

The Perfect Partner

Chapter 1

New Orleans

May 1887

Carine Bouchard's eyes scanned the newspaper office for something to knock over. Failing that, she stabbed a finger in the direction of the young man standing in the doorway and leaned forward over her editor's desk. "Perhaps you don't know Mr. Colville's reputation. There's no way I can work with him. His advice will be the same, no matter what our readers ask: 'Have a drink and bed the lady. That's what she needs.'"

"Miss Bouchard!" Swenson bellowed. "Show some respect!"

Vespasian Colville, a jaunty grin on his face, sauntered into the room and shook the editor's hand. "Her remarks don't offend me, sir." He turned to Carine and bowed. "I'll soon prove myself worthy of working with the eminent Miss Bouchard. I'm certain I'm up to the challenge."

Was he *mocking* her? Her heart sank and her stomach roiled. It was bad enough that Mr. Swenson was adding a male writer's point of view to her popular column, *Dear Jacqueline*. But to saddle her with this man! Perhaps if she insulted him enough, he'd quit before he started. She met his eyes. "Well, I'm certain you're not, Mr. Colville."

"Now, now." Swenson glared at her and waved the young man to a chair beside hers. "A little tension between writing partners will add some spice. With this column, the *Daily Picayune* will be ahead of most newspapers in the country. I'm going to call it *Dear Jacqueline and Jacques* and run it three times a week. Readers will love it."

He paused to knock ash from his cigarette into the heavy crystal ashtray on his desk. “I envision you agreeing on a suitable response to most letters. If you cannot agree, for whatever reason, you’ll each write your own advice. Readers will take sides. Men against women and so forth; it’ll sell newspapers.”

Carine almost laughed out loud. She and Vespasian were expected to agree on answers? Not likely. She turned to look through the glass that separated Mr. Swenson’s office from the constant activity of the busy newsroom. A row of female typists lined one wall, clattering away at their machines, while male reporters dominated the room, pacing, shouting to each other, throwing balls of paper into the trash, hunting and pecking out their drafts on newer machines. Now that Vespasian was hired, she felt unsure of her position. She wasn’t a secretary but she wasn’t in charge of the column either. Was she supposed to work *for* Vespasian?

She had known him since she could remember. Whenever she spent the day with her best friend, Maureen Collins, he showed up, too. As a pesky boy, he interrupted their dolls’ tea parties, pulled their hair, put stinging caterpillars down the backs of their dresses. As a young man, the pattern of self-centered hedonism continued—with drinking, gambling, and God knew what all. Pervasive rumors had it that he visited with ladies of the night.

When Maureen made her debut two years ago, Vespasian began courting her tirelessly. Carine warned her against the man, believing he would ruin her reputation and break her heart—all for his own amusement. Maureen had not exactly appreciated her advice. The friends didn’t speak for many months.

“Miss Bouchard?”

She wasn't paying the slightest attention. Vespasian nudged her arm and nodded toward their boss. She looked up in time to see Mr. Swenson pull a fistful of envelopes from his desk drawer.

"As I was just telling Mr. Colville," he said, his piercing blue eyes fixed on her, "I have more than a dozen letters here. All these came in yesterday. I suggest the two of you proceed to the boardroom and get started. I need five hundred words by five o'clock."

With a grin, Vespasian accepted the letters from Mr. Swenson before she could. Carine stood, yanked her skirt into place, and snapped, "You shall have an excellent column, Mr. Swenson, as always."

They entered a room furnished with eight straight-back chairs and a long oak table with a pitcher of water and two glasses, a writing tablet, pencils, a typewriter and paper.

Carine took charge before he could. "Sit down, sir, divide the bundle and start reading. When you find something interesting, set it aside. I'll do the same. If we're lucky, we'll find three or four letters that are usable. Dictate them to me and I'll type. I'm guessing you don't know how."

"Actually I do."

She raised her eyes to his. "I'm stunned."

"I suspect there's quite a bit you don't know about me," he said, with unmistakable insinuation.

Her breathing became uneven, but only for a moment. She motioned him to a chair. "I hope there is plenty I don't know about you. I'd like to keep it that way."

He remained standing and quirked an eyebrow. “I taught myself to type in the last two months. Practiced daily. I found myself with quite a bit of time off from Collins Factorage and I always dreamed of writing professionally, you know.”

“Perhaps you shouldn’t have.” She glared at him. “Sit down and start reading.”

“You’re standing. A gentleman doesn’t sit while a lady—”

She threw up her hands. “This is the working world, Mr. Colville. There’s no need for strict attention to social mores.”

“We’re writing an advice column on etiquette and social interactions, are we not?”

“Fine,” she said and settled in a chair.

Vespasian sat beside her and divided the letters as if dealing cards, one for her, one for him. “I read your column religiously. Every Monday and Thursday. Occasionally, I’ve been quite impressed.”

She flinched. Occasionally? “It started as a weekly, you know, but it’s so popular that—”

“I was hired.” He smiled, showing off remarkably straight teeth. The skin around his eyes crinkled and his green eyes sparkled. He was enjoying himself. Sparring with her was his day’s entertainment. He could joke, but she needed this job. Her family wasn’t in the poorhouse, but since her father’s death last year, her mother had curtailed all luxuries. The novel she worked on secretly every night still hadn’t sold . . . If this ridiculous partnership failed, she would make sure *he* was the one to leave.

He finished sorting the letters and leaned closer. “I know I’ve not had a serious purpose in life so far, Miss Bouchard, but I’m a changed man. If you give me a chance, I think you’ll be surprised.”

“I’m sure I won’t be.” She sighed heavily. “That’s the problem.”

The first letter she opened was written in the tiniest script she'd ever seen. She removed her spectacles, cleaned them with a handkerchief from her purse and replaced them. From the corner of her eye, she saw he noticed but ignored him. She certainly wasn't going to turn and let him see her full face without her glasses. She'd worn them for the last five years; she'd become the young lady in glasses and she was perfectly fine with that description.

Maureen told her she hid behind them. Perhaps she did. She could enjoy a Mardi Gras ball or a night at the opera without them. She needed them to read, but not to see a set of steps, the actors on a stage, a handsome dance partner. Though he'd asked her out of politeness, she'd never accepted a dance with Vespasian, who counted himself one of the best dancers in the state of Louisiana. The fact that he also considered himself God's gift to women made her nervous, even now. Such arrogance. And such a worthless rakehell.

He began to laugh. "I think we should use this one. It's from a young lady who wants to let a certain young man know she's interested in him. Listen:

*"I came out in January and he danced with me at quite a few Mardi Gras balls, but he's not called on me. What can I do to let him know that I'd like to become better acquainted?"*

*"Young Lady in Distress."*

Why was that amusing? Carine took a deep breath and asked the Lord for strength to get through the next hour. "Are you familiar with the language of the fan? At a house party or garden party, she should carry the fan open in her right hand, signaling she's desirous of acquaintance."

Vespasian's forehead creased with incredulity.

She went on, "And when she knows he's watching her, she closes it, indicating she wishes to speak with him."

He shook his head. "I see why I've been called in to help," he muttered for her to hear. "Men don't know what all that fan business means. Do you think the Jesuit priests are teaching young men the language of the fan?"

She paused to consider. She had long suspected men didn't know much about fans, but she refused to let him win this point. "If a gentleman doesn't know about fans, he shouldn't be out in society."

"That doesn't help *Young Lady in Distress*," he retorted. He brushed away the dark brown curls that fell across his forehead. "Let's assume this gentleman misses the fan signal. What else can you suggest?"

Carine tried to picture men and women mingling at a house party. "Suppose she drops a handkerchief so he must pick it up? She thanks him and a conversation begins."

"More nonsense," he said. "I will tell you exactly what to say. Please type, Miss Bouchard. I'll dictate: "*Dear Young Lady in Distress*,"

"*I—or are we writing we? I like 'we.'*

"*We suggest the next time you meet this gentleman, contrive to move close and stand beside him. Put a parenthesis—If we have to tell you how to manage this maneuver, you should still be in the schoolroom. Close parenthesis. Are you with me so far?*"

"I type very fast, sir."

He nodded. "*While smiling brightly, angle your body forward, preferably in a gown that shows some décolletage.*"

Carine stopped. "I'm not typing that. She'll ruin her reputation."

He raised his eyebrows. “Hear me out.” He cleared his throat. “*You must glance at his trousers. Put a parenthesis—Again, if we have to explain what part of his trousers your eyes should find, go back to the schoolroom—close parenthesis.*”

“Mr. Colville!” She slapped the table beside the typewriter.

Ignoring her, he continued: “*If you do not see evidence of his interest in you, move on to another gentleman.*”

She crossed her arms and gave him a withering stare. “We cannot write that.”

“Miss Bouchard, I believe you’re blushing.”

Indeed, her face felt very hot. “I can’t believe you’re suggesting such a charade to her. She might as well jump into bed with him. Forget courting all together.”

He stood, reached for the pitcher of water and poured her a glass. As he did, the back vent of his coat opened and she had a view of his trousers, pulled taut across his buttocks and thighs.

She knew she was flaming red now. She accepted the water glass gratefully and took several rapid swallows. “Thank you,” she murmured.

Vespasian’s eyes fixed on her hair, moved downward to her face, her neck and her bosom. Smiling, his eyes returned to her face. Did she—her physical person—please him? She knew very little about men, but sizing her up this way was a shameless attempt at intimidation. She would not let him take control here. It was *her column*.

“I have no wish to offend you, Miss Bouchard, but I’m afraid the two of us must be honest with each other if we’re to write together.” He leaned closer, his breath on her cheek. “If a gentleman is not aroused by the sight of a young lady’s breasts at close proximity, nothing she says or does will induce him to call on her.”

Startled by his frankness, Carine sat perfectly still, her hands poised above the keys, her body thrumming with awareness of his warmth beside her. She had no brothers and no close male cousins. She'd never had a man speak with such honesty to her. She swallowed though her mouth was dry. "Is that so? It's not the same with women."

He patted her wrist, surprising her with such familiarity. "Of course it is. She may not admit it, but there's a little thrill low in her belly, a lovely twinge of queasiness when she sees a certain gentleman across the room. If there's not, she doesn't want *him* to call on *her*."

"But he might find her fascinating if only he paid a call . . ."

He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "She can drop a thousand handkerchiefs if she likes. He'll pick them up and be polite, but he won't call if he's not attracted to her physical person."

"You're impossible! Is that what love is all about for you? For men?"

He grinned sheepishly. "Well, not entirely, but it's a large part. There's no point in this young lady thinking she can attract him if he's not interested."

"Perhaps her father has a huge bank account."

"Ahh, that's a different story." He put his hands behind his head and leaned back, stretching his long legs out in front of him. "I'm sure we'll have a letter about marriages of convenience before long. Meanwhile, this lady needs to hear the truth."

Carine had to admit she was inclined to agree with him. "Very well. I like your idea of moving close to stand beside him, but I'll alter the wording."

He shrugged. "I don't suppose Mr. Swenson would permit my wording."

She did not respond until she finished typing. "One finished. Let's move on." She opened the next letter, scanned it and shook her head.

“Distasteful, I presume?”

She read aloud, “*Dear Jacqueline,*

*“Is there any chance a man will marry me when his parents are against our union?”*

*“Loved by Him, Not Them.”*

“A Romeo and Juliet.” Vespasian sighed as if he came across such situations all the time.

“How romantic.”

Annoyed by the sentiment, Carine bit out, “I can only hope you’re employing sarcasm, sir. This type of situation is hopeless. We have Shakespeare to blame for scores of young ladies thinking these circumstances”—she shook the letter in her hand—“are romantic.”

He grimaced. “Let’s each write an answer, Miss Bouchard.”

She threaded another sheet of paper into the typewriter. He leaned across the table to grab paper and pencil, giving her a second view of his long legs and his pants as his coat slid sideways. She felt a queasiness low in her belly. *Nonsense*. She typed quickly. The sooner she finished here, the sooner she could have supper.

As she read her reply, Vespasian rose and began pacing, both hands behind his back.

*“Dear Loved by Him,*

*“Are you prettier, more intelligent, better educated, better dressed or better off financially than your future mother-in-law? Any of these could inspire disapproval. Or is it the reverse? If your social standing, family background or financial means are lacking, it will be nearly impossible to overcome these prejudices. Expect many years of exemplary living and a houseful of adorable children before they accept you. And even then, they may never change their opinion of you.*

*“I advise you to think this through very carefully before you consider eloping. If he gives up an inheritance for you—which I suspect will be the outcome—you must be certain deep in your hearts that love will endure without.”*

He went up one side of the table, turned and strolled back on the other side. When she finished, he turned to face her. “Miss Bouchard, the last thing this couple should do is *think this through.*”

Did he plan to disagree with *everything* she said? Carine narrowed her eyes and bit her lip hard. “Is everything a joke to you? I—we—might alter the course of someone’s life with our advice. We have a serious responsibility.”

“I know,” he said, “and if these two are in love, they should follow their passion and live happily ever after.” Picking up his paper, his voice hoarse with emotion, he read: *“Tell this man your sun rises in him each morning. If he were to abandon you, you would have no warmth, no light, no love.”*

A shiver ran down Carine’s spine. What a beautiful declaration; perhaps Vespasian could write after all. She supposed no one would ever share such a sentiment with her. At a full twenty years of age, she’d never had a proposal, much less a serious suitor. She sipped her water before she spoke. “Utter foolishness. I refuse to offer this woman the expectation of happiness in a marriage that begins with his parents’ antagonism.”

“Romeo and Juliet—”

“Died! Shakespeare didn’t *write* about the myriad problems likely to beset such a couple. He probably thought it’d be too boring!”

A smile crossed his face. “Let’s use both answers.” He started pacing again, back and forth along the table. “Mr. Swenson suggested if there came a time when we couldn’t agree, we

could offer two answers. People will talk about it on the streetcar and in cafés. Can't you hear them? 'Did you read what Jacqueline said to *Loved by Him, Not Them*? She's absolutely right. Poor way to start out.' To which her friend will answer: 'I hope the couple takes Jacques' advice and runs off together.'"

Deep in thought, she tapped her pencil on the table. "It's an unexpected twist that Jacqueline advises caution, isn't it?"

"It'll draw readers to us."

"I have plenty of readers."

"Apparently not as many as Mr. Swenson would like."

She scowled. Did he always have to have the last word? She wanted this meeting to be over. Her hands flew across the keys. "Anything else you'd like to add?"

He continued and she typed word-for-word, "*If your intended won't run away with you, he's either playing with your affections or is a spineless bastard who will never defend you against his family. You should end this affaire de coeur immediately.*"

She paused. "We can't write *bastard* in a family newspaper."

"Fine. Whelp. Spineless whelp."

She finished typing and started organizing their papers.

"Good. Done." He was already reaching for his hat. "I think we did an exceptional job, if I do say so myself."

She scowled for the second—or was it the hundredth time—this afternoon?

He shook his head, a big grin on his face. "Oh, Miss Bouchard, admit it. It's a good column."

“Mr. Swenson will be the judge,” she said crisply and stood. “In the future, I think we should work separately. I’ll take all the letters from women. You take the letters from men. We’ll each work at home. Mr. Swenson will never be the wiser.”

He frowned. “But I think the whole point is to talk things through. We’re *allowed* to disagree. Swenson seemed to enjoy our disagreement in his office. What did he call it? *Spice*?”

Swenson might have, but she had not. She didn’t want to write with Vespasian Colville. She didn’t want to be in the same room with him. How could she say it kindly? And why did she wish to be kind? “It’s unpleasant to . . . to argue with you.”

“It’s challenging.”

She spoke in her most professional tone. “I will collect all the letters on Monday, sort male and female, and send the letters from men by messenger to your lodgings. Are you on Esplanade Avenue in your family’s home?” She knew he didn’t reside there any longer, but she didn’t want him to know she knew.

He gave her his new address, smiling in a rather condescending manner. “If you wish to work alone, Miss Bouchard, just say so. It won’t offend me. That’s the problem with women. They never say what they think.”

That did it. She could be direct—as direct as any man. “You find it strange that I don’t want to work with you? Are you really that obtuse?”

He shrugged.

“You waltz in here like you’re in charge. I created this column. My answers attracted attention and the number of advertisers increased. Mr. Swenson added a second column, and now a third. If the situation were reversed, I expect you would have quit without blinking an eye. The great Colville must write with a woman? You’d have walked out.”

His eyebrows arched, his face flushed. Suddenly he seemed genuinely embarrassed. “Forgive me, Miss Bouchard.” He bowed his full head of curly dark hair for a moment. “I am grateful to you for staying on the job with me. I expect I will learn a great deal from you. You’ve done a wonderful job in creating the column.”

She stared into his green eyes and swallowed hard. He seemed sincere. And he’d given her a compliment.

He continued. “If you wish, Miss Bouchard, we’ll work independently and see if the columns have the same liveliness, shall we?”

She stood to put the letters from women into her satchel. “I believe it will be far easier...” She trailed off. She’d won but her victory felt hollow.