

# THE PRICE OF A MAN

Karen van der Zee

## CHAPTER ONE

Two days and two hours after I'd signed the agreement with SBB, I met Mr. Right. Two days and two hours too late.

Well, he *looked* like he might Mr. Right. And I didn't actually *meet* him. I saw him standing in the pesticide aisle of the garden center, studying the label of some kind of poisonous spray. He didn't see me.

He was all man, all lean muscle and male sex appeal, his profile showing a straight nose and a strong chin. I moved my empty cart past him and stopped a few feet away and pretended to check out some poison of my own. This gave me the opportunity to look him over surreptitiously. Looking was allowed, wasn't it? And I wasn't a nun, even if my sister-in-law Pamela wished I acted more like one.

The man stirred every feminine fiber in my body with his tall athletic frame and his dark looks. A lock of hair had fallen over his forehead and he pushed it away without looking up. Well-fitting jeans showed long legs and lean hips, and the blue T-shirt displayed straight, wide shoulders. Loafers on his feet, not sneakers. His clothes were nothing out of the ordinary, except that something about him set off little sparkles in my bloodstream.

Okay, so now I could say something clever, or ask a question to get his attention. It was simple enough. *Excuse me, have you ever tried this on your roses?*

Oh, for Pete's sake, I said to myself. This is no use. Just get your topsoil and get out of here.

So I did.

\* \* \*

In the parking lot I ran into Marcus, who kissed me chastely on the cheek. He smelled of aftershave, familiar. It was a bit strange to be kissed chastely by Marcus. I was used to bear hugs and passionate kisses from him, but that was now in the past. He still had his tropical tan and his freshly shaven head gleamed in the sun.

"Where have you been hanging out?" he asked. "I call you and call you and you're never home. And your cell isn't working or something."

"I have a new cell number. I'm not home much these days. I'm at my grandmother's house, painting and gardening." I pointed at the bags of topsoil in the cart. "Why were you calling me?"

"We have a new menu. I want you to come by and try some of my new creations."

Now there was an invitation I could go for. "I would love to. I don't suppose hot and spicy feature in any of them?" He'd recently returned from six months in Thailand. I loved exotic food, and Marcus was a brilliant chef, and I was not the only one who thought so.

"Of course," he said. "By the way, your brother and sister-in-law had dinner with us last night, with a couple of friends."

"Really? They didn't go for the hot and spicy, I'm sure."

"No. Roast chicken with mushrooms." He grinned. "I came out of the kitchen and inquired if all was to their taste."

"And was it?"

"Everything except me. They gave me very cool looks."

I laughed. "You shouldn't have dumped me, see."

He looked wounded. "I didn't dump you."

No. He'd left for Thailand for six months and I had declined to come along. Not that I hadn't been tempted, but burdened with a sense of responsibility I found that making such drastic changes in my life was more than I could handle with only three days' notice. As a teacher, I was not inclined to walk away from a roomful of six-year-olds, most of whom I loved and adored. And Grandma was not well and I didn't want to leave her, either.

So we had decided to part ways, which had made both of us sad, but the call of the wild was too much for Marcus to ignore. He was who he was and I had understood that. Some relationships were not meant to become permanent. On some level I had always known our love had no good future, but it took his trip to bring it into focus.

"But that's what they want to think," I said, "that I'm the victim of your bad behavior. I've not been able to convince them otherwise."

He sighed theatrically. "They are very conflicted people, aren't they? Shouldn't they be happy I'm no longer corrupting your tender soul, or conspiring to whisk you off to Timbuktu with me?"

"Well, yes, I'm sure they're sleeping better these days. Just the same, they blame you for breaking my heart."

Howard and Pamela had never approved of Marcus. Marcus was, well, *unconventional*, Pamela had said, trying to be tactful. Still, *unconventional* was not a positive word in her dictionary, whereas it was definitely one in mine. Marcus was creative, happy, fun-loving. He was also restless and impulsive, lived in the moment and was not given to long-term commitments. He loved wandering the far corners of the world looking for culinary adventures. In the

past five years, he'd held five different jobs. He'd get bored, pack up, and disappear. That's just who Marcus was.

Clearly, not family-man material.

"I didn't break your heart," he said. "Did I?" He looked worried.

"Not fatally. It cracked and it hurt because I missed you, but it's all healed now." I smiled at him. By the way, what are you doing here on a Saturday afternoon? Shouldn't you be at the restaurant?"

"I'm on my way. See you later, then. Call me when you're coming, will you?"

He took off in his long-legged loping way and I smiled after him. We were friends. It was good this way.

I remembered Pamela finding me crying my heart out the day Marcus had boarded the plane, and in her usual practical way Pamela had drawn her own conclusions: That flaky chef with his bald head had dumped her little sister-in-law.

Trying to convince Pamela of the error of her ways was a losing battle. One thing I had learned to accept was that people believed what they wanted to believe.

I opened the back of my little red Toyota and pushed the cart up against it to make it easier to tip the heavy bags of top soil into the trunk.

\* \* \*

From the back she looked great. A mass of curly red hair, long slim legs, and a tight behind in white shorts. Alexander watched as she struggled with a heavy bag of topsoil, trying to haul it from the shopping cart into the back of her car. The cart kept rolling away.

"Need some help?" he asked, and she turned to face him.

From the front she looked even better. Big brown eyes, a generous mouth, nice full breasts covered with a tight little turquoise top. The May sunshine set her hair on fire.

"Oh, thank you!" Her smile was wide and grateful, revealing a mouthful of perfectly white teeth. She wiped a hand over her forehead, pushing her hair back, and left a streak of dirt.

Alexander put his foot on the cart to keep it from rolling away and lifted the first of three bags out of the cart and into the back of the little red Toyota. The plastic was muddy from yesterday's rain. Then he grabbed the other two and plopped them inside as well and pulled the hatchback door down.

"Thank you very much," she said, still smiling. She had a lovely mouth, ripe lips ready for kissing. She was no film-star beauty, but she was very easy on the eyes, mud streak on her forehead included.

"My pleasure." He rubbed his hands together.

"Sorry, now your hands are all dirty. Maybe I have a tissue." She rummaged around in the bag slung over her shoulder. "Nope, I don't."

"That's quite all right. Not necessary." He should go now. Get in his car further along in the car park and drive away. He couldn't make himself move, feeling the force of destiny hold him firmly rooted to the ground.

"Doing garden work?" he asked, feeling like a fool as he heard his own words. What else would she be doing with three bags of topsoil in mid May in Connecticut, USA? And since when did he have trouble talking to women? Since never.

His cell phone rang. Damn. He had to take it, couldn't afford not to with everything going on in Rome. He reached for the thing and watched her step toward the driver's seat door, keys in hand.

"Thanks again," she said.

He nodded as he spoke his name into the phone. His gaze did not leave the redhead as he listened for the response across the wires. Lisette in Amsterdam. Good, Lisette could wait.

"*Ik bel je straks terug*," he said, clicking off, watching the woman open the car door.

She turned her head, looked at him quizzically as he put the phone back in his pocket.

"What language was that?"

"Dutch."

"Oh. I thought you had an accent." She grinned. "You don't *look* Dutch."

"I'm only half. The other half is Italian."

"Italian? Well that explains it."

"Probably not," he said drily. He touched the top of his head. "Dark hair from my Dutch side, blue eyes from the Italian side."

She laughed. "It's a mixed up world, isn't it?"

"Very." He liked the sound of her laugh. Easy, without artifice.

"Do you live here?" She had her hand on the door, made no move to get in the car.

He shook his head. "I'm visiting friends here for the weekend. I'm in New York on business. I live in Amsterdam, mostly, but I also spend time in Rome."

"I love Rome. I was there three years ago." Her big brown eyes were all warm enthusiasm and he knew it was now or never.

"It's hot. I'm going to have something cold to drink over there." He waved at the burger joint on the other side of the road. "May I offer you one? A cold drink? He watched her eyes light up. Then, mysteriously, her face

darkened and her smile vanished. "I'm sorry, I'd like to, but I can't. I've got to be going."

And with that, she quickly hopped into the driver's seat, started the engine, backed out of the parking space and drove off so fast, you'd think the devil was on her tail.

He stared after her. What was he thinking? He was going back to New York on Monday. Back to Amsterdam on Wednesday.

He glanced at his watch. He'd better get going. He turned and almost collided with a big blonde pushing a cart full of bedding plants and a chubby boy sitting in the front sucking a lollipop, drooling pink on his white shirt.

He thought of the redhead racing away. Perhaps she was married. For all he knew she could have three kids waiting at home to be fed and bathed.