

Last Chance Beauty Queen

CHAPTER ONE

Mirrors never lie.

Caroline Rhodes caught the fleeting spark of surprise in her own eyes as she studied her reflection in her Camry's rearview. Despite her professional wardrobe and flawless makeup, the mirror still reflected an image of the small-town Watermelon Queen she had once been. She touched up her lipstick and gave herself one last implacable stare. As usual, the humidity had gotten to her hair. She sleeked it back into its ponytail, but a few stray curls refused to be tamed. It was hopeless.

She snatched her black Coach briefcase from the passenger seat and covered the distance over the blazing blacktop to the front doors of the Columbia Hilton in less than a minute. Icy air greeted her as she passed through the glass doors and headed toward the steakhouse restaurant in the lobby. The heels of her pumps clicked over the marble floor like hammer blows. With each heel strike, the tension coiled inside her.

She was here to meet Hugh deBracy, the umpteenth baron of somewhere in England, who probably looked down his nose at people who came from small rural towns in the middle of nowhere.

DeBracy had come to these shores to buy up a little bit of that rural land so he could put up a textile machinery factory. Caroline's boss, Senator Rupert Warren, wanted to make that happen. There was the matter of two hundred new jobs at stake.

But there was a teeny-tiny problem. The land Lord deBracy wanted wasn't for sale. Caroline's job was to make this problem disappear—a feat that would take a miracle.

She stepped into the dark, cold environment of the steakhouse and scanned the sparse luncheon crowd. She had never seen a photo of Hugh deBracy, but she found him without any trouble.

He was in his mid-thirties and wore a Savile Row suit and a slightly loosened regimental tie. Except for his curly Byronic hair, the man looked like the dictionary definition of an uptight English aristocrat. He sat at a booth halfway down a long row, and he looked up from the menu he'd been perusing as if he could sense her studying him.

The man's gaze widened as if in recognition. He stood, dropping the menu and nervously tightening his tie.

His glance dropped to her ankles and then rose in a slow circuit that moved up her bare, suntanned legs and the professional silhouette of her business suit. The gaze stopped when it reached the hint of lace at the V of her jacket where, predictably, it stuck.

As an ex-beauty queen with bustline to match, Caroline was used to this, even if she hated it. It was tough to be taken seriously when people discovered that you once wore a ridiculous pink and green dress accessorized by a rhinestone tiara and a sash across your breasts.

Caroline squared her worsted-clad shoulders and walked forward. His gaze rose to meet hers. The corner of his mouth twitched, and his eyes—the color of scotch whiskey—softened.

“Miss Rhodes?” he asked.

The sound of her name spoken with those clipped British vowels did something totally inappropriate to her insides. Boy, she really needed to find a meaningful love life, one of these days—after the election. In the meantime, she’d continued to find escape in those romance books featuring suave English heroes.

No doubt this secret addiction to historical romances was the reason her girl parts got hot and bothered by Lord deBracy’s accent. She had to remember that this guy had the ability to royally screw up her life and her career.

She reached for a cool nonchalance that she didn’t for one instant really feel.
“Lord deBracy?”

“Um, that would be Lord Woolham. The title applies to the peerage, not the surname. I am delighted to meet you.” He nodded his head but didn’t extend his hand in greeting, which kind of belied his words.

Crap. She had screwed up, and she really hated doing that. She should have researched English titles before she set one foot in this restaurant or opened her mouth. Despite her gaff, she gritted her teeth, gave him a professional smile that was not too big and not too small, and took her seat in the booth facing him.

“I want to thank you for meeting me here,” he said as he took his seat. He turned and nodded at the waiter in true aristocratic fashion.

“It’s not a problem. Senator Warren wants me to help you in any way I can,” Caroline said. Her words were misleading. Being here with him was a problem. She had everything at stake: her career and her family. His Lordship had nothing at risk, except a potential factory.

The waiter came along, and they ordered: roast beef for him and a small house salad for her. When the waiter left, his Lordship opened the business conversation.

“So,” he said, leaning forward slightly. “According to the senator, you’re the woman who can help me solve my real estate problem.”

She looked him straight in the eye. And his eyes were so warm and brown they didn’t seem to match his stiff formality. She wasn’t going to let him see how badly she felt outclassed here. So she forced herself not to look away. “I’m good at what I do. But Senator Warren has given you assurances that might be unjustified. There are serious complications.”

“I see. Would you care to elaborate?”

No. She wouldn’t. If given her druthers, Caroline would get up and run like a greyhound to the nearest exit. But she was stuck. The senator really, really wanted this factory built.

“I’m afraid this is a very difficult case,” she said, trying to quell the butterflies in her midsection. The waiter came back with deBracy’s house salad before she could say anything more.

His Lordship put his napkin in his lap and began cutting the lettuce with a single-minded purpose that verged on obsession. “How so?” he asked. “According to my partner, who was assembling the land for the factory until his untimely death, the parcel of land in question is not being used productively.”

Wow. How totally smug of him. No doubt Lord Woolham thought that the only productive use of land was in supporting the lifestyles of the rich and aristocratic. “How much do you know about the parcel in question?” she asked.

“Not very much, except that the fellow who owns it won’t sell. It’s a very small piece of land, too, which makes it even more irritating. I have offered quite a bit of money for that small piece of land.”

Like he couldn’t actually pay more if he wanted to—not that more money would solve this particular problem. “Do you need this particular piece of land for the factory project? Couldn’t you—”

“Without it, I won’t have access to the rail line or the main highway. I need to acquire it or there will be no factory.”

The waiter returned and placed a huge portion of roast beef in front of his Lordship and an itty-bitty salad in front of Caroline.

“Is that all you’re going to eat?” deBracy asked, frowning down at her tiny plate.

She ignored his question. She was not about to discuss her struggle with her weight with a member of the English aristocracy.

She picked up her fork and speared a piece of romaine. “Lord Woolham,” she said, “I’m just so sorry, but there is nothing I can do to help you get that land.”

He looked up as he cut his beef. A little half smile played at the corner of his lips. Was he satisfied that she’d gotten his title right? The cad.

“The senator told me that you could fix anything.”

The senator had asked too much of her this time. “I’m not a miracle worker.”

“So tell me why you think it will take a miracle, then.” DeBracy conveyed the meat to his mouth and chewed. The muscles worked in his cheeks, and he managed to look debonair, even with his mouth full.

She leaned forward. “The man who owns the land isn’t going to change his mind. Trust me on this.”

“Is that because he’s an eccentric? I’ve heard he’s a bit ’round the bend.”

Caroline laid her silverware across her plate and dropped her hands to her lap. She intertwined her fingers and squeezed. She wanted to be anywhere but there, having this conversation. Senator Warren shouldn’t have asked her to do this. But if Caroline could find a solution to Lord Woolham’s problem, she might just get the promotion she’d been working for—and that job in Washington, DC. So she sucked in a deep breath and said, “The man who owns the land speaks with angels.”

“Really? How remarkable. What do they say?”

For the first time, Hugh deBracy had surprised her. “You did hear me, didn’t you?” she asked.

“I’m not deaf. What do the angels say?”

“They’re opposed to selling the land.”

“Well, that’s predictable. We’ll just have to convince the angels otherwise, won’t we?”

“Um, I don’t think we can do that. You see, there are additional complications.”

“Aren’t there always?” His voice was laced with impatient arrogance.

“Yes, but these are really big complications.”

“How so?”

“There’s an eighteen-hole miniature golf course on the land.”

“Mini-golf?” DeBracy had stopped chewing. It was hard to tell if he was shocked, amused, or surprised.

“Yes, miniature golf. You know, small holes, putting only, lots of fiberglass hazards and obstacles.”

His Lordship nodded, one cheek still filled with unchewed beef.

“Only in this case,” Caroline continued rapidly, determined to get the truth out quickly, “there are eighteen holes each depicting either an Old Testament Bible story or a chapter in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. The place is a bit notorious, actually. It was featured last year in the online guide Bizarre America: The Ultimate Guide to Tasteless Tourist Traps.”

His Lordship choked on the steak he had neglected to chew. His face turned red, and for a moment, Caroline thought she might have to perform the Heimlich maneuver. She couldn’t live with herself if Golfing for God were the cause of his untimely demise. That might solve one problem for her, but it would certainly annoy the senator.

Luckily, first aid was not required. His Lordship cleared the obstruction and reached for his water glass. His Adam’s apple danced as he swallowed. The motion was almost hypnotic.

Caroline pulled her gaze away. “I guess your late partner didn’t tell you about Golfing for God, huh?” she said once deBracy had finished his water.

He laid down his silverware and then wiped his lips with his napkin. “No, George didn’t provide those details. I did hear from the real estate chap that the owner of the land in question is a complete nutter. But I was given to understand that the business on the property is no longer in operation. Is that not correct?”

Nutter. UK vernacular for crazy as a loon. Great, just great. “Golfing for God was hit by a hurricane and a lightning storm last fall. It’s not currently in operation, but there is a movement to—”

“Good, then I should be able to negotiate with the man who owns it. I’m planning to pop ’round to have a look tomorrow.”

It was her moment to choke. Luckily she didn’t have any food in her mouth. “You can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know who you’ve been dealing with in South Carolina, but anyone in Last Chance will tell you that trying to get Elbert Rhodes to sell his property would take a miracle. Literally.”

“Elbert Rhodes?” His eyebrow curled upward. The man ought to have a quizzing glass.

Her face burned with embarrassment. She had managed to tell the truth, and now she would have to endure his snotty, snide, superior laughter. He was not going to take her seriously.

“That’s right, Lord Woolham, Elbert Rhodes, the owner of Golfing for God, is my father.”