

MAGIC OF THE HEART

by
C.J. Harte



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CHAPTER ONE

Maggie stared out the window at the gazebo. Sun and shadows danced across the empty structure. It was another sunny California day in early November. She pulled her arms around herself as if to keep the emptiness from growing any larger. She imagined what it would feel like to sit out there holding hands with a lover. “Not likely. Not anytime soon,” she whispered. The only way to fight that feeling was to push those thoughts away. She stared at the gazebo and restored the feeling of calm. “It’s not fucking fair.”

“What’s not fair, M.J.?” The quiet solitude was broken by Maya Browning, her personal assistant, who came in carrying a bunch of notes.

“Life. Nothing.” Maggie kept her personal and professional lives very separate. “What’s up?” Business problems were easier to solve and didn’t usually require much commitment.

Maya looked at her feet. Maggie could feel the mood changing and she slid on her business persona as easily as she put on her shoes. “What’s going on?”

Maya finally looked up, took a deep breath, and spoke. “We need to redo some of the tracks on the new CD.”

She felt the calm slipping away and there was little she could do to stop it. “What the fuck do you mean we need to redo?”

“Look, M.J., we’ve been trying to fix it.”

“Trying doesn’t cut it. Only results. What the hell happened?” She was M.J. Carson, the superstar. She knew how to charm, how to entertain, how to get whatever or whomever she wanted. These were skills she used to survive and advance her career. Being charming was a second skin she could slip on easily. Today, however, wasn’t one of those times. “Shit, Maya, these tracks were supposed to be done two months ago, before we begin the damn tour.” She paced around her home office. “I’m supposed to leave tonight. When the hell is this supposed to get done?”

“Look, M.J., the music will be done in time. Don’t worry.”

“Don’t worry?” Maggie stared at her, not believing what she was hearing. “Who the fuck should worry? It’s only my name and voice.”

Maya spoke calmly. “We can have it done by the end of the month and to the distributor before Christmas. I promise.”

Maggie shook her head. This was so damn typical. “When I was sixteen and playing anywhere I could get a gig, I expected things to get screwed up. Once the band became a success, I hired people to make sure that never happened so I could concentrate on writing and performing music. Not managing it. Damn it, Maya, that’s your job. You’ve worked for me for five years and here I am, after nearly twenty years in the business, and things are fucked up. Do I have to do everything?” She shook her head. *I definitely need a break.* “You knew this album needed to be getting big play before the tour. You knew what a tight deadline we’re working on. You knew how hard I’ve worked to get these songs written and the music put together. You knew how difficult it was to round everyone up to get the recording done in the first place. You knew I wanted to spend the next three weeks with the kids. Why the hell am I just finding out it hasn’t been finished?”

Maya looked at her notes. “When we originally listened to the master, there were some rough places. The sound engineer wasn’t sure what caused it but thought he could fix it.” She looked up. “He called me this morning and said there was no way to fix

it. It's only a small portion of a couple of tracks. No big deal. It'll be done on time."

Maggie walked over to the window overlooking the sun-dappled gazebo. She could barely resurrect any of the threads of peace she felt earlier. *Another fucking sunny day*, she thought. She turned to face Maya. "No big deal? No fucking big deal! Have you forgotten who will put in the long hours recording in some damn cramped studio? Are you the one paying for the redo? Are you going to listen to the gripes from the band when we call them in? Again." Maggie didn't wait for an answer. "Don't you dare tell me not to worry. Call Karl and tell him to get the same mixers from the last CD. Fly them out if we have to. I don't want anyone else and I don't care how much. Understand?"

Maya nodded. "I'll make sure it's done."

Maggie wanted to scream or throw something. She felt like a cat about to pounce. She repeated her warning. "Do you understand?"

Maya nodded. "I understand."

"Go on. Get out. I need to finish packing." Before Maya had a chance to exit, Maggie stopped her. "Oh, by the way, are you sure all the arrangements have been made for this trip? I don't want any hassles for the next three weeks. And no media!"

"Your itinerary is with your tickets," Maya said. "I'll have the recording set up for three weeks from tomorrow. We'll record in Orlando."

"Thanks, Maya. I don't know how I'd manage without you."

"Yeah, sure. Have a great trip." Maya left quickly.

Finally alone, Maggie sat in front of the window and stared out at the garden. The office faced the eastern edge of her estate and provided a languorous, peaceful view of the large natural-wood gazebo nestled among the shade trees. The solitude and beauty of the structure was the deciding factor when they purchased the place seven years ago, and the reason this room

had become her office. The gazebo stood as a silent sentinel, a symbol of the peace and quiet she rarely experienced in her own life.

She sighed. “Another fucking sunny day.”

CHAPTER TWO

Susan Hettinger quickly slid into her seat in first class, allowing other passengers to board the plane. She wondered what had happened to her life. There was a time when she was first starting out that she had felt more in control. Lately she seemed to be spending more time on planes, less time with her family, and she had zero personal life. She leaned her head against the seat and watched as an attractive woman with two children took the remaining seats in her row, with the daughter sitting next to her.

Shortly after take-off, the girl asked, “Are you going to Disney World too?”

For the first time that day, Susan smiled. “Not anytime soon, I’m afraid. I live in Orlando.”

“My mom is taking us on a vacation. Do you have a little girl?”

Susan thought about her own daughter and how little time she had spent with her recently. “I do. Her name is Cady and she is four years old. How old are you?” *Note to self: I need to spend more time with Cady.*

“I’m Beth and I’m seven. That’s my brother D.J. over there. He’s three. And that’s my mom.” She pointed to the woman and little boy. “I’m the oldest.”

The flight attendant interrupted their conversation, offering something to drink and getting dinner orders.

I can't believe the office wasn't able to get a direct flight. She sipped her diet soda and hoped she could stay awake.

She leaned her seat back and let her mind drift. When was the last time she had relaxed, really relaxed? She went back more than six years to a time when she was a rising star accountant at a major accounting firm. She'd shared her ideas with colleagues who recognized her creativity and organization. That was before Ed Turner offered her the job as his chief financial officer in his venture company in the entertainment industry. Sometimes she felt her life had been in a steady decline ever since.

When she first started the job, Susan loved to say, "I work in the entertainment industry." Suddenly she was much more interesting. People quizzed her incessantly about whom she knew and what gossip she'd heard. When she finally explained that she was the financial manager for a creative projects agency, people quickly lost interest—unless they were trying to plead for more money for their projects or they were caught doing something shady. Then their language was much less pleasant. These creative people all too often liked to use their creativity with other people's money, and it was her job to keep track of every cent spent.

The overhead announcement interrupted her thoughts. She tightened her seat belt and reminded herself that she was a working single parent who managed a team of professionals handling over \$100 million in projects a year. Since no one except the producers and backers cared about what she did, she no longer tried to explain her job to strangers, or her family, and no longer felt the need to impress anyone. She just introduced herself as an accountant and avoided the tedious questioning. And it kept her life routine...and boring.

As she stared at the magazine she'd bought in the airport, she admitted that she would barely recognize who was number one on the Billboard charts or who starred in the top-flight movies. At

times she thought she should pay more attention to who was on the A-list, especially when Ed was ranting about some deal with some star. At least she could pretend to know what they were talking about. How had her life become so boring? So repetitive. *Well, Susan, that's the way you wanted your life. It's probably going to take something big to change it.*

The sound of children's laughter interrupted her thoughts. Beth was holding on to a game board. D.J. could barely reach across the aisle. By the time he finally moved his piece on the board, someone walked down the aisle and he had to struggle to keep his seat. His last effort landed him on the floor and caused his sister to giggle.

Smiling, Susan asked, "Would you two like to get a little closer?"

"I'm sorry if my children are bothering you."

When the mother spoke, Susan heard the tingling notes of a warm springtime melody. Just a hint of amusement and a measure of promise. Susan turned to face the speaker. Sitting across the aisle was an attractive brunette near her own age. Susan was impressed by the gentle way the woman dealt with the disgruntled child. It was when the woman looked up and smiled that Susan felt a rush of unexpected heat.

"They're not a problem," Susan said. "I think he just wants to play." Seeing the disappointed look on D.J.'s face, Susan said, "Look, why don't we trade seats for a while? It would be a lot more fun if they could play the game."

"Are you sure? That's very generous of you."

Once they were settled next to each other, the mother said, "My name is Margaret Carson-Baxter, but my friends call me Maggie."

Susan accepted the outstretched hand. Maggie's hand was surprisingly large and strong. Susan found her concentration slipping as her blood warmed turning into liquid honey. She stared up into beautiful, laughing eyes. Suddenly she was having trouble remembering anything, much less what was being

said. She stumbled over her own name. “Susan, uh, Susan, uh, Hettinger.” She chastised herself for this sudden inability to start a conversation. *I must be tired.*

Maggie didn’t seem to notice any awkwardness. “I usually get nonstop flights,” she said, “but this was the only flight leaving when I wanted to leave. The next flight wasn’t until ten. I wouldn’t mind, but my kids would probably sleep part of the way and then be wound up once we landed.” Maggie smiled. “Two kids going at a hundred twenty miles per hour at five in the morning is not healthy for mom or kids.”

Susan laughed and thought of her own daughter’s antics. “My office did the same thing, scheduling me on this flight. This time I wanted to be home before I was doing the same thing.” Susan found herself relaxing. “Your children are beautiful, like their mother.” She sat back abruptly. “Oh, my God, I can’t believe I said that.”

Maggie laughed and touched Susan’s arm. “Thank you. That’s the nicest compliment I’ve had in a long time. I think my children are beautiful, but it’s always nice to hear it from others.”

“I...I...” Susan tried to find some appropriate response that would keep her foot out of her mouth. “I guess most parents think that. I love when my coworkers say something nice about my daughter. Of course, families are often a topic of conversation at work.” *God, Susan, how lame is that? You never join office conversations unless it deals with business.*

Maggie couldn’t remember talking about children with any of her co-workers. Maya was a lesbian. Her other two assistants weren’t married. Karl was married, but she didn’t know whether or not he had kids. That fact surprised her. “I guess so.” Maggie didn’t want to do any further exploration of that topic. “I think I need to go to the restroom.”

Susan watched Maggie walk down the aisle. She was tall and solid with a walk that was both confident and easy. Everything spoke of reserve and control. Still, there was something

compelling about her. When Maggie returned, Susan felt herself falling back into the easy conversation.

“Where are you headed to?” Maggie asked.

“I live in Orlando. Your daughter mentioned that you folks are heading to Disney. Guess we’ll be on the same flight all the way.”

“That was another reason for wanting to get into Orlando early. The kids have been absolutely wild since I told them we were going.” Maggie’s tone became softer when she spoke about her children. “This is a combination of business and pleasure. I haven’t had a vacation with the kids in a long time. To be honest, I don’t think I’ve had a real vacation in the last two years.”

“I try to set aside special time for my daughter.” *Susan, that was a really smart thing to say.* “What I mean is that I make sure I take the weekend off when I have to be away during the week. They grow so fast, and I don’t want to miss any part of her life.”

“Derek and I feel the same way.”

“Derek?” Susan wasn’t sure she was ready for the answer.

“My husband. He’s a professional football player and has a game this weekend. He won’t be able to join us until right before Christmas.”

Maggie mentioned his name and Susan nodded. “Oh, Derek Baxter.” While Susan was sure her father would have recognized the name, she did not follow the sport. Or, for that matter, any sport. For once she wished she had.

“I’m heading home,” Susan said. “I’ve been in California all week on business.” Realizing she had put herself in a corner, she dreaded the next question.

“What do you do?”

Susan groaned and gave her well-rehearsed answer. “I’m the accounting director for a business in Orlando. What do you do?” Maggie’s eyes hadn’t glazed over, but Susan didn’t want to give her the chance to say, “How nice.”

“I’m in music.” Maggie hesitated. “Mostly producing.” Maggie wasn’t sure how much more to reveal.

“You must have to deal with a lot of men. I had a good friend in college who was determined to succeed as a symphony director. She struggled for a long time and then decided to just compose. Even that was difficult. She now teaches at Florida State.”

Maggie smiled. This was one of her favorite topics. “Do you realize how few women conduct major symphonies or head major recording studios? And women composers haven’t gotten the financing men have. It doesn’t matter the genre. Where are the women? Sure, there are a few, but not nearly enough.” Maggie paused and realized she had revealed too much. “Sorry. My senior paper in college was on the role of women in music management and administration.”

“Don’t apologize. Women still have many glass ceilings to break.” Susan searched for some clever thing to say. “What do you think it will take to make that change?” *Clever, really clever, Susan!* While it got the desired response and Maggie continued talking, Susan was suddenly aware of how much she was enjoying the conversation and didn’t want their time together to end.

Fate intervened when the plane landed in Dallas for their only stop. First they were delayed for two hours while the airline tried to fix a leaky faucet, unsuccessfully. Next they were told the plane was not flyable. Finally, the airlines recruited another plane, at another gate, in another terminal. When the airline offered her VIP assistance including a waiting electric cart, Maggie grabbed Susan’s arm. “Come on. Why walk when we can ride?” Kids, carry-ons, and two adults were quickly moved to the awaiting cart and zoomed to the new gate.

Susan had never had such great service, except for the time she broke her foot. She briefly wondered if Maggie was some airline VIP but then erased that thought with the acknowledgment of the assistance being designed for the kids. They were all settled in their first-class seats before their flying companions were embarking from the Sky Train at the terminal.

Once aboard the plane and headed to Orlando, Maggie

discovered her wallet was missing. “Damn, all my identification is in it. It had to have fallen out on the other plane.”

One of the flight attendants noticed Maggie’s agitation and came up. “May we help you, Ms. Carson?” The attendant’s inquiries were not helpful. “A member of the cleaning crew may have picked it up,” the attendant said. “I am sure we’ll find it. Do you need to make a call or other arrangements?”

Frustration evident, Maggie nonetheless remained gracious. “Ms. Carson,” the attendant whispered, “could I get your autograph for my nephew?”

Her husband must be some star quarterback, Susan thought, as Maggie asked the nephew’s name and signed her name. Susan thought Maggie was vaguely familiar, but she quickly discarded that thought when she realized she had been staring at Maggie all evening. *Of course she’s familiar looking. Susan, this is not like you. Sitting back in her seat, she tried to calm her racing heart. Come on, Susan, this is some married stranger. Chill, she reminded herself. An attractive married stranger. Admit it, you haven’t enjoyed being with another woman this much in a long, long, long time. What is it about Maggie? This is like the time I went to a circus and watched the magician pull rabbits and other wonderful objects out of the hat. But Maggie is a married magical person. Oh, shit.*



It was nearly three in the morning when the plane finally landed in Orlando and they found their way to the baggage claim to wait for the bags. “My car is parked in the terminal lot. If you need a ride or if I can help with anything...” Susan let the sentence fall off. What else could she offer? Maggie obviously was financially secure...and married, she again reminded herself.

“Susan, thank you. I have a rental car and hotel arranged. Oh, shit. I forgot. I don’t have my wallet.”

Before her brain could get in gear, Susan opened her mouth. “I have my car here and I have a large house with plenty of room. You’re welcome to stay until you can work something out.” When her brain caught up with her mouth it screamed. *What are you doing, Miss Obsessive-Compulsive Queen of Privacy?* “I have only one child and it’s a really large house.” *Great, that’s a winning argument!*

“Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“Of course I’m sure. Guests are always welcome at my house.” *Right, and it is going to snow in Orlando tomorrow. You’ve really gone and done it now.*

Maggie rubbed her sleeping son’s back. She quickly reviewed all her options before she made a decision. “Okay, but only if you let me buy dinner when I get some money.”

Maggie’s lopsided smile was worth it. Susan’s heart threatened to stop beating. She took another deep breath, sealed the agreement with a handshake, and herded Maggie and her children into the waiting car. Considering the amount of luggage Maggie and her kids had, Susan was glad she had a minivan.

As they drove away from the airport, panic finally set in. Susan realized she had no idea what kind of person Maggie was, where she lived, how she lived, how much money she earned. She figured Maggie’s husband earned a six- or seven-figure—*but who’s counting*—salary. Still, she was bringing a total stranger to her modest home in Winter Park, a conservative, upper-middle-income area north of Orlando. A place no one outside her family had ever stayed.

Susan’s house once belonged to her parents but was given to her when her father retired and her parents started traveling. The older neighborhood was composed of many old friends of her parents as well as an increasing number of young upwardly mobile families with children, looking for the “right” starter address. When her father died, Susan’s mom came back to live in the mother-in-law cottage behind her house and to care for

Susan's daughter during Susan's frequent out-of-town business trips.



Susan used the remote control to open the garage door. As she drove into the garage, a nagging parental voice reminded her of her lifestyle, her responsibilities, and her near dread of meeting new people. Now, she'd spent the entire trip entranced with a stranger and brought Maggie and her children into her house. *Me, the queen of...no, don't go there. Well, as Scarlett O'Hara would say, "I'll think about that tomorrow."*

The sleeping children were carried in and quickly settled into the spare beds in Cady's room. Cady stirred briefly but fell back asleep. Unloading the car was a quest to defy gravity and other laws of physics. Somehow they managed to get everything into the house in one trip. "You're a lifesaver," Maggie said.

Susan felt both awkward and guilty. Awkward because of her need to continue the connection with Maggie. Guilty for the feelings of attraction. Her control slipping, she mumbled something.

Maggie reached for Susan's arm. "Susan, I'm serious. I can't tell you how much all this means to me. Thank you."

Maggie's hand heated the skin on Susan's arm. A subtle tremor began in the center of Susan's body and threatened to spread. Susan willed her body to stay still. After Maggie let go, Susan felt unexpectedly empty.

Everything changed once they moved into the room that served as Susan's home office. The white enameled daybed was now the resting place of many late-night reports. The computer sat quietly. The whole room was a silent testimony to her structured, organized life. *My boring. organized life.*

"I'm sorry the room is such a mess," Susan said as she grabbed a stack of papers. "I leave all my folders out so I can return to

them when I get home.” Looking around at the carefully arranged and color-coordinated stacks of working files, she realized she had a whole Southern Forest in processed paper. *Oh, goddess, suppose she’s one of those rabid West Coast environmentalists.* There was no way to suddenly make all the paper disappear unless Susan began shoveling it under her clothes. Briefly she wondered if Maggie would notice if she tried to hide the paper under her blouse.

Maggie was clearly amused at Susan’s scurrying. “You can organize my office any day. Yours looks so neat. I have to rely on my assistant to help me figure out what I do each day.” Susan didn’t care if Maggie was an environmentalist. She was willing to start a paperless work system if Maggie approved.

As they cleared the room, Maggie asked, “If it wouldn’t be a problem, I’d love some hot tea. Anything herbal or caffeine free. Then if you can point me to a hot shower, I’ll be eternally in your debt.”

There was a small half-bath off the family room. Another full-size bathroom was located near Cady’s bedroom, next to the spare bedroom in which her mother slept. The pipes in that bathroom made lovely noises that were loud enough to stir the neighborhood. *Why haven’t I gotten that fixed?* That left only the bathroom in Susan’s bedroom. She had little choice. *Why did I invite this person into my house? Well, it’s a little late to worry about that now.* The voices continued to argue. *Shut up!* Susan finally ordered her overactive imagination.

She grabbed towels and led Maggie into her bathroom. “If you don’t mind using the shower in my bedroom, you can go ahead and clean up there while I fix us both some tea.”

“Perfect.” Maggie reached for Susan’s arm as she walked by. “Susan, you have been great. If you’re uncomfortable about anything, it’s okay. I can wait until we get moved to the hotel.”

“Maggie, please, make yourself at home.”

Maggie gently caressed Susan’s shoulder, then moved to briefly touch Susan’s cheek. “Thank you.” With that she turned,

walked into her room, and started to unpack some items from her overnight bag.

Susan placed her hand on her cheek. She watched as Maggie pulled things from her luggage. Her movements were slow and deliberate. Susan struggled to breathe. Maggie had a definite grace and sensuality. While she didn't meet most people's criteria for classic beauty, she had a magnetism that caused others to notice her. Tall, lean body. Languid movements of a cat, carefully sorting through her possessions.

Finally she held up a midnight blue satin nightshirt with buttons down the front and long tails in the front and back. *Maggie would be stunning in it*, Susan decided. Her breathing became shallow and rapid as she watched. Maggie held the nightshirt, examining it, running her hand up and down the fabric. Susan realized that Maggie knew she was watching yet she refused to acknowledge Susan's presence.

Susan had become a voyeur, unwilling to pull herself away. Maggie removed her blazer, slowly folding it over a chair. Next she slipped off her loafers as she unhooked her leather belt. Only as Maggie unbuttoned her jeans did Susan force herself to turn away.

Susan returned to the kitchen and mechanically attempted to make tea. No cogent thought surfaced—only emotions and images. The water boiled out, forcing her to refill the pot. On the third attempt she was able to force herself to focus on the simple act of making tea. As Maggie walked into the kitchen she was setting two cups of tea on the table. Susan's heart rate had finally returned to normal...until Maggie entered.

Wet hair hanging down below her shoulders, moisture glistening on her face as well as all exposed parts of her body, Maggie was every bit as stunning as Susan had imagined. Susan's reaction was visceral. The desire to touch was more intense than anything she had ever experienced. She curled her hands into tight fists to keep from reaching out. Maggie's nightshirt reached mid-thigh, and well-formed, tanned legs were clearly visible. She

was beautiful. *How does she manage it? She either works out or keeps herself physically fit in other ways.*

Maggie's movements were again deliberate and graceful. She walked to the table, pulled out a chair, and sat. One leg folded under her and the other foot resting on the seat with her knee just under her chin, she stared up at Susan.

Susan knew she was in trouble. She turned away with a not-so-gentle reminder to herself that Maggie was a married woman with two children. She also briefly considered that she didn't have time for a relationship, even if Maggie wasn't straight. *Relationship? What am I thinking?* Sometimes reality was better than a cold shower.

"I seem to be constantly thanking you," Maggie said. Her voice was soft, her eyes inviting. That wonderful lopsided smile was just beginning. "I insist you let me make it up some way. I won't take no for an answer."

Susan had to stay focused on the sheer act of picking up the cup to avoid spilling it. "You really don't have to do anything. I know what it's like to be stranded." *Yeah, right! You don't go outside to pick up the paper without a detailed plan for how you open the door, how quickly you walk, how you bend and pick up the paper. Stranded? I am never stranded. Not me!* Even her mother questioned where Susan developed this compulsion to organize every facet of her life.

"I told you. I won't take no. In fact, if you and your family don't have any plans for Thanksgiving, I would like you to be my guests. That's when Derek arrives. I realize you may have other plans, but if not, please say yes."

Susan wanted to say yes, but then she remembered: *Thanksgiving is in two weeks. It's my turn to cook. My sister and her family are coming over.* And then the thorns of reality began to pierce.

"Susan, are you okay?"

"Yes, I...I'm...I'm fine," she muttered.

Oh, shit. Shit! Shit! Shit! What have I done? All her fears and inhibitions attacked at once. *Some evil plot, surely.* Her life had been a constant battle for control. Control made her comfortable but also allowed her to postpone decisions. Especially about her personal life. She felt control slipping. *Oh, shit.*