” she heard Cookie say.

Pushing open the front door, Poppy found herself on the sidewalk. The impact of hot, humid air increased her nausea. Clinging to the wall, she edged around the side of the brick building into the back parking lot. Within seconds, she lost her breakfast yogurt into an open trash bin.



Heston Demming. Even his name made her weak.

Later that day, alone in her seventh-floor condo at Solar-marina, a high-rise on Vanderbilt Beach, Poppy lay sprawled across her queen-sized bed, her tense muscles relaxing. She had recovered her equilibrium, although the thought of eating still made her queasy. Now sipping a margarita, she savored the salty-sweet lime taste. Maybe the salt was from her tears. Her fingers wiped warm wetness from her eyelashes. Through sliding-glass doors, her raw eyes watched the blue-green Gulf of Mexico. Images of the past flooded her mind.

She saw Heston in the senior class play, a star even then, as he stole the show. She saw Heston, at high-school graduation, tall and handsome and silly-looking in his cap and gown. She saw him, home from college, standing on the beach, the legs of his trousers rolled up, his bare feet deep in wet sand, a loose cotton shirt hanging from his broad shoulders, the warm sun highlighting his wind-tossed brown hair with a golden halo. She saw him, in the dark, shadowy cabin of the sailboat, his muscular young body nude from the waist up, his face ice-hot with the glow of desire, his silver-gray eyes yearning for her touch. She felt him inside her, up against her, his heavy weight across her chest, his thrusting desire, telling her over and over again that she was the only girl he would ever love.

She tasted his kiss...

Warm rivulets ran down her cheeks. She heard herself sobbing. Her round chest heaved. She gasped for air to fuel the heaving sobs. Her nose clogged. Placing her glass on the rattan bedside table, she clutched the ball of tissue in her hand and brought it to her nose. She blew her nose between sobs. After a time, her sobs subsided.

Bundling into a fetal position, Poppy laid quietly, her cheek pressed against a tear-soaked pillow. If only she hadn't listened to her Uncle Mel. She would give anything for another chance, a chance to live her life over again, a chance to say yes to Heston Demming's proposal of marriage. *Oh, so many years ago now...*

If only Heston hadn't met Montserrat Flynn that very night, twenty years earlier. Such a hideous quirk of fate. *Whatever happened to Montserrat?* She pondered hazily. *Why hadn't Heston married that girl? Why had he married Inez Greco instead?* Gratefully, Poppy savored the last drops of the lemon-lime liquid. Soon the images swam together, and she sank into the troubled sea of sleep. That night she dreamed Heston had uncovered her long-kept secret. She awoke in a sweat at dawn.



At work the next morning, Poppy's head throbbed. Her eyes felt stale and puffy as dried marshmallows. Even wet tea bags had failed to reduce the swelling. In spite of her misery, Poppy located her cell phone and dialed. Morning light had brought new clarity. Maybe Cookie had made a mistake. Maybe it simply wasn't true. Maybe Heston was just here on vacation. She was determined to know the truth about her old

A Chance to Say Yes

flame's return. There was only one way to find out. Go directly to the horse's mare.

A generic receptionist's voice answered the phone. "Good morning. Regal Properties. How may we serve you today?"

Poppy responded. "I'd like to speak to Inez Greco—I mean, Inez Vega, please."

"Whom may I say is calling?"

"Tell her it's Poppy Craft-Talbot. She's known me since high-school. It's a personal call, not business."

"One moment, please." Bland piano music tinkled for a few seconds and then clicked off. A mature woman's voice, sultry and throaty, with the faintest hint of an accent, came through the speaker.

"Poppy, dear. Inez Vega here. How are you? It has been ages." Inez pronounced her name "EEE-ness," even though, legally, she had Anglicized the spelling. Aloud, Poppy responded in kind.

"Hello, Inez. I'm fine, thanks. I wanted to ask you something. S-Something personal."

"Oh?"

Poppy's throat constricted. She could feel the spite in Inez's tone. Inez knew why she had called. Poppy's whole face heated. She wanted to crawl into a hole and die. But she *had* to be sure.

"Yes. I wanted to ask you about...about..." The words wouldn't form.

"About Heston?" said Inez smugly.

So it is true. "Yes, Inez. It's true? He's moved back home to Naples?" Poppy heard a dainty cough, then a vindictive smile.

"Yes, Poppy, dear, it's true. Heston signed a contract. A few days ago. He's purchased a turnkey mansion in Port Royal—a grand, yellow British-Colonial winter home on Galleon

Drive. It has everything—indoor pool, gym, tennis courts, a dock and yacht slip, with Gulf access. An eight-figure deal. Frankly, I'm in heaven," Inez bragged.

"I see," mumbled Poppy, her heart sinking. For years the premiere Naples neighborhood—until newer, outlying developments began to compete for status—bay-front Port Royal was themed on Jamaica's famed port city of the same name. Street names reflected its pirate and British Navy associations: Spyglass Lane, Rum Row, Captain's Walk, Admiralty Parade, Galleon Drive. The Port Royal Club, which fronted the Gulf of Mexico, was a local social zenith.

"Heston's rich now, Poppy, rich beyond his wildest dreams, blast him! It should have been mine. At least I'll make a big commission on the sale. Frankly, I was shocked when he looked me up last week."

Poppy winced. This was how she remembered Inez, as money-mad. She could just picture Inez now—cropped dark hair, svelte body, short skirt, golden earrings—sitting in her plush office. She let Inez ramble on. *It doesn't matter now*. The worst was true. Now what? Poppy's stomach dropped to her feet. Her skin flushed hot and cold. Thank goodness she didn't have to look Inez in the eye.

Inez prattled into her ear. "You just missed him as matter of fact. I could have handed him the phone. You could have chatted directly with your old playmate not ten minutes ago. He and Maude just left my office. Last minute details. You know how it is. Before the purchase, they were staying, along with their *precious* daughter, Winnie, an absolutely stunning child, by the way, as is my Frankie—Anyway, they were staying at the Ritz-Carlton. But the happy family took possession two days ago. As for me, Poppy dear, I ordered a bottle of Dom and carried it home. Rogelio and I celebrated our little

A Chance to Say Yes

hearts out.”

Inez’s dagger missed her mark. Poppy inhaled deeply and then said evenly, “I already know about Heston’s wife and daughter, Inez. I saw Winnie’s photo in a fan magazine last month. I was under the drier at the hairdresser’s. Otherwise, I never read that trash. Haven’t for years.”

Inez regrouped. “Who does your hair, dear? Toner will take the brassiness out of red. Of course, the blinding color keeps people from noticing that your eyes are too far apart.”

Poppy bridled. “Really, Inez...”

“When I saw you at the Parade of Homes last year, your hair seemed so—vivid”

“At least my hair color is natural,” spat Poppy.

“No gray yet? It won’t be long now, dear, will it?”

“Oh, Inez, please! I don’t want to trade insults with you. I heard a rumor, and I wanted to ask you about it. That’s all.”

“Poppy, who told you about Heston’s return?” Inez quizzed nosily.

“None of your business.”

“And why do you care?” Inez grilled.

“I...uh...” stuttered Poppy. “I don’t care. I was just curious.”

“Don’t worry, Poppy, dear. Your secret is safe with me. After all, who could blame you? Carrying a torch for our Hess all these years, even after he dumped you at the altar. He was a hell of a lay. Even I will admit that.”

“He didn’t dump me at the altar, Inez,” retorted Poppy hotly.

“As good as,” said Inez snidely. “He never married you. Heston did marry me, Poppy, dear. What’s more, I bore him a son.”

“How is young Franco?” asked Poppy with exaggerated

civility. Her fingernails dug into the chair cushion. Her teeth clenched in her mouth.

”Doing quite well, thank you. Franco’s team leads his youth-soccer league—because of Franco. The boy’s a genius when it comes to soccer. We hope he’ll be tracked to the Olympics, then turn pro. Franco will be 13 next August. We’ll be making major decisions about his future then. Heston has promised to come and watch Frankie play. He’ll want to be in on the decision-making, naturally.”

Poppy’s heart leaped into her throat. *Heston’s son a professional athlete? What a thought.* “Well, I wish Franco the best of luck,” said Poppy earnestly. “I’m sure you and Rogelio—and Heston—are very proud of him.” Her heart skipped two beats. This subject came too close to the quick. She wanted to hang up.

”I like your husband, Rogelio,” Poppy said to Inez, desperate to change the subject. “He comes in to my gallery every now and then and buys an artwork. He has good taste—in art.”

”Some of his tastes are too vulgar for me,” said Inez, suddenly frigid. “I prefer the classics.”

Poppy understood the dig. Rogelio Vega had made no secret of his attraction to Poppy. Whenever he ventured into the gallery, Rogelio Vega flirted outrageously with her. A married woman, Poppy had fended off Rogelio’s advances tactfully—so far. Lately, now that Poppy was separated from James Talbot, her doting husband of ten years, Rogelio had become more persistent in his pursuit.

To needle Inez, Poppy decided on a little payback. “Inez, your stepson Danny is dating my girl friend, Sasha. I’ll bet you knew that already since Danny still lives at home. Frankly, I doubt if Danny could keep secrets from you, even if he

A Chance to Say Yes

tried. You seem to know everything about everyone.” *Almost.*

“A good saleswoman keeps her ear to the ground,” agreed Inez candidly. “Your little friend is too old for my Danny. I’ve told him so, more than once. He’s only 27. She’s 35 if she’s a day—and paunchy.”

“She’s 33—and voluptuous,” corrected Poppy, fencing. “Anyway, so what? Sasha says Danny prefers older women.” *Maybe you’re just jealous, Inez.*

Danny’s visage flashed into Poppy’s mind. Bad-boy Danny Vega was a hunk and a half, a younger, meaner, scarier version of his debonair father, Rogelio. Inez saw Danny every day, at home and at work. No woman could be around Danny Vega for long and *not* be affected by his animal appeal.

Striking back, Inez swung hard. “Older is better? How is *your* husband, the dodderingly dull accountant? Jimbo, isn’t it? Jumbo?”

Breath exhaled slowly from Poppy’s nostrils. “I believe James is fine, Inez.”

Poppy heard the snide smile again. “I heard he left you,” said Inez. “Poppy, you should have had children with him. Why on earth didn’t you?” The thrust hit home.

“I didn’t want children with James, Inez!” cried Poppy defensively, leaping up from her desk “I didn’t want children, period. I never, ever wanted children, do you understand me? Like this is any of your business.” Pain shot through her arm as the side of her fist hit the desk top.

Inez countered. “But surely your husband wanted children, Poppy, dear. All men do, eventually. If you’d had a family, you wouldn’t be trapped in the past, still longing for a man who doesn’t love you and never did. Do yourself a favor, dear. Go find your dowdy husband, Jimbo, and make a baby with him. You’re still on the good side of 40. Do it before

your red hair does go mousy gray.”

Poppy sputtered into the phone. “W-where do you get off saying things like that? You know darn well you’re the same age as I am. How a nice man like Rogelio Vega puts up with you, Inez, I don’t know.”

“Rogelio adores me, Poppy. My marriage is ideal. It’s everything a woman could wish for.”

“In your dreams, Inez.” *Be careful.*

“You are barren—aren’t you? I told Hess you are,” Inez jabbed. “Even if you aren’t...”

“You told him *what?*”

“Was I indiscreet? Sorry.”

“Be sorry for yourself, Inez, I’m not falling for your sales pitch. And I’m not going to dignify your nastiness with a response. This conversation is over.” Poppy threw down the phone. Furious, she drummed her fingers on the desktop. Calming down, she retrieved her cell phone and dialed another number.

“Hello, Sasha?” she cried, as a familiar female voice answered. “I need to talk to you! I need to tell you something really impor...!”

But it was only the answering machine. When the beep sounded, she demanded, “Sasha, pick up. Pick up!” When there was no response, she rang off, dissatisfied.

Collapsing into her desk chair, she waited, lost. The energy drained from her body. Her pale face contorted. She sat at her desk and sobbed for a few moments. Thank goodness her partner, Wallace, hadn’t arrived for work yet.

This is foolish. Standing slowly, she smoothed the creases in her flowing gray-silk skirt and hobbled to the front door of the gallery. She exited onto the gray-cement sidewalk outside. Blinking back the sunlight, she gulped a few deep breaths of

A Chance to Say Yes

fresh air. It was beautiful day, cooler than yesterday—another perfect warm, winter day in the wealthy, tucked-away resort city, once known to locals as Naples-On-The-Gulf. The moniker still lingered in local memory as the call letters of radio station, WNOG. No wonder “snowbirds,” the year-rounders’ term for winter visitors, flocked here from the North in wintertime to escape snow and ice.

Putting a hand to her chest, Poppy tried to focus on the present moment. Warm ripples of sunshine caressed her skin gently. Crisp early-morning air filled her nostrils. Azure skies domed overhead. Giant puffs of white cloud hung aloft, like heavenly mobiles suspended over an earthly crib.

Crib? Why had that image come to mind? She shuddered in spite of the sun’s warmth. She needed to talk to Sasha. She needed to talk to someone. She feared she might panic. Alone, she couldn’t carry the guilt, the remorse, much longer. Restlessly, her eyes roamed her posh surroundings. Conceivably, she *could* make the twenty-minute drive back down to Fifth Avenue and confide in coffee-maven Cookie Lee; but Cookie was a blabbermouth. Poppy knew she would live to regret such a moment of weakness.

Behind Poppy, as she stood weighing her options, rose the Italianate architecture of The Village on Venetian-Bay. Soaked in sunshine, the mall’s thick, multi-colored stucco walls lined the immaculate sidewalk. Its two cupola-topped towers were roofed by undulating coral-colored Spanish tiles. Numerous tall picture windows displayed the expensive wares of the mall’s luxury shops, including those of Poppy Wallace Fine Art.

Across the parking lot lay the street, the elegant, palm-lined Gulfshore Boulevard North, and beyond the boulevard stood a row of towering beachfront condominiums. These

massive light-colored buildings lined the Park-Shore stretch of Gulf-of-Mexico coastline. Even now Poppy viewed them in amazement. The barrier island had been only partially developed when Poppy and Heston had been children in grade school together.

When Poppy's parents had perished in a crash, she had moved from Lake Park to her prosperous uncle's ranch-style home on Putter Point Court in The Moorings. She had been twelve at the time. She and Heston had ceased to be next-door neighbors then, but they still hung out together every day in middle school. Heston had given her her first cigarette. He had given her her first everything.

People change. Have I changed? Has Heston?

Naples had once been a hamlet haven for the super-rich. However, since Heston had fled his hometown twenty years earlier in search of fortune, fame, and adventure, Naples had grown into a wealthy-man's metropolis. No wonder he felt the need to return home and flaunt his new wealth and celebrity. It was what he had always wanted to do, anyway. What better place to do it? What better time? Naples was Conspicuous Consumption Central.

Truly, Poppy couldn't blame Heston for coming home. She only wanted to avoid him. But could she? In spite of its growth, Naples was still a very small town. Her conversation with Inez Vega had proved that to be true. The question was—could she avoid seeing him, socially or accidentally? She would be afraid to walk the sidewalks. However she might squirm, Poppy felt a net tightening around her.

Chapter 2

Sasha Bassett heard the phone ring and heard the answer machine pick up. Hearing her best friend Poppy's voice leaving a message, Sasha rolled back into bed and wrapped her shapely, suntanned arm around Danny Vega's six-pack abs. Snuggling her buxom body against his mass of sleepy, warm muscle, she forgot phones existed. She knew nothing but the nearness of her man.

Danny Vega's musky scent permeated her entire being. She never wanted to be separated from him—never, never, never! She wanted this moment to last for eternity. Hugging Danny tightly, she felt him stirring from sleep. Any moment

now the alarm would go off. he would awaken, take her, and then leave her lying alone, in her own bedroom, in her own dreary little apartment in Coco Palms. She would lie there, and the bed would grow cold, and she would start to ache again from missing him. If only they were married, she wouldn't be alone.

For the moment—this one sweet moment—she savored the sound of Danny's deep, regular breathing. If only this man needed her the way she needed him. Softly, she kissed the back of his head. Her lips pressed his silky, dark hair. Her fingers traced the tiger tattoo between his shoulder blades.

The alarm clock buzzed. Groaning, Danny Vega thrust out a hand, slapping the "off" button of the bedside clock. Rolling over, he pulled himself on top of her and engulfed her in a loose embrace. "Hey, baby," he mumbled, gazing down at her sleepily.

She beheld Danny's face with awe. She loved his face. She stroked the bristly black stubble on his square jaw. Still half asleep, Danny kissed her cleft chin and nestled down against her voluminous chest. *Please never let this end*, Sasha begged the Fates. For a moment, Danny's lips toyed with her left nipple. Then, as he dozed again, she softly stroked his hair. Once more, the alarm buzzed.

Jostling her, Danny abruptly sat up in bed. Ripping the electric cord from its socket, he slammed the digital clock against the far wall. Her key-lime-green parrot, Gabby, fluttered fearfully in its ornate white-metal cage. The bird, an Amazon Spectacled Parrot, was six inches tall, with scarlet "spectacle" markings around her alert eyes and a blue-and-white tuft on top of her tiny head.

"Pretty bird," said Gabby, vying for her mistress's attention.

A Chance to Say Yes

“Son of a bitch,” Danny groaned. Pulling one leg from beneath the white eyelet comforter, Danny placed a sock foot down onto the mauve carpet.

“Wait...” Sasha pleaded, reaching out a hand. Danny smiled warmly down at her. “Gotta make it quick,” he said. “Meeting clients at ten. Inez’ll be pissed as hell if I’m late.” With a growl, he scooped her into his muscular arms.



Three hours later, Sasha returned Poppy’s phone call.

“Hi, Pops,” she said dreamily. “It’s me. What’s up?” She was still languishing in bed, although she was now alone. Satiated, she had been drifting in and out of sleep.

“A lot, Sash,” said Poppy nervously.

“Tell me. I’ve got time. It’s my day off,” she sighed. “You sound upset,” she added, plumping the pillows behind her head.

“I am very upset,” replied Poppy through the cell.

“Why?”

“Sasha, I’ve heard some unbelievable news.”

“Oh, yeah? What?”

“I-It’s just incredible,” stammered Poppy.

“What is it?” she demanded, slapping the mattress with the palm of her diminutive hand.

“Are you alone?”

“Yes, for heaven’s sake. Danny’s out showing property.” She heard Poppy draw air into her lungs.

“Okay, Sasha. Here goes. He’s back.”

She guessed what was coming. Danny had told her about Inez’s big sale. But she let Poppy get it out.

“Sash, Heston Demming is moving back to town.”

Clearing her throat, Sasha explained. “Oh, Poppy, I heard already. A couple of days ago, Inez phoned Danny here. She told him she’d sold Heston Demming a waterfront mansion in Port Royal. Danny says Inez hit the jackpot. He says it was a double-dipper. She had the listing, too. Danny’s pretty worked up about the sale himself. Even though he won’t see any of the commission, their firm will. Poppy, I was going to call you and tell you this morning,” she said. “Honest.”

“Whatever. I believe you. Listen, Sash, you know what’s strange? Ever since you started dating Inez’s stepson six months ago, I’ve felt Heston’s presence creeping back into my life. And now, here he is. And the feeling is growing stronger.” She heard the anguish in Poppy’s voice.

“Yeah, nothing’s more embarrassing than seeing old lovers you want to avoid. Believe me, I know. Oh, maybe it won’t be so bad, Poppy. Maybe it won’t even matter. You may never even see Heston at all. Unless you want to.”

“Of course I don’t want to!” cried Poppy.

Was there still feeling there? Most definitely. She tucked this knowledge away for future scrutiny. “I don’t understand why you’re so upset,” she said to Poppy, playing a hunch. “You’ve never told me the whole story. All I know is what little you’ve told me. I know you and Heston grew up together here in Naples, and I know he was your boyfriend in high school, and that he went away to college. But that’s all I really know. You would never tell me anything else,” she prodded. *But I do know you’re hiding something. I can feel it.*

“You really want to know?” asked Poppy.

“Yeah!” she cried. “Cross my heart, I won’t tell a soul. Tell me, Poppy.”

A beat of silence. “One night he proposed to me.”

Sashes felt her jaw unhinge. “Heston Demming proposed

A Chance to Say Yes

marriage to you? And what exactly did you say?"

"Nothing. That was the whole problem. I said *nothing*." Poppy confessed.

She sat upright in bed. "Wait a minute, Poppy. Let me get this straight. When you were in high school --"

"And Heston was a freshman in college," added Poppy.

"Heston Demming proposed marriage to you, and you said nothing," she repeated, incredulous.

"That's right," Poppy affirmed sheepishly

"Oh, yeah?" exhaled Sasha, flopping back down in her bed. *What kind of an idiot is this woman?* "So what happened? You just let him get away?" she said aloud.

"Yes." Poppy's voice sounded small and far away.

"Oh, Poppy!"

"I know. I'm an idiot. At my seventeenth birthday party, Heston asked me to marry him—down on one knee, in front of everybody—after I'd graduated high school. Sasha, I was shocked. I hemmed and hawed. You know how I am. I do that when I get nervous."

"Yeah," she acknowledged. She'd seen Poppy tongue-tied over a dinner menu.

"Heston asked me to think about it," Poppy went on. "I nodded. Then he kissed me and went back to the party."

"Kissed you how?"

"Deeply."

"Yeah?"

"Thirty minutes later that hippie heartbreaker, Montserrat Flynn blew in the door on a cloud of reefer smoke. None of us knew her. She was someone's date—a band member, I think."

"What was this chick's name?"

"Montserrat. Montsey, they called her. I think it's a Catalan name."

“A what?”

“It’s a part of Spain . She was a foreign-exchange student. For Heston, it was lust at first sight. From that moment on, he was under that girl’s spell. I never heard from him again after that night, Sasha. I’ve never spoken to him since. He went back to college in Miami. Friends told me he was dating Montsey, that they were inseparable. That’s the last I heard of Heston, until six years later, when I read in the local newspaper that he’d married Inez Greco in Miami. Even then I never saw him because he and Inez lived on the east coast after they married. Inez only moved back to Naples after she divorced Heston and married Rogelio Vega.” Poppy sighed. “Sash, am I telling you more than you wanted to know?”

“Hardly,” she breathed. “Rogelio and Inez are my future in-laws, I hope. What can I say?”

“That I’m a fool,” said Poppy, tears in her voice.

“Come on now. Pull yourself together, girl. Did you love Heston back then?” she asked carefully. Her open mouth went dry as she waited for Poppy’s reply.

“Yes. No. I don’t know...” said Poppy, confused.

“You were crazy about Heston Demming, weren’t you?” Sasha baited eagerly.

“Maybe I was. But I got over it,” said Poppy.

Not likely. For a moment, silence hung heavily. Then she heard Poppy’s voice tremble

“There’s more, Sasha.”

“More? You mean, something else you haven’t told me?” she demanded, rising to her knees on the mattress.

“Uh-huh. Something I’ve never told anyone.”

“What is it? Tell me, Poppy!”

“No, I can’t!” All of a sudden, Poppy’s tone became guarded.

A Chance to Say Yes

“Why not?”

She heard Poppy whisper into the phone, “Because Wallace just walked in. I’ll call you back later, Sash.”

“Wait!” She heard the phone go dead. Grasping her cell, her finger jabbed the redial key. Just then, her cell rang.

“Hello?” she cried, thinking Poppy had redialed.

“Hey, Ma-mah,” she heard Danny’s smooth voice croon. Shifting gears, Sasha dropped back down into the bed and cuddled coily beneath the bedcovers.

“Hey, yourself, Tiger,” she purred. Danny made a growling noise, then chuckled, pleased. “No time for that, babe,” he said. “I’m still showing property.”

“How’s it going?” she asked.

“Ohio Looky-Loos. I’ll dump ‘em at dinner. But, Babe, I’ll be tied up this afternoon. No time for tennis with sexy little you. Hey, did I tell you what I did yesterday? Last night, we got hot and heavy pretty fast, you and me. No chance to talk, you know? So yesterday morning I went over to Heston’s new house with Inez. Claimed she had papers for him to sign. My stepmom is no fool. Hey, what a showplace!. The movie-star biz pays good.”

“Couldn’t she have faxed them?” she asked, her lip curling in irony.

“Sure, but then why visit? Nah, Inez is sticking her nose in, and I’m sticking mine in, too. Wanted to see the great star’s new digs—and meet his sexy, supermodel wife. What a knockout Maude Winston is. Just like her magazine covers. Cold as a witch’s tit, but who cares.”

Incensed, Sasha saw green. “Ooh, she sounds awful. Why did you bother, Danny? You’ve met Heston before, right? Lots of times?”

“Yeah, sure, babe. Heston Demming is my kid brother’s

old man. I've met Demming once or twice, over the years. Let me tell you—Demming has not been the ideal father, if you know what I mean. Schmuck ignores Franco. Has for years. Sends the kid birthday presents and Inez child support, but that's it. Don't think he'll be winning Dad of the Year anytime soon."

She made a move. "I agree that being a father is an important job," she said seriously. She heard an intake of breath on Danny's end.

"Don't start that rap with me again, Sasha. I've told you over and over again. I do want to be with you right now. But I am not ready for fatherhood."

She began, "Danny..."

Danny interrupted her. "You took your pill this morning, right? I don't want no surprises coming my way, if you know what I mean. Don't try springing any brats on me, Sasha. I am not ready for marriage. End of story. Got it?"

"Yeah," she said. "I got it. Yeah, I took my pill this morning, Danny."

"As long as we're clear," said Danny, suddenly charming again. "I hurt people who cross me, Sasha. You don't want to be one of those, babe, do you?"

"No. I don't."

"Okay, well, look, I'll call you later. Maybe we can grab a bite or something."

"Okay."

"Ciao, Bella."

"Bye, Danny."

She turned off the phone. She felt her face contort. A wail rose up inside her empty womb. What would she tell her mother?

Portly, post-menopausal Tonya Bassett constantly nagged

A Chance to Say Yes

her daughter about catching a respectable man and producing a grandchild. She was her mother's only hope. However, at 33, Sasha had learned that willing, eligible men didn't grow on trees. If she was ever going to be a mom at all, she knew she must become pregnant—and soon. Unfortunately, marriage was part of Tonya's master plan for her daughter. As far as Tonya was concerned, a sperm bank was out of the question. She had swooned and taken to her bed once when Sasha had brought up the subject.

If only...

As much as she loved Danny Vega, she was forced to face reality. Danny didn't want her. And she didn't want to anger him by insisting. She'd seen Danny ignite once too often. She would have to look elsewhere for a suitable mate. But where? To whom? Most of the men she knew were already taken. There must be *someone*.

Pouting, she rolled over in bed. She watched the sunbeams pouring in through the window panes. Like particles of dust, her thoughts danced dreamily amongst the rays of light.

So Poppy and the movie idol had been a serious item as teenagers. Well, well, well. She wondered if Inez Vega knew that—or Danny, even. She wondered if James Talbot knew it. *I doubt it.*

What else is Poppy hiding? She had long suspected Poppy of nursing a deep, dark secret. Obviously, Heston's proposal was part of that secret. Maybe his return would force Poppy to spill the beans.

Yawning and stretching, Sasha decided to think about it later. Crushing Danny's pillow case against her face, she devoured the lingering scent of her macho lover. She might wear another man's name, she might bear another man's child, but she would never love anyone but wild man Danny Vega. In its nearby cage, the bird, Gabby screamed heartily, still hoping

for its owner's attention.



Entering the art gallery, Wallace noticed his business partner's red-rimmed eyes right away. Tall and bald, Wallace sidled up to Poppy and placed his large hand upon her slim shoulder. He squeezed it to the bone.

"You've been crying, little girl," he said.

She tried to avoid the man's questioning eyes. Today her life seemed foreign to her. So much had changed since yesterday.

"Leave me alone, Wallace," she said, shrugging his hand away.

"Well, I don't have to ask what you did on *your* day off," Wallace quipped, running the hand over his shiny shaved head, then sliding a forefinger under his brush-like moustache. Poppy knew this gesture by heart. She had seen him make it hundreds of times since they had opened Poppy Wallace Fine Art together three years earlier. "Looks like you cried all night long."

"Let's limit our conversation to business, if you don't mind," Poppy pleaded brusquely.

"Not at all, Cruella," said Wallace, feigning huffiness. "If you don't want to tell me what's wrong, don't."

"Stop it, Wally. Please." Poppy placed the palm of her hand against her hot forehead. Hammers were pounding both her temples. She would kill for a pain reliever.

"If you'll stop snapping at me like a sea tortoise, I might even bring you a latte," Wallace offered. The woodsy scent of male cologne now hung in the cool, indoor air. It made her headache worse.

A Chance to Say Yes

“No thanks,” said Poppy, shuffling through the papers on her desk. Just the thought of a latte made her stomach turn. Alas, she knew Wally would quiz her until she surrendered. He meant well but nagged doggedly. That very characteristic helped him sell lots of art.

Wallace rose to his feet, stretched, and yawned. “Have it your way, partner. Business-wise, here’s what’s happening: *Le artiste* Cedric Spicer’s paintings will be arriving by van sometime tomorrow morning.” Wally reached into his pocket and extracted some folded papers. “Here’s the printout for his opening. It’s almost ready to be proofed. We may add a couple of pieces. Clear your calendar, girl. Cedric will grace us with his presence at any moment. He text-messaged me. He wants to meet you.”

“Where’s he staying?” asked Poppy, searching her desk drawers.

“At the Hideaway Bed and Breakfast— that spa in Old Naples—near the city dock.”

“He didn’t want to stay nearer to us? Somewhere north of town? The Ritz-Carlton? The Naples Grande?”

“He’s an artist, Poppy. He seeks bohemian ambience.”

“Fine. The Hideaway’s about as close as you can get to it in Naples. Sounds like you’re on top of things, Wally,” said Poppy, downing two headache tablets with leftover diet soda pop.

“Thank you much,” smiled Wallace, his eyes raking Poppy’s face. “I’m going into the back to check that shipment of glass,” he told her.

“Good,” agreed Poppy.

“But I’ll be back,” he said.

“Don’t I know it,” replied Poppy. The hammering on her temples would soon subside.

“Don’t cut your wrists while I’m out back.”

“Don’t worry, Schmitty.”

“The name is Smythe. Long I. Nobody’s called me Wally Schmidt since I left Toledo. Not in the three years since you and I opened this junk shop.” Wallace’s voice faded as he strode out of the main gallery and into the workroom at the rear of the gallery.

“Whoa, Wallace! About face! He’s here!” Poppy shouted, only a moment before Cedric Spicer burst through the front door of the art gallery. Wearing his jolly mask, Wallace trotted back into the gallery simultaneously. Without breaking stride, he charged towards Cedric, who was skipping towards him with an outstretched hand.

“Smythe, how are you, my man?” gushed Cedric, grasping Wallace’s hand and pulling the larger man to him in a quick hug. “And who’s this pretty little thing?” Cedric asked, extending his hand to Poppy. “This little china doll can’t be your Poppy.”

“My partner, Poppy Craft-Talbot,” Wallace said gallantly.

“Charmed,” said Cedric, “Totally.” Standing back, he stroked his goateed chin and sized up Poppy from top to toe. “I adore natural redheads. And you’re so toned. Do you work out?”

“Two or three times a week. When I can,” answered Poppy, surprised at the man’s easy familiarity.

“It shows.”

“Thanks.”

“Do you cream those freckles?”

“I used to.”

Poppy had the urge to snarl, but she stifled it. Cedric Spicer, famous painter, was a whirlwind in designer sneakers. The word ‘dervish’ came to mind. Lean-bodied in a black T-

A Chance to Say Yes

shirt and khaki trousers, Cedric moved with tight flamboyance, not unlike a tipsy Flamenco dancer. Dissipated and unwholesome, he was oddly sexy and very aware of his sexiness. She watched him breeze about the gallery, commenting to Wallace on this or that art object, making plans for the upcoming exhibit of his paintings.

An unusual man, as are many gifted artists. There was something sneaky about Cedric's demeanor, too, an air of gossipy candor which probably tended to focus on whoever had just left the room. The cheeks of his long face were sunken inward, leaving hollows beneath his high cheekbones. A scar zig-zagged across his jaw. His straight blonde ponytail was laced with gray.

"Poppy, I'm going to steal Wallace for a few hours, do you mind? I've rented a studio while I'm here, out in the designer district, and I've stuck a few pieces in there. I'd like him to pass judgment on them—you know, for the show," Cedric explained.

"Be my guest," said Poppy gratefully. She wanted nothing more today than to be alone with her emotions.

"Do you have a powder room?" Cedric asked with the delicacy of a sledgehammer.

"In the back," Poppy said with a sweep of her hand. "On the left."

"Thanks ever so." Cedric scampered away out of earshot.

"What a piece of work," Poppy grimaced.

"He's bi, you know," said Wallace, eyebrow raised.

"Bi-sexual? Or bi-polar?" Poppy joked.

"Both, I suppose. I meant bi-sexual. So don't think his come-ons are empty air. He bangs babes with the best of them."

"Thanks for sharing that, Wallace," said Cedric re-

entering the room while zipping his khaki trousers. Embarrassed, Poppy burst into laughter. “Get going, you two,” she ordered. “Please.”

“Ooh, lucky you,” Cedric said to Wallace as they left the building. “I like ‘em ballsy. ‘Bye, Cupcake!” he called back, waving at her.

“Bye, Cedric,” Poppy waved in return. Alone at last, Poppy gathered her thoughts for a moment. She was interrupted at once by the ringing of her cell.

“Hello?”

“Poppy?”

Her heart sank. This was a voice she did not want to hear—her husband, James Talbot.

“When did you get back from Lauderdale, James?” she asked, uninterested in his response.

“Yesterday. I thought I’d check in with you,” he said in his Southern monotone. She could envision him in his standard attire, sports shirt and chinos, the iron-gray hair thinning on his domed head, the black-framed spectacles sliding down his bulbous nose.

“Thanks, James. That was thoughtful of you.” *How can I get off the phone?* “How’s the project going?” she inquired politely.

“Okay. Coming along slowly. Have you thought any more about our conversation last week?” he queried. “I have,” he added.

“Um, yes, sort of,” stalled Poppy, even though she had thought of nothing but Heston Demming for the past two days.

“My position hasn’t changed, honey. I still want kids. I still want kids with you.”

“James, my position hasn’t changed either. I don’t want

A Chance to Say Yes

kids—with you or anyone else.”

“Do you know how it hurts me to hear you say that, Poppy?” James said.

“Then stop bringing it up, and you won’t have to hear me say it anymore,” Poppy retorted, cringing.

“Why are you running from motherhood? Maybe you should see a shrink.”

“Absolutely not!”

“If you don’t change your mind, Poppy, I’m not sure we can stay together.”

“We aren’t together. Not anymore.”

“But I still love you.”

“Oh, Jimbo,” Poppy moaned. Her head still ached, in spite of the pain pills.

“Please think about it.”

“All right,” she relented. She felt honor-bound to try to reconcile with her husband. After all, she had made the marriage vow of her own volition. In her wildest dreams, she had never imagined that Heston would reenter her life.



The strong, clean smell of chlorine hung in the moist air. Floating in her indoor pool, Inez Vega dangled shapelessly in the still water, feeling her limbs adrift like seaweed greenery. She had taken a morning swim to cleanse her soul of last night’s ugly scene with Rogelio. At the moment, the water surrounding her skin felt warm and comforting. Buoyant, she idled for a few more minutes in the pool’s deep end.

Using a gentle breast stroke, she began combing the water. In the shallow end, she stood on the pool floor and lifted a terry-cloth towel from pool’s edge. She felt the warm water

drain down her suit-less body as she climbed the steps to the pool deck. She saw the maid hurrying forward with an elegant towel-robe. The maid slipped the cozy, dry cloth around Inez's trim nude body.

Ambling across the tiled courtyard of her Mediterranean-style home, Inez mounted the circular staircase to the second floor. Although stylish and elegant, the Vega home was twenty-five hundred feet smaller than Heston's new house, a fact of which she was painfully aware. Entering her spacious bathroom, she doffed the robe, tossing it onto a vanity chair, and slid into the tepid, sudsy bath, prepared earlier by her maid. Luxuriating in the oily, rose-scented water, Inez lay back and let the gentle jet spray massage her limbs.

Head lolling against the rim of the tub, Inez let down her guard. The ugly scene from last night came rushing back. How she wished she were free of Rogelio. They had almost come to blows. She tried to please him sexually, but it was impossible. She could not arouse him anymore. And the things he had said to her were horrible. Horrible. She wouldn't say them to her worst enemy.

Was it her fault she didn't enjoy him anymore? No. It just couldn't be helped, that's all. They had reached a point of no return in their marriage. That's why she had moved out of the downstairs master suite and into a bedroom of her own on the second floor, just across the hall from Danny's bedroom at the top of the stairs. Danny needed watching. She could keep an eye on him now. Oftentimes, Danny stayed out all night, and it bothered her.

A knock at the door and Inez's maid entered, informing her lunch was ready to be served. The pungent fragrance of lobster bisque drifted into the room.

"Leave me. I'll be right down," Inez responded.

A Chance to Say Yes

The bathroom door closed behind the departing maid. Half an hour later, Inez sat fully dressed in blouse and slacks at the table in the kitchen's breakfast nook. The nook overlooked the loggia and the indoor pool beyond. Inez had declined to eat by herself in the dining room. She hated dining alone, hated it more than anything in the world.

After lunch, she would dress and return to the office. Any type of busy-ness was better than this dull, aching loneliness. Nibbling at her cucumber half-sandwich and lobster-bisque luncheon, she heard the front door slam. Her heart accelerated. *Who was home? Danny? Franco? Not Rogelio?*

It was Franco. As her slender, dark-haired son bounded into the kitchen, Inez was struck once again by his likeness to his father. Not his aquiline facial features, which were more like her Italian family, the Grecos, but rather, his build and his mannerisms. Heston couldn't deny this one. But why had he ignored him for years?

Inez had been shocked when she'd received the phone call from Hess, two weeks earlier, telling her he wanted to view property in Naples. When he'd come to her office and apologized to her for hurting her both during and after their marriage, she had been floored, and smitten, all over again, as if all the fury between them had become so much crumbling dust. Over the years, she had followed his every career move. She had even kept a scrapbook of clippings and a disk of electronic information on Hess. She had told herself these were keepsakes for Franco.

"Hi, Mom," said Franco, opening the refrigerator and peering inside.

"How was soccer practice, Frankie?" she asked, placing her napkin on the table and turning to admire her son.

"Okay," the boy shrugged, fingering the food items on the

shelves. "We won."

"Excellent."

"Any *Tres Leches* left over from last night? Or did Rogelio eat it all?" he asked the maid. Quickly, the maid scooped cake-like milk pudding into a bowl and placed it on the breakfast table across from Inez. Hungry, Franco darted over to the table and began devouring the creamy dessert.

"I love this stuff," he said, mouth full. Inez had to chuckle. "Make more," he smiled.

"I saw your father again this morning," she said. "Danny and I visited his new place in Port Royal."

"Sweet," said Franco sarcastically.

"Your father wants you to come visit him. He wants to know you better."

Wolfing the final bite of food, Franco slung his spoon into the empty bowl and leaned back in his chair.

"I don't want to know him," the boy said matter-of-factly. "The Big Star," he sneered. Sighing, Inez studied her son's facial features—the almond-shaped brown eyes, the aquiline nose, the sensual mouth. Already the girls were phoning him daily, and he was only 12 years old. Would he grow up to be like his father, so attractive that he could turn it into millions of dollars? It was possible.

"You must get to know your father, Franco. He's going to be living here in town now, in our midst. It will be the perfect opportunity for you and he to become better acquainted. He could do a lot for your future."

"He doesn't like me. I won't do it," said Franco, standing up and flinging the chair against the small table. "And you can't make me." The impact made a crashing noise. Inez flinched.

"Franco! Of course your father likes you. What about your

A Chance to Say Yes

little half-sister, Winnie? You want to meet her, don't you?" she called sharply, as her son raced from the room and bounded up the staircase, two steps at a time. She heard his bedroom door slam shut. Loud music with a driving beat swelled and filled the vaulted rooms of the courtyard house.

Once more, she sat alone at the breakfast table. She was worried about Franco. She and Rogelio had been summoned three times to the principal's office at Franco's middle school. Three children had accused Franco of bullying. Her son always picked on smaller, younger children. He seemed to possess a streak of weakness that ran counter to his physical prowess. *How would Franco treat Heston's tiny daughter? They'll blame me. Everyone blames the mother.*

Perhaps it was her fault. Where else had this trait come from? The men in her family were not like this. The Greco men were tough but not cruel.

She continued to muse as the maid cleared the dishes and carried them to the sink. Rinsing the dishes, the maid then loaded the dishwasher. Finished, she padded into the laundry room, leaving Inez alone, still worrying.

Where did I go wrong?

She stared through the window at her indoor pool. A black and white soccer ball now floated on the water's surface. Franco must have thrown it there, on his way into the kitchen. The pool tiles were decorated with dolphins, like a Minoan palace. How she had slaved over the details of her home. And now, they didn't seem to matter at all. She hated this house. She hated her marriage. She wanted out. She wanted what should have been hers in the first place. She wanted her youth back.

She wanted Heston Demming and his riches.

Chapter 3

How long has he been standing there watching me?

Poppy's blood pressure rose as she swiveled in her chair. Spellbound, she beheld Heston Demming's tall silhouette framed in the doorway of her art gallery. Backlit by afternoon sunlight, his lean body stood planted in deep shadow, his cool stance unmistakable. One elbow was braced against the door frame.

When she became aware of him, he moved into the light. She could see the boyish features of his photogenic face. A lock of brown hair fringed his fair forehead rakishly.

Like an image in an eight-by-ten glossy, his countenance appeared cocky, self-assured, and every bit the movie actor he

A Chance to Say Yes

was. At the same time, she could sense his reticence. For a moment she thought she was seeing things, as if he were just in her imagination, the way a lost driver might see a mirage on a desert highway. But she could feel his presence. She knew he was real.

“Come in, Heston,” she said to him quietly.

Ambling slowly into the large, lighted open space of the gallery entry way, he did not look around at the art objects, on display throughout the gallery. Instead, as his face emerged from shadow, he looked into her eyes.

“Hello, Poppy.”

“Hello,” she echoed. She was grateful to be sitting down. Usually, at meaningful moments, she tended to trip over her thong sandals or walk into the nearest wall. As she watched him advance, her heart thudded. She was certain he could hear it.

Don't move, stay calm.

Oh, he is beautiful.

He was just as beautiful as her memories of him from all those years ago. No, even more beautiful. At 39, his masculine beauty was at its apex. No wonder he was a box-office sensation around the world. No wonder his DVD's sold millions of copies. Her heart pounded. Blood rushed in her ears. She felt short of breath. She felt her gut clench for the first time in years. She had forgotten how desire felt.

“I can't think of anything to say except some old cliché,” he said with that fleeting smile she remembered so vividly. “Like, ‘It's been a long time’.”

“Twenty years,” said Poppy.

“But who counts?” he quipped.

Poppy tried to smile. She wasn't sure her face moved at all. She felt frozen in place like a hosed-down ice sculpture.

Heston's silver-blue eyes now flitted back and forth across the room, exploring various works of art.

"This is nice place you have here. A fine place," he said awkwardly.

"We like it," said Poppy. "We specialize in the work of Florida artists."

"We? Who's we?"

"My business partner, Wallace Smythe, and I. We like it. We bought it together three years ago. Don't you remember? My parents left me some money when they...passed away years ago.

He nodded. "Sure. Old Mel had charge of it, last I heard. Until you came of age."

"I used it, and what Mel left me, to start this business."

"Mel's gone?"

Poppy, nodded numbly. "Wallace was an art historian I met in college. I have a BFA from The Ringling School of Art in Sarasota."

"Really? I didn't know you'd ever left Naples."

"Just once—to study art," she replied. *Can he tell I'm lying?*

"For a moment, I thought *we* meant you and your husband. I heard you have a husband these days."

The man's charm was palpable. It oozed from every pore. *Fight it.* "My husband, James, is a C.P.A. H-he's good at what he does, but he's not all that imaginative. Definitely not artsy. James plays a lot of golf."

"Ah!" Heston commented sagaciously. "You don't play with him?"

Poppy shook her head, mesmerized. As a boy, Heston had been adventurous. Now, as a mature man in his prime, he seemed to embody the very spirit of adventure. His dynamic

A Chance to Say Yes

presence, coupled with such awesome virile beauty, gave him the air of a classic-film swashbuckler come to life. All he lacked was the sword at his hip.

Moving with the grace of a natural athlete, he strolled around the gallery, touching this piece, examining that one, acting authoritatively, as though he had just purchased the business and wanted to familiarize himself with the inventory.

Stumbling backwards as he strode her way, Poppy bumped into a small globe of blown glass, Bounding forward, Heston managed to catch the fragile, hollow orb right before it fell and shattered. Tense, but affecting cool, he grinned at her for the first time.

“Better watch that,” he said.

Mortified, Poppy nodded and faked a smile in return. Carefully, she took the piece from his outstretched hands and repositioned it on its pedestal.

“I guess you make me nervous,” Poppy admitted softly.

“I’m Heston Demming, Mega-Star. I make everybody nervous.” He watched her closely.

“I had heard you’d moved back,” she said, attempting a conversational tone.

“Oh? How did you know? Wait. Let me guess,” He paced the room. “You heard it from your best friend, who heard it from her boyfriend, who heard it from his stepmother, who just happens to be my ex-wife, Inez Vega.”

“Greco Demming Vega,” she mumbled, eyes wide.

“I stand corrected,” said Heston affably. “Inez Greco-Demming-Vega. My ex-better half.”

“You’ve been talking to Inez.”

“Actually, to her shadowy stepson, Danny The Panther.”

“Actually,” said Poppy, “I heard it from Cookie Lee down at Rainbow’s on Fifth. Cookie’s the current town crier. Not

much happens around here that she doesn't know about."

"Rainbow's on Fifth," mouthed Heston theatrically, posing grandly. *Shakespeare couldn't have staged this blocking better.* "Is that a good place to hang here?"

"If you like coffee—and gossip."

"Oh, I do."

"Don't play innocent, Heston. I know you've been there."

"Would you like to go there with me now, Ms. Craft-Talbot? We could have a cup of adrenaline and chat. I brought shades and a Miami Marlins' cap to confuse my fans. I have some things I need to say to you, Poppy. I didn't come here today just because I like art—although I do. You know I've always wanted to pick up a paint brush."

"Still haven't tried your hand?" she asked him timidly. She looked up into his face. He seemed so...imposing. Where was the boy she had known?

"No." Heston shook his head decidedly.

She licked her lips. "W-We have coffee out back. Already brewed. A little strong maybe, but we can talk alone here. Wallace is out with our up-and-comer, Cedric Spicer. We're showing Cedric's work soon. His opening is a week from tomorrow. Please come. You and..."

"My wife?" he said, following Poppy into the back room of the gallery.

"Yes." In a small kitchen area, a pot of hot coffee stood ready. Poppy took two cups and filled each half way. "Milk? Sugar?" she asked.

"Black is fine. If I don't watch my figure, who will?" Heston remarked glibly.

"Well, I suppose your physique is important to you. Worth millions of dollars, really."

He nodded, silver eyes twinkling

A Chance to Say Yes

“Please sit,” said Poppy, indicating a chair at a small table in the corner. As Heston lowered his slender, muscular body into the chair, Poppy slipped into a chair across the table. For a moment, in the still of the small room, they sipped the strong brew uncertainly. She cleared her throat. He drummed his manicured nails on the table top. The tiny refrigerator hummed. The air conditioning droned. The air blew cold from the vent. Her right shoulder was freezing.

“Well, I won’t have to buy that chest wig after all,” Heston joked, indicating his cup.

She grimaced. “You are, perhaps, implying that my coffee is strong enough to put hair on your chest?”

“You always got my jokes, didn’t you? Let’s just say I have enough chest hair already, thanks. As you well know.” He winced comically as he raised his cup and sipped another drop of the tart black brew.

Poppy’s cheeks grew hot. She giggled awkwardly. “You’re funny, Heston. You were always funny. Remember? In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* you were hilarious as Bottom. Naturally, I thought you should have played one of the romantic leads.”

“Ah, but I had to learn my comic timing somewhere,” he noted, nose crinkling.

“True.”

“My wife has no sense of humor.”

“What was it you wanted to say to me?” Poppy asked, cheeks flaming. The hot coffee was warming her soul and clearing her mind, but it—or something—was making her armpits perspire in spite of the air conditioning.

. Leaning back in his chair, Heston crossed one long, slender leg, so that his right ankle now rested on his left knee. He stole a glance at her. She met his eyes. She felt her heart

leave her body. For a moment, their gaze held. Then Heston looked away and began to speak. Like a maiden under the sword, Poppy had been driven through by Heston's silver-blue gaze.

"I don't know how much you know about me, about my private life," he faltered, then pressed on. "I don't think I'm telling you anything that isn't common knowledge. I don't know how well you've followed my career." He paused here so that she could insert the right words. However, she could not utter them truthfully.

She had never followed his career. She had never seen any of his movies. She had lived the past twenty years in denial, strict denial, of a past mistake too painful to be conjured, even for amusement or old time's sake. When she did not follow his script, Heston improvised.

"What I'm trying to tell you, Poppy, is that *everybody knows* that I'm a recovering alcoholic. My personal life is weekly fodder for the tabloids—here and abroad."

"Oh, Heston!"

"No, wait. Let me finish. Here's the good news. I've been clean and sober for eleven months."

"That's wonderful.

"Here's the not-so-wonderful part. As part of my rehabilitation program, I am obliged to find all the people I once injured and apologize to them. To make reparations to them if I can."

A cloud crossed Poppy's countenance. "So that's why you're here? You came to apologize to me, for..."

"For running out on you twenty years ago. For humiliating you in front of everyone who ever meant anything to you. For publicly asking you to marry me and then bolting like a frightened rabbit, when another woman caught my fancy."

A Chance to Say Yes

In a tender gesture, he took her hand in his. Her flesh throbbed where his fingers pressed. "I'm sorry, Poppy. I've felt like a cad about it for years. Truly sorry, if I hurt you, as I believe I did. I was young, I was stupid. I was a fool. If I can make it up to you now, after all these years, if there is any way, please tell me," he pleaded earnestly.

"I admire your courage, Heston, coming here this way," she responded, trying not to dissolve into a pool of liquid protoplasm. "But I must tell you—it's I who owe you an apology."

"Why?" demanded Heston, surprised. "Why on earth would you say that?"

His jaw line is Michelangelo. His taut, sun-kissed skin is Vermeer. He is finer than any work of art in this gallery. "Because I didn't accept your proposal—not right away, as I should have. Instead, I stammered like an idiot. I'm sure it must have been embarrassing for you. You probably thought I was turning you down."

He arched a tweezed eyebrow. "You mean to say you didn't?"

"No, of course not!" cried Poppy. "I was just shocked when you proposed to me. I was dumbfounded. I couldn't speak. You thought I didn't want to marry you."

His silver-blue eyes shone. "You mean you wanted to...?"

"I never had a chance to say yes—or no. I tried to find you, to talk with you, but you had gone away..."

"With Montsey Flynn."

"Yes. With her. I cried for three days."

Heston sighed heavily. "At the risk of sounding trite: *'Oh, what fools these mortals be.'*" Unconsciously dramatic, he rose to his feet as he quoted the Bard. Like a forlorn thespian, he strutted slowly back and forth, hands clasped behind his back.

“You can say that again, Mister,” observed Poppy ruefully. It was only then that she remembered her hidden shame. He was unaware of the true state of affairs. What in the world should she do? Tell him? Should she tell him now? Should she wait? She would die if she had to say it to his face. Before she could answer her own silent question, a male voice boomed in the outer room of the gallery. .

“Poppy-girl, where are you? The front door’s unlocked! We have customers waiting!”

“We’re in the back, Wallace,” Poppy called.

“Who’s ‘we’?” This second voice she recognized as Cedric Spicer’s.

Wallace stuck his shiny bald head into the back room. “Hello.”

Impishly, Cedric Spicer entered and struck a pose behind Wallace in the doorway.

“What have we here? Oh. My. Garters. ...You’re...you’re...!” He jiggled a forefinger at Heston. For what may have been the first time in his life, Cedric seemed at a loss for words.

Amused, Poppy said, “Wallace Smythe, my business partner, Cedric Spicer, gifted artist—Heston Demming, international superstar.”

Cedric raved, “It is! You are! Heston, honey, I’ve seen every flick you’ve ever made. Please forgive me for staring, but you’re just so frigging *gorgeous*.” With one elbow, Cedric poked Wallace in the ribs. “Fan me, please. My aesthetic sensibilities are in an uproar. “To cool his ardor, the artist fanned his face with both hands.

Wallace merely rolled his eyes.

“Calm down, Cedric,” laughed Poppy. “He’s flesh and blood, not manna from heaven.”

A Chance to Say Yes

“Speak for yourself,” said Cedric, eyes bulging.

Even Heston had to laugh at such sincerity. “It’s always nice to meet a true fan, Cedric. Thanks for your support,” he said, offering his hand. Gawking, Cedric pumped Heston’s hand enthusiastically, clinging to the long fingers for just a moment too long.

“Your moving here is all over town. I mean, I guess I knew I’d run into you someday, but not so soon. What are you doing here?” Cedric quizzed. “Poppy, why are you hiding this Adonis in the back room? Does your husband know? Oh, that’s right. You’re separated. Never mind!” Cedric flailed his hand. “Don’t answer that.”

Heston threw a glance at Poppy. “You’re separated?”

Lowering her eyes, Poppy nodded.

“Do you two know each other well?” Swinging his forefinger back and forth, Cedric was adding one plus one.

Poppy put the brakes on. “We were friends as children, Cedric. Heston and I grew up together in Naples.”

“When it was just a sleepy little golfing village,” Heston chimed in.

“Well, I’ll be a monkey’s gay uncle.” Cedric’s jaw swung on its hinges.

Heston moved towards the outer gallery. “Look, I’d better be off now. My daughter, Winnie, and I have a date for a sail. I have a new yacht.”

Poppy nodded her approval as Heston glanced her way. Reaffirmed, he said, “Listen, I’d like you all to attend our housewarming party on Sunday evening. My personal assistant, Andrew Upshaw, will contact you with the details. Bring your husband, too, Poppy, if you’re still on good terms with the man.”

“Not that good,” said Poppy reluctantly.

"I'll be her date!" cried Wallace. She felt Wally's arms encircle her neck. "We'll be there with bells on."

"Me, too!" said Cedric, thrilled.

"You bring a date, too, Cedric, my man," grinned Heston.

"I just might do that. I might even bring a woman. I met this gorgeous creature—no spring chicken, mind you, but with mature allure—at the Hideaway B&B—where I'm staying, Room 3, by the way, Heston, if you're interested," Cedric gushed. "In me, not her."

Heston laughed, nonplussed. "Well, fine. That's great. We'll see you all Sunday, around 6 p.m. Dress is elegant casual. My wife, Maude, will be pleased."

"That's right! Your wife is Maude Winston, the model." Cedric placed a hand over his mouth. "A twofer," he gasped approvingly.

"No doubt she'll be pleased to meet you, too. And you, Wallace."

"Thanks so much," said Wallace, shaking Heston's proffered hand. "Great meeting you."

"Likewise." Heston turned to face Poppy. "*Au revoir, Brown Eyes.*" Heston took her hand and pressed it gently. "Thanks for understanding," he said softly.

"You, too," said Poppy. For an instant, her gaze touched his. Then he strode out the front door of the gallery. Rushing to the window, Wallace peered outside.

"Oh, my stars and garters! He drives a red Ferrari. I'm in lust! If I weren't an obsessive-compulsive germ freak, I might never wash this hand again."

"Oh, Cedric, behave," Wallace said snappishly.

What just happened here? Quietly, Poppy slipped away as the two men quibbled. She had felt the lightening pass from Heston into her.

A Chance to Say Yes

Did I just fall in love all over again? Me and everyone else in the universe. Cringing, she recalled Cedric's ridiculous display. Yet there was one thing she and Heston had in common, one thing no one else could ever share, even if he never learned of it. Only her Uncle Melvin had known. Mel had died eight years ago. *Please, Uncle Mel. You got me into this mess. What should I do now?*

From the top of Wallace's desk, Poppy lifted a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Escaping the gallery, she trotted to the waterfront railing and sat on a patio bench. She lit a cigarette to steady her nerves. The pungent smoke filled her lungs. She blew the smoke out through her nose. She would have to tell Heston eventually. He had a right to know. *Didn't he?*



Later that evening, Poppy lounged alone on the couch in her living room at Solarmarina. Scattered around the room were a few of her own little assemblages, works of art she had created from natural found-objects. Looking at the whimsical art works gave her emotional comfort, which she sorely needed. In the hours since Heston's visit to her gallery, she had bought or rented every movie he had ever made—all the ones she could find. A pile of CD's now sat on the round glass coffee table in front of her. He had made more than 30 films. With the help of the Internet, she had located 18 of them. *Where to begin?*

A white-ceramic bowl of popcorn was standing by. Alongside it stood a plastic beaker of diet soda. Seeking comfort, she eyed the faux-leather recliner beside the couch—the tacky recliner that James had always claimed as his. Getting up from

the couch, she dropped down into her estranged husband's easy chair and threw her slipper-shod feet onto the adjacent footstool.

Settling in, she hit the power button on the remote. The screen came alive. Music blared suddenly. Irritated, she turned down the volume and reached for the bowl of popcorn. She grabbed a handful of salty yellow kernels.

"Let's see what you can do, Mr. Demming," she said to herself, munching steadily as the credits rolled.

And then Heston's face came on the screen. But it wasn't the Heston she had spoken with today. No, it was the Heston of fifteen years ago, much closer in time to the teenage Heston she had known. Startled, she clicked the off button on the remote. Swallowing the mush in her mouth, she sipped her diet drink reflectively.

Maybe she wasn't up to this, after all. The moments ticked away. No, she was. Taking a deep breath, Poppy turned the TV back on and nestled back into the recliner. She would watch it. She would watch or die. It was time for her to face the reality of who her childhood sweetheart had become. She pressed the forward button.

The first of Heston's films she had chosen to view was *Dragon Claw*. It was a science-fiction thriller, full of savagery, guts and gore. In it, Heston wore a red plastic suit and battled aliens with lasers. It ran only ninety minutes. She watched it through to the end, then slipped a second CD into the player. *One down, seventeen to go.*

The second movie, *Blue Juniper*, had been made more recently. It was a romantic tearjerker, filled with snowy landscapes and roaring wood fires, with a good deal of love-making being done in front of a rock-hewn fireplace. This adult Heston was nearly naked in some scenes, and the actress

A Chance to Say Yes

he made love to—starlet Lennox Cordova—was stripped bare. Poppy had long since put down the popcorn bowl and remote. She sat galvanized by the moving images on the screen. Nothing had prepared her for the power of Heston's on-screen sexuality.

All of a sudden, the walls seemed to close in on her. Poppy felt claustrophobic. She couldn't breathe. She needed air. Without stopping to turn off the set, Poppy tore through her bedroom and out the sliding glass doors onto the balcony. In the darkness of night, a steady stream of warm westerly wind was blowing in from the Gulf. She could smell the seaweed and hear the small waves breaking five floors below her. As she looked north, then south, the stretch of coastline in either direction was strung with white electric lights. In front of her stretched the vast blackness of salt water. Faintly, above the ocean's drone, she could hear Heston's voice coming from the TV set.

"I did kill him," said Heston, the actor. "I did it for you, Laurie Jean."

Lennox Cordova's voice answered seductively. "I never knew how much you loved me, Tony, not until today." Then the music rose to a crescendo, and Poppy guessed that Heston was mauling the young actress with kisses. Angrily, she slid the glass door shut. Now the sound from the TV was muffled. On the balcony at midnight, she was free from the terror of her feelings for Heston Demming. But she would never be free of their hidden bond.

Tomorrow she would search out Sasha. She desperately needed advice from her friend. She would tell Sasha the truth and swear her to secrecy. She couldn't go on, not alone like this. Not now. Not after looking into Heston Demming's eyes.



Wednesday morning, Sasha Bassett was scarfing donuts at Rainbow's downtown. As she chomped away compulsively, her mother's words were ringing in her ears:

"How long do I have to wait, Chickie? Are you ever going to give me a grandchild? Am I going to die without any kind of legacy? What's it all been for? You've never done anything right in your life. Now you can't even do what comes natural. Get off you lazy duff. Find a man who'll father your child. Forget that Cuban shark. There are other fish in the sea."

Sasha swiveled her head in surprise as James Talbot, Poppy's estranged hubby, strode up to the counter. Swallowing, she watched James exchange words with Cookie Lee. Cookie was laying it on thick. *What a dork he is.* As usual, James was dressed in a sports shirt and trousers. His receding hairline and heavy eyeglasses made him seem older than he was.

Picking up his coffee cup and corn muffin, James turned to scan the seating area. Raising one arm, Sasha waved him to her table. She craved conversation, if only to drown out her mental tapes. Even with her best friend's boring husband.

"Hi, Jimbo!" she smiled. "Join me?"

James shrugged his rounded shoulders. "Don't mind if I do. How's it going, Miss *Sashay*? You got some powdered sugar on that cute little dimpled chin of yours." There was something so dull about James that it made her teeth hurt. Or maybe it was the powdered sugar.

"Heard you were going to Lauderdale a while back," she said, rubbing her chin with a white paper napkin. "I'm such a pig," she muttered, brushing powdered sugar from her lap.

"But you're a cute little oinker," grinned James.

A Chance to Say Yes

What is this? Texas flirtation? She threw him a look of skepticism. Unnerved, she watched as James carefully unfolded his napkin and laid out his food and drink items on the table. *No wonder he drives Poppy mad. He's such a neat freak.*

"So, James, how's life treating you?" she asked, pushing away her plate of half-eaten donuts and settling down with a toothpick.

"Pretty good. Except for my wife."

"Yeah, that sitch is a bitch," she said sympathetically.

"Have you talked to her lately?" asked James, slurping his decaf.

"She called me yesterday, but we didn't get a chance to talk much."

"Did she say anything about me?" he asked earnestly.

She grimaced sadly. "Not that I can remember. Sorry, guy."

He shrugged. "That's okay. It's not your fault. I doubt if Poppy even thinks about me much anymore." Pouring half-and-half from a small metal pitcher, He laced his decaf generously. Adding three packets of sugar, he then meticulously wiped spilled grains from the table top. Inserting a metal spoon into his cup, he stirred methodically, as though counting rotations. Again, he picked up the small pitcher.

"Well, to be honest, you two just don't have that much in common nowadays. She likes the arts and creativity. You like numbers and golf."

"A lot of wives take up golf for their husbands' sake." He began pouring milk into his cup.

"Yeah, and a lot don't. A lot get a divorce. Or a lover." She gasped as soon as the words escaped her mouth. James' gray eyes goggled at her from behind the lenses of his glasses. His puffy, sun-dried skin drained to the color of snow.

“Are you saying my wife has a lover?” Light brown liquid sloshed over the rim of his coffee cup. Befuddled, he set down the pitcher and grabbed a handful of napkins.

“Absolutely not!” Sasha cried. “Here, let me wipe up that spill for you.” She dabbed a paper napkin on the table where James had sloshed his milky decaf. “I never meant any such thing. I’m always sticking my foot in my mouth.”

“Well, that’s a relief. I’d hate to think of Poppy sneaking around behind my back. The one thing she’s always been with me is honest. I’ve always admired my wife for her honesty. It’s something I can always count on, like humidity in Florida.”

She recovered. “Oh, yeah. She’s a peach. I was just trying to emphasize that you and she don’t have the same goals in life.”

“That’s for dang sure,” said James. “I want kids. She doesn’t. End of story.”

“End of story,” Sasha echoed, stopping in mid-air and staring at the wall behind James’ domed head. “End...of...story.” she whispered. She felt as if a great rent had opened in the fabric of consciousness and revealed to her the secret of life. Choirs of angels couldn’t have sung out more clearly. Nor her mother’s voice: *Go for it!*

“Earth to Miss Sashay,” quipped James, waving his stubby fingers in front of her eyes.

“Eh? Oh, James! Sorry. I just thought of something,” she said sweetly, sitting up prettily in her seat. Abruptly, she tossed the toothpick into an empty cup. With quick, dainty movements, she adjusted her shirt and shorts and arched her back. She was glad, for the first time, that James couldn’t keep his eyes off her bust. *Poppy may not want a kid with you, buddy, but I do.*

“Would you like more milk in your decaf?” she asked

A Chance to Say Yes

James solicitously, picking up the stainless-steel creamer.

He looked at her askance. Then he broke into a smile.

“You mean half-and-half? Why, sure,” he said. “Don’t mind if I do.”

Beaming from ear to ear, she poured a touch of cow juice into Poppy’s husband’s cup.

“You know, Jamie,” she said, eyes wide, “I don’t know why Poppy has never wanted children with you. I mean, you’re everything a woman could want in a man. You’re strong and steadfast. You work hard for a living. You’ve got that Texas stud thing going on. I guess she doesn’t appreciate the life you provide for her.”

Face froze in a Mona-Lisa smile, she ruminated. *What the hell are you doing? Shut up and leave me alone. This man wants a baby and so do I. But he’s your best friend’s husband. Poppy doesn’t want him. She’s hot for that movie star now.*

The words flashed through her head in an instant. Her smile grew wider.

“Do you realize what an attractive man you are, Jimbo?” she purred, leaning in closer so that her cleavage was even with the table top. From James’ expression, she guessed he wanted to dive in. “It wouldn’t be hard for a man like you to find female companionship.”

“Oh, I don’t know...” His nose was suddenly beet red.

“Many a time I’ve told Poppy what a catch you are,” said Sasha.

“Really?”

“Really. Why if I weren’t with Danny Vega, I might snap you up myself, you tiger, you!” *Barf me Shut up!*

“Sasha-girl, do you really feel that way about me?” James seemed enraptured.

“I do indeed.” *Shut up and do it. Strike while the iron is hot.*

Mama, he's got bucks, too.

“Well, I wish I’d known that all these years.” Shaking his head at the ironies of life, James dabbed his cracked lips with his napkin. He then folded the napkin precisely and placed it on the table. With calm, even movements he arranged his empty dishes and soiled utensils, until their positions suited him.

She watched him with leery awe.

“I feel like taking a little stroll down the avenue,” he said, suddenly rising. “Care to join me?” His metal chair scraped the floor as he stood.

Sasha grabbed her bulky satchel--which was nearly half as big as she was. “Sure! Sure I would, Jamie. Let’s go.” Offering James her arm, she allowed him to lead her out the front door. *What if someone sees us? Someone like Danny.*

She knew how violent Danny Vega could be when provoked by jealousy. She feigned ease as James led her down Fifth Avenue South, the smartest shopping street in town. The street was, in fact, the main drag of “downtown” Naples, a classy thoroughfare lined with expensive shops, banks, brokerages, and sidewalk cafes.

Decorated with fancy lampposts and inviting wooden benches, Fifth Avenue South ran east-west for the length of ten full blocks, from US 41 to the public beach. Perpendicular to Fifth Avenue South, the city’s public beach ran north-south for miles, from Port Royal, which was south of downtown, to the far north, Vanderbilt Beach.

“I’m right proud to have you on my arm, little girl,” James said, dragging Sasha along. “As you well know, I love my wife. And I would do anything for her. But a man gets tired of feeling like there’s something wrong with him all the time.”

A Chance to Say Yes

“No doubt,” she said in earnest. “No doubt that’s true.”
She turned her face away from passersby.

If you enjoyed this sample, it can also be purchased in hard-cover or the full eBook. Please visit www.archebooks.com for more information.

