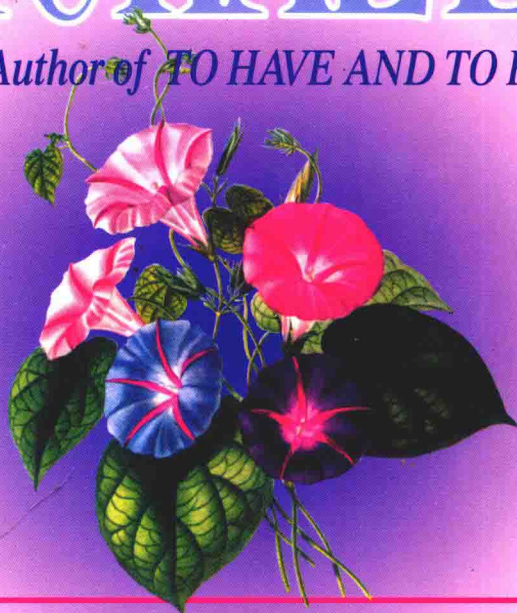


FERN MICHAELS

Bestselling Author of TO HAVE AND TO HOLD



SERENDIPITY

A Novel

Serendipity

*FERN
MICHAELS*

BALLANTINE BOOKS • New York

Copyright © 1994 by Fern Michaels, Inc.

All rights reserved under International
and Pan-American Copyright Conventions.

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, a division of Random
House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random
House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Michaels, Fern.

Serendipity / Fern Michaels.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-345-39271-X

1. Women in business—Pennsylvania—Philadelphia—Fiction. 2. Married
women—Pennsylvania—Philadelphia—Fiction. 3. Divorce—Pennsylvania—
Philadelphia—Fiction. 4. Philadelphia (Pa.)—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3563.I27S47 1994

813'.54—dc20

94-19693

CIP

Text design by Debby Jay

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition: August 1994

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Serendipity

Also by Fern Michaels
Published by Ballantine Books

DESPERATE MEASURES
TO HAVE AND TO HOLD
SEASONS OF HER LIFE
ALL SHE CAN BE
CINDERS TO SATIN
FOR ALL THEIR LIVES
FREE SPIRIT
TENDER WARRIOR
TO TASTE THE WINE
VALENTINA
VIXEN IN VELVET

The Captive Series

CAPTIVE EMBRACES
CAPTIVE INNOCENCE
CAPTIVE PASSIONS
CAPTIVE SPLENDORS
CAPTIVE SECRETS

The Texas Series

TEXAS HEAT
TEXAS RICH
TEXAS FURY
TEXAS SUNRISE

The "Sins" Series

SINS OF OMISSION
SINS OF THE FLESH

Serendipity

Chapter 1

Jory Ryan—that's how she thought of herself now—finally gave into the tremors she'd been holding in check during the past hour, but still fought her tears back. The front she'd managed to put up for Ross when he'd asked for a divorce was the hardest thing she'd ever done, harder than going through the miscarriage, harder than going off alone, harder than living alone, working and going to night school. Harder than getting through her estranged father's funeral. But she'd done it, she thought. She'd not only persevered, but had prevailed, even when he'd tried to ease his own conscience by buying her off.

A day didn't go by that she didn't think of Ross Landers and the mistakes she'd made back in the beginning. Would she really have cried rape? Back then, she'd threatened Ross with it, but to this day she couldn't say yes or no with certainty. Back then she'd been a wild, incorrigible teenager, without a mother, whose father was away from home so much, she'd had all the latitude and freedom she wanted.

How badly she'd needed a mother; but her mother died giving birth to a baby brother, who also died—one year later, when she was seven. Since then, it seemed, she'd gotten into one scrape after another.

As a teenager she'd been a tease and a flirt. But she'd only gone all the way with one other boy, and only once, before she'd done it with Ross Landers, a dozen times. She would never forget the look on Ross's face when she told him she was pregnant. He'd said something so hateful, so vitriolic, she'd run from him, wanting to hide her shame. Afterward, Woo, Ross's best friend, had tried to console her, saying she should be patient, that Ross would do the right thing.

For three months she waited for Ross to do the right thing. She'd called Woo again, but he'd gone back to Lancaster; so instead she showed up on Ross's doorstep and told him she intended to have the baby, and if anyone asked why she wasn't married, she'd say he'd raped her. She'd gone back to her father's house then, and sat on the swing on the front porch, freezing. Ross arrived an hour later and, without emotion, told her to get in the car. They drove to Maryland and were married by a justice of the peace at eleven o'clock at night.

The following months, when she and Ross lived in a small house, were the most miserable of Jory's life. One night in particular stood out. She'd been three months pregnant, and feeling sick and out of sorts all day. She hadn't gone down to dinner, and at ten o'clock, when she was almost asleep, Ross came to her room and tried to make love to her. She'd done her best to help him, but he was incapable of sustaining an erection. He'd stared down at her, said she repulsed him, that she was nothing but a slut he'd had the misfortune to marry. He stormed from the room, and returned only after she'd miscarried.

Sick with humiliation, Jory packed her bags in the sixth month of her marriage and left. She hadn't said good-bye to Ross, and saw him only three times afterward. The last time was at her father's funeral, eighteen months ago. He'd been among the city employees who turned out to pay their final respects. He hadn't tried to speak to her then, nor had she tried to speak to him. Jory couldn't help but wonder what people thought about her and Ross. Did they think they were divorced, separated, strangers? She came to the conclusion they simply didn't care. She didn't care either.

"Driver, I changed my mind," Jory said now. "Turn around. I

want to go to Chestnut Hill. Gravers Lane, number sixteen." Going back to the house she'd grown up in couldn't be any more traumatic than what she'd just gone through with Ross.

Forty minutes later Jory paid the driver and got out of the taxi. The house was a Tudor, the yard overgrown, the trim on the windows in need of paint. She'd painted the front door a bright red as an act of defiance when she was sixteen, but she couldn't remember why now. She did recall her father telling her to strip off the paint and varnish the door. She told him to do it himself, and took his slap high on her cheekbone. She still carried the scar his college ring made with the fierce blow. Her hand moved to her cheek to touch the thin line her skillfully applied makeup covered.

Maybe it wasn't an act of defiance after all. Maybe she'd painted the door to bring some color into her life. At Christmastime the red door always seemed particularly festive. Now it was simply a red door with peeling paint. She felt like crying as she fit her old house key into the lock.

It was cool inside, the blinds drawn, the furniture covered with dusty white sheets. The rugs were rolled up against the wall, the floors gritty and dusty.

Tears rolled down Jory's cheeks as she walked from room to room, peeking under the dust covers. If there had just been one person in the whole world to love her, to care about her, she wouldn't be here right now.

She should sell the house, she thought, take the money and invest it in something that would give her a small income. The ten thousand dollars she'd received from her father's insurance was still sitting in the Mellon Bank, along with the three thousand he had always kept in his checking account. The same perverse streak that wouldn't allow her to spend Ross's money wouldn't allow her to spend her father's money either. She knew her father's car was in the garage. When she sold the house, she'd sell the car too.

She could live here if she wanted to, Jory thought. The two hundred dollars rent she was paying in Florida could go toward the taxes on this house. She could ask her boss to help her get a job at the *Philadelphia Democrat*. If she wanted to, that is. She could do a lot of things if she wanted to. But did she want to risk running

into Ross and his family? She might have guts, but did she have enough to put herself through more heartache?

Jory was in her old room now, staring at the four-poster with the draped sheets. She thought of harems, jewels, and silk veils. This room should have been a sanctuary, but it wasn't. She'd really only slept and changed her clothes here. She couldn't remember what she did in this room when she was little. Did she play with blocks, have a rocking horse, dolls? She couldn't remember. She lifted the dust sheet on the bed. The mattress was pale blue and quilted, the tag at the bottom wilted and wrinkled. She smiled at the slight dip in the middle. She still slept in the middle of the bed. She let the sheet fall back. It was just a bed she used to sleep in.

Tears burned Jory's eyes when she opened dresser drawers, looked in the two closets. There should be treasures here, things she left behind. But there had been no treasures—except one. Damn, where was it? She yanked and pulled at the drawers, distinctly remembered thumb-tacking it to the back of one of them. God, let it be here, she prayed. Please, let it be here. And it was, a length of satin tied in knots, the binding from her childhood blanket. She literally swooned with feeling when she brought it up to her cheek. The one and only thing in the world that had ever given her comfort. So many times it had been drenched with tears. She couldn't count the times she woke up in the morning with the treasure pressed into her cheek. Now, her fingers worked the knots the way a nun would her rosary. How good it felt, how wonderfully comforting. She remembered each knot, big and small. She thought of each knot as a milestone in her life. Her eyes dry, her mouth grim, Jory added a last knot to the end of the satin.

"For my pending divorce," she said sadly.

Jory removed the dust cover from an oak rocking chair with a faded orange cushion and sat down.

If she did come back, she thought, and lived here in Chestnut Hill, she might be able to avoid Ross. Financially the move made sense. She would have a car, once she replaced the tires and got it tuned up. She could make the house into the home she never really had. She could probably take off from now till the end of the year and get the place cleaned up. She could take a sewing class and

make new covers for the furniture; there was a night class for *everything*. There was an old treadle sewing machine somewhere in the house. She could make bright cushions, valances instead of drapes—those poofy kind she'd seen in magazines, which allowed for a lot of sunlight. She could shampoo the carpets herself, wax the floors, clean the windows. And if she decided to leave Florida, she would get severance pay, and maybe she could even collect unemployment insurance. She had eight hundred dollars in a savings account, and would get back her rental deposit and the deposits on her utilities. A thousand dollars might see her through the worst of things. And if she absolutely had to, she could dip into her father's insurance money.

Outside in the afternoon sunshine, Jory looked around. "I'm coming back," she said aloud, saluting the bright red door before she started down the hill to Germantown Avenue to catch a cab.

Three weeks later she moved into the house in Chestnut Hill.

Chapter 2

“There is no way in hell I will allow you to turn this magazine into a *sewer* publication. I absolutely forbid it, Justine!”

Justine Landers’s lips curled into a sneer, and when she replied, her voice was as contemptuous as her gaze. “Do I need to remind you that *I* am the publisher of this magazine? I even have a contract to prove it. It was my wedding present. Remember, Jasper dear?”

“You might be the publisher, but I own this magazine, just as my father and his father before him owned it. One day Ross will own it. Until this moment it has been a publication to be proud of. The answer is no, Justine, an unequivocal no!”

Ross Landers, watching his parents argue about *TIF*, appeared impassive, as if he were a spectator at a tennis match.

“We’ve lost money six years in a row,” Justine said. “We are in the red up to our necks, Jasper. We publish a magazine no one wants to buy or read. People train their dogs or line their trash cans with our expensive magazine. Even I don’t read it, and I publish it. When was the last time *you* read it? When was the last time you even bothered to come down here to see how things were going? I can tell you—three years ago. Three years, Jasper. The employees of this magazine are almost as old as God. None of them has had an original idea in the last twenty years. Even this building is archaic.

Everything looks like it came over on the ark." To make her point, Justine grabbed a glass paperweight from a desk and threw it onto the cushion of a Morris chair. Dust spiraled upward. Her facial muscles stretched into a grimace.

"The answer, Justine, is still no."

His wife threw her elegantly manicured hands in the air. "What do you think I'm going to do to this magazine, Jasper? *TIF*, Truth in Fiction . . . People will believe what we print, but it has to be interesting. I can make it interesting. Then, I thought I'd do a feature story on Judge Halvorsen, for instance. I'm sure all of Philadelphia will rush to buy next month's issue if they can read about 'Hizhonor' and his charming wife Helen.

"I can have this magazine in the black inside of six months," Justine said. "*In the black*, Jasper. Give me a year, that's all I ask. Ross will head the legal department. You trust your own son, don't you?"

Worms of fear skittered around inside Jasper's stomach.

Ross was Justine's big gun; Justine knew it, and so did Ross. Should he hold out? Jasper wondered. He knew his wife was right, because she never dealt from anything but a position of strength. He also knew that *TIF* was the laughingstock of the publishing industry, but he hated change of any kind. He wondered, then, as he did every day, why he'd ever married Justine. And the answer was always the same: Justine had opened her legs for him three times a day. Until the day she found out she was pregnant with Ross and closed them.

Justine's eyes narrowed. She had him, she could feel it. She pressed again, saying, "Deed *TIF* over to me. Ross will draw up the necessary papers. Surely you have no objection to that."

He had a thousand objections, but he said, "Eight months with eight hundred thousand in the black, then we'll talk about ownership. Take it or leave it, Justine." The expression on his son's face changed then. To admiration? Jasper wondered. For him?

"That's blackmail!" Justine shrieked. "You're blackmailing me, your own wife? Ross, do something."

"Not on your life," Ross said quietly. "This is between you and Father."

"My wife?" Jasper's laugh was so bitter, Ross cringed. "Do you want me to recite chapter and verse here in front of our son? Don't ever refer to yourself as my wife again. You live in my house, live off my generosity, and you feed off your son. You're a disgrace to this family, Justine."

"How dare you speak to me like that!" Justine sputtered.

The look of approval was still on his son's face. Jasper felt giddy. He didn't ever want that look to go away. "I just did, Justine. Don't even think about pushing me one inch further." His voice turned thoughtful: "I see you sitting on an orange plastic chair. I can actually see it." Obviously Ross could see it too, because he was grinning.

"What does that mean?" Justine demanded.

"What that means, Justine, is you're no lady. You wear a lady's clothes, you wear makeup like a lady, and at times you can converse like a lady, but don't ever forget for a minute where I found you. You belong on an orange plastic chair. You're a mongrel."

Abruptly, Jasper turned away from her and toward his son. "Ross, it was nice to see you. Perhaps we can have dinner at the club one of these days."

"I'd like that," Ross said quietly.

"Good. I'll call you."

Justine watched her husband leave the room. She bit down on her lower lip. She'd just been put in her place by a master. Who would have thought such a thing could come out of Jasper's mouth? Certainly not Ross, whose mouth was hanging open. Her heart was pumping furiously and she knew her face was a mask of shame.

She pulled herself together before turning to face her son. "Don't take any of this to heart, Ross," she said. "Your father has never paid any attention to finances. It's nice to have unlimited resources," she added sardonically. "He just clips coupons and cashes checks. That's your father's life. Besides playing golf and dining at the club. But this magazine *is* losing money."

Ross stared at his mother. She was dressed to the nines, her heavy makeup garish. His father had to clip at least three coupons to pay

for the designer outfit she was wearing. Crocodile shoes were expensive. He should know, he had a pair.

She wasn't pretty or even attractive, this woman he called Mother. More than once he'd heard his father call her a mongrel, and at times it showed, like today. Justine was cold, callous, and manipulative, and he didn't like her at all. However, he did respect her keen business sense. The opposite was true of his father. He liked Jasper, but didn't respect him.

"Eight months and eight hundred thousand in the black is pretty stiff, Mother," he said. "Are you sure you want to go ahead with this?"

"I'm damn well sure, Ross. Draw up the papers. I'll make your father eat those words. I have a few little . . . insertions I want you to add."

"Just a minute, Mother. What kind of *little* insertions? This has to be a cut and dried professional contract. I won't be a party to trying to put something over on Father."

"Get off it, Ross. Don't get sanctimonious on me. You'll do as I say or you'll be disinherited. Let's not forget all those little scrapes I got you out of, all the strings I pulled. To be blunt, *son*, you'd be in jail if it wasn't for me. The first rule of business is, you fuck them before they fuck you. Now, I suggest you go to your office and get to work on that contract," she said coldly.

Anger, hot and scorching, flared in Ross's eyes. Standing, he towered over his mother. He wanted to tell her how much he disliked her, how his earlier rebellion was because of her; wanted to tell her she wasn't and never had been parent material, and yes, she bailed him out of scrapes because he had no role model growing up. He also wanted to tell her to go home and wash the heavy pancake off her face, and to take off the artificial eyelashes that made her small eyes feral-looking. The urge to yank at her upswept hairdo was so strong, he clenched his fists. What the hell would she look like without all the trappings? Like a *real* mother?

"Don't threaten me, Mother," he said coolly. "I'm a good attorney, I can get a job anywhere. In fact, I was asked last week if I had any interest in going back to work in the prosecutor's office. What that means is I have other options."

"My, we're uppity today, aren't we?"

"Is this where you give me that tired old line about changing my shitty diapers when I was born? Forget it, Mother, and don't ever dismiss me again."

"Ross, you are an ungrateful snout. I will not tolerate such talk from my son. Not now, not ever."

Ross threw his hands in the air. "Are you firing me?" Jesus, how hopeful his voice sounded.

Justine heard it too. "Of course not. One doesn't fire one's son. We are merely having a business discussion. Clearing the air, so to speak. I will not apologize for my drive, for my business sense. Remember this, Ross, you do what you have to do. Business comes first."

"Well, I can certainly relate to that," Ross said bitterly. "First-hand of course."

"Why don't we have dinner this evening?" Justine said.

Ross's stomach heaved. Dinner with either one of his parents was, in his opinion, like dining out with vipers, each of the vipers trying to find ways to do the other in, with him always in the middle. "I have other plans, Mother. Didn't we just have dinner, let's see, wasn't it three years, two months, and sixteen days ago?"

"That will be enough, Ross. *Enough!*"

The moment the door closed behind Ross, Justine clapped her hands. She'd won both rounds. So what if Jasper held her down with restrictions? She could keep him in line by simply mentioning Judge Halvorsen and his wife Helen, who was cuckolding the judge with Jasper.

Justine sat back in her swivel chair, long legs stretched out in front of her. She had nice legs. Nice high breasts too. All in all, she was perfectly proportioned. Back then—meaning back when she'd married Jasper thirty years ago—she'd been good in bed. Jasper had said so.

Orange plastic chairs. She winced. She would have ordered them too. For the reception area. Her thoughts whirled as she tried to come up with suitable justification. Mongrels versus pedigrees. She wasn't actually going to sit on them herself. They were for other