

The Christmas Wish

Chapter 1

The silver Jaguar XJ6 sent pinwheels of red and gold leaves into the autumn twilight as Will Martin left the interstate and approached the town of his birth. As always a feeling of melancholy enveloped him as he drove down the two-lane highway lined with century-old crimson maples whose boughs intertwined and formed a shadowy tunnel across the road. The powerful engine hummed as he maneuvered the gentle twists and turns that led to the town. Will fished the cellular phone from his inside coat pocket and punched in a number.

"Mick," he said into the phone. "I'm sorry I'm late. I was hoping you'd still be at your shop." He smiled at the reply. "I'm less than five minutes away. Thanks." He punched the end button on the phone and returned it to his pocket.

The last vestiges of sunlight brushed the tops of the trees in the town square as he slid the Jaguar to the curb in front of Mick's Flower Shop. He hopped out and hurried into the shop. Mick sat behind the cash register counting the day's receipts. He looked up as he entered the store. "Afternoon, Will. It was nice of you to call, but I figured you'd still want the bouquet you ordered. I wasn't going anywhere until you arrived."

Will smiled at the white-haired old man rose from his chair and made his way to the walk-in cooler in the back of the shop. He emerged a few moments later holding a dozen yellow roses. "This okay, Will?" He held the bouquet lovingly in his hands. "Or should I call you Mr. Martin now that you're running the agency?" Mick's eyes crinkled up at Will.

"Will" will be fine," he replied, with a smile of his own. "The flowers look great, Mick. How much do I owe you?"

"Hmm, I suppose I ought to give you the same price I gave your grandfather. After all, I don't suppose I'd be in business if it weren't for him" Will lifted a quizzical eyebrow. "But that's another story for another day. Ten dollars."

"Are you sure? That seems awfully reasonable. Especially when I kept you open on Thanksgiving Day."

"Yup, ten dollars. That's the Martin price, including tax." The old man smiled. Will handed him a ten-dollar bill. "Thanks, Mick, I'd like to hear that story some time." He took the roses and raced back to the car. He glanced at his watch as the powerful engine pulled the car from the curb. *If I can make it to Julia's in five minutes, I'll be on time*, he thought. He steered through the light traffic around the town square and hurried down

Olive Street to the new condominiums that had sprung up on the edge of town. He slid into a parking spot and hurried up the steps to Julia's front door.

Inside, Julia Welsh admired herself in the hall mirror. The dark red suit she wore accentuated her honey-blond hair. She leaned close to the mirror and inspected her face. Quickly she reached into her bag and applied a fresh dab of color to her lips. The grandfather clock chimed melodiously, as the doorbell rang. *Well, he's on time*, she smiled, *that's a first*. She picked up her dark green overcoat, opened the door, and accepted Will's kiss on the cheek.

"You look gorgeous," he said as he took her arm and led her to the waiting car.

"You don't look so bad yourself," she replied, sinking into the leather seat. *Maybe things are moving along at last*, Julia thought, *at least he's finally taking me home to meet his grandmother*.

Will glanced at the woman sitting next to him. I'm a lucky guy. *I hope Gram approves of her*. He smiled at Julia as she examined herself in the mirror set in the sun visor. The Jaguar sped across town. Will turned into the circular drive in front of a two-story brick home bounded by neatly trimmed hedges. A covered porch ran the width of the house. The manicured lawn was covered with autumn leaves. The smell of wood smoke hung in the air as Will helped Julia from the car. Immediately the front door flew open and Ruth Martin stepped onto the porch. She was wearing a dark blue dress that set off her silver hair. Although seventy-five years of age, she looked ten years younger. Will hugged her, handed her the roses, and kissed her cheek. "Gram, this is Julia Welsh." Ruth Martin smiled broadly and held Julia's hands in hers as she looked into the young woman's clear blue eyes.

"Come in, come in," she said, as she led them into the foyer of her home. "Will, it's so good to have you home for the holidays this year."

"It's good to be here."

"Dinner's ready. Why don't you get Miss Welsh seated in the dining room and then help me bring in the food from the kitchen."

Will led Julia through the living room, through the French doors, and into the dining room. The table was set with the pale ivory linen cloth and the crystal he knew would be there. This meal always began the holiday season for the Martin family, and the menu never varied. He pulled out a chair for Julia. "I'll be right back," he whispered as she took her seat.

Julia inspected the dining room while she waited. The Spode china reflected her perfect face as she gazed across the room at the painting of Warren Martin hanging on the wall above the sideboard. Two elegant silver candelabras bracketed the picture. Julia turned to find a similar painting of Ruth Martin on the wall behind her. She examined the silverware and noticed that the handle of each knife was engraved with the family crest. She thought of the handsome man helping his grandmother in the kitchen and smiled a deep, satisfied smile. *Thirty-two years is long enough for him to be single*.