



## *Summer Shadows*

By Gayle Roper

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### **Chapter 1**

Abby stared up the flight of stairs and mentally kicked herself. The rigors of climbing to the second floor every day hadn't seemed such an overwhelming challenge when she talked to the realtor on the phone. All she'd paid attention to was "on the beach", and that had made up her mind for her. That and her desperate need to escape.

*Idiot*, she muttered under her breath, though even now "on the beach" tempered her self-criticism to a mild reprimand rather than a blistering diatribe.

Sighing, she grabbed the banister and began the arduous trip up the outside stairs to her new second floor, beach front apartment, pulling herself from step to step, trying to ignore the pain. After all, there was a time not too long ago when it would have been much worse. She gritted her teeth and "pushed through".

How she hated that phrase. Helene, her physical therapist, had yelled it at her for months. Easy for Helene to talk of pushing through as she stood there on her two strong, whole legs while Abby with her damaged hip and leg tried to climb one step, then two, walk the length of the room, then back, dripping with sweat and almost retching from pain.

"Push through, Abby," Helene always called. "Push through. You can do it. I know you can."

And because Abby had no choice other than a life of immobility, she had pushed through, crying as she pushed. Three times a day, then twice, then once, then three times a week, then twice, then once, she had pushed through the torture known as physical therapy.

But she was now walking without a cane unless she had to be on her feet for a long time. And she was climbing the stairs to her new apartment, step by straining step.

She couldn't help smiling. Sometimes such small things were really momentous victories.

"Excuse me, but just what do you think you're doing?" The deep voice was cold, the question accusatory. "This is a private residence."

Abby gripped the banister to steady herself and turned. Even looking down from her vantage point half way up the stairs, she could tell he was one big man. And an irate one. His hands were fists on his hips, his mouth was pressed thin with anger, and his dark eyes shot sparks. His fair hair fell across his forehead, and the sun struck it so it looked like a gleaming golden halo.

It was sad, his surly attitude, because otherwise he was really quite impressive. A beautiful fallen angel, she thought, struck with a flight of imaginative, if theologically incorrect, fancy, but an angel lacking in civility. She sniffed the air in curiosity. All the supernatural, Peretti-type novels said she should smell the brimstone if he were indeed a fallen angel, but she didn't catch any hint of sulphur in the clean sea air.

"Well?" he prompted.

She lifted her chin and straightened her shoulders as she tried to remember his original question. Neither fallen angel nor grumpy man was going to intimidate her. She backtracked mentally from her image of an angel and brimstone through impressive and irate to-- She grinned. What was she doing here? That was the question. And she even knew the answer. Not that he deserved it.

"Marquerite de la Roque," she said. "Without the moral baggage."

He blinked. "Well, Marguerite, I repeat, what are you doing here?"

"My name is not Marguerite. She has been dead for several centuries."

He looked understandably bewildered.

"Like her, I am embarking on a great adventure. She sailed from France to Canada in 1541, the first European woman to reach the New World. And I am moving to Seaside today," she pronounced. *To my New World full of promise.* She smiled brilliantly at him.

"I hate to tell you, but you're hardly the first woman to reach town," he said dryly. "And, I'm sure, not the last. Now why are you here? Climbing these particular steps, I mean."

A loud woof brought her gaze to the dog that stood at the man's side. The Rottweiler stared at her, his brown eyebrows pulled together in an unblinking frown that matched the man's.

*Great. Steps, a grumpy neighbor, and an ugly monster besides. Wait until Puppy sees him. She'll have a coronary on the spot.*

"I'm Abby Patterson," she said, remembering at the last minute to look at the man and not the dog. "And I'm not trespassing. I'm renting the second floor indefinitely."

"Oh." He looked nonplussed, and she was irritated enough at him to enjoy his discomfort. "But you're not coming until tomorrow."

She shrugged. "Change of plans." If ever she'd uttered an understatement, that was it. But how could she possibly explain to this glowering man that coming today was her private Declaration of Independence. Her own giant step for mankind. Her personal strike against tyranny as she raised the banner signaling the liberation of Abigail Lynn MacDonald Patterson.

She waved the keys she'd gotten at the realtor's. Then she turned her back and pulled herself up a couple of more steps. She was surprised to feel the wood vibrate beneath her feet, indicating he was following her up. She looked over her shoulder and saw both him and his monster dog ascending her steps. Her *private* steps.

She reached the small landing at the top and turned to him, her back against the sturdy wooden railing. He stepped onto the landing too, followed by the monster. Talk about crowded.

"What?" she asked, voice abrupt. He and the dog unnerved her standing in the tight space with her. As a result she gave him her frostiest stare to prove she wasn't unsettled by his nearness. It was just that he loomed, sort of like her father did.

He stared at her, every bit as frosty as she. It was a wonder snow didn't fall in spite of the balmy early June temperature. "I'm Marsh Winslow."

She was so busy wishing he would back up onto the porch that ran across the width of the building and give her breathing room that it took a minute for the name to register.

"You're Marsh Winslow? My landlord?" She was appalled. "Really?" She had to share the house with this snarling, ill-tempered person? And, she glanced down, his monster dog?

The dog nudged his master's hand for all the world like he wanted to be introduced too.

The man looked at the monster and his face softened into a smile. "This is Fargo, the wonder dog."

"I've got a cat," Abby said, staring at Fargo with distaste. He was so big.

"Puppy."

Marsh Winslow blinked again. "You have a cat and a dog? I thought you only had a cat. That's all we agreed on in the lease."

This time she blinked. "I do."

"Er, you do what?"

The man couldn't even follow a conversation. "I do have just a cat," she patiently explained. "I'd have told you if I had a dog." She glanced at Fargo. "They're hard to hide."

"But you just said you had a puppy." Fargo nodded his agreement. "They're even harder to hide."

"I said I had a cat named Puppy."

"A cat named Puppy?"

It was his glance at the dog that made her angry. It was like the two of them thought she was playing with less than a full deck. It was too much like her parents had looked at each other when she told them about her new job in Seaside.

Well, contrary to public opinion, she was not an idiot. Her mental deck was a full 52 cards, carefully shuffled and ready to play.

“And naming a dog after a city in North Dakota makes more sense?” she snapped.

Her landlord scratched his ear like he couldn't believe he was involved in such a foolish conversation. Fargo sat, lifted his rear leg and began scratching his ear too.

Fleas? Both of them?

He took a deep breath, the kind you take when you are putting up with someone who has tried you to the limits. “I, um, I need to apologize if I sounded a bit abrupt,” he said abruptly. “I didn't realize who you were.”

She looked at him a minute without reacting. He didn't appear sorry. His mouth had the puckered look of someone who'd just swallowed something extremely sour or someone whose mother had forced him to apologize countless time when he didn't want to.

“Don't let it worry you,” she said, waving her hand regally in the air. “You couldn't have known.” Having dismissed him, she turned ninety degrees to look out over the beach and the ocean. “It'll be a case of Isabella and Ferdinand.”

Fargo woofed in question and Marsh said, “I beg your pardon?”

“Isabella and Ferdinand,” she repeated, again waving her hand to shoo him away.

“Of Christopher Columbus fame, I assume? And you're Isabella and I'm Ferdinand?”

She nodded. At the moment she was Queen Isabella dismissing the diminutive Ferdinand -- except that Marsh Winslow was anything but little and he didn't seem to realize she'd dismissed him. Still if they could work out a policy like Isabella and Ferdinand did, they'd probably manage all right. As co-regents of Spain, Isabella ruled Castile, and Ferdinand ruled Aragon. She would rule the second floor, her Castile, Marsh the first, his Aragon. If such an arrangement allowed the royal marriage to survive, certainly it would allow the two of them to coexist through the summer and beyond.

“How many miles to the horizon?” she asked suddenly.

He blinked at the change of topic and glanced quickly at the water. “I haven't the vaguest idea.”

How was he able to convey with just the tone of his voice the idea that she had asked a foolish question? “Oh. I just thought you might know, living here and all.”

He heard her barb and answered with icy cool. “I bought this house three months ago. I have lived here a total of one week thus far.”

“Oh.” She watched the gentle waves roll softly onto the sand. The gloriously radiant sun bathed the scene, and she had to squint against the glare in spite of her sunglasses. It was all she could do not to hug herself with delight in spite of her grouchy landlord.

A place at the shore, right on the beach in the southern end of Seaside. Nothing between her and the beauty and glory of the sea but the wide strand of soft, golden sand.

When she and her parents had come to Seaside through the years for vacations, they had always rented the first floor of a house that stood three blocks back from the beach.

Financial considerations had forced that rental.

As a child, she had thought everyone lugged chairs, umbrellas, towels, toys, rafts and bottle upon bottle of suntan lotion to the beach every day and back every evening, all sandy and sticky and tired and grumpy.

One day it suddenly dawned on her that people actually lived in the houses that lined the beach. They got up each morning, had breakfast on their big wide porches and stepped off their decks right onto the sand. They went back to their houses for grit-less lunches. They walked back onto the sand for the rest of the afternoon, and they even played on the beach in the evenings after the lifeguards went off duty. Or they sat on their porches and verandas and decks and watched the waves.

Nothing was more thrilling than watching the waves, nothing, and it was like they belonged to the people who lived right on the beach. And they could watch no matter the weather. On a wild, rain-soaked day they could sit inside all dry and cozy and observe the temperamental sea slapping the sand, waves crashing in fury, spume flying.

Now here she was with her own porch right on the beach. She could eat breakfast on her own deck to the music of the purling sea. She could sit beneath her own awning and watch the ceaseless motion of the water until she was gluttoned on the sight. If she wanted to, she could lie on her chaise and listen to the waves sigh and break all night.

And when the weather turned, she could enjoy the ferocity, the violence from behind her floor to ceiling windows.

And she had only to step from the walk beside the house onto the sand, to cross the lovely cream expanse to stand in the cool green water.

Three cheers for insurance settlements.

“Let me show you around the apartment.” Marsh gestured toward the door just behind him on the landing.

Abby glanced at him. “That’s okay. You needn’t bother.”

She knew she sounded less than gracious, but he hadn’t exactly been the warm and welcoming host. Besides she wanted nothing more than to be alone. She was bone tired. She ached from head to foot, and she needed the bathroom badly. She gave a perfunctory smile. “I’ll be fine.”

This time he took the hint. With a brusque nod, he started down the steps. “Let’s go, Fargo.”

The dog threw her one last look and lumbered off in his master’s wake.

Abby turned back to the view, telling herself it was all right that she was uncharacteristically unfriendly. She had a good excuse. Sitting in the same position for five hours had played havoc with her hip, making the muscles tighten and the nerves scream. Add to that the tension of traffic and the fact that she was essentially a runaway, and she was stressed. It was perfectly understandable that she was brusque.

But she was free!

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