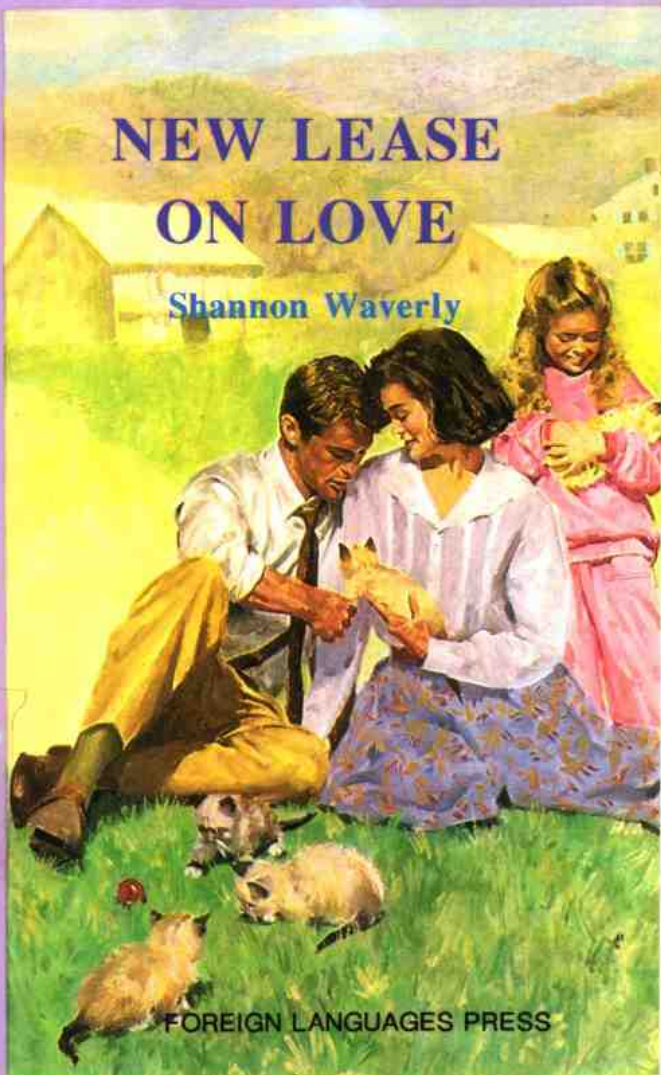


 *Silhouette*

# NEW LEASE ON LOVE

Shannon Waverly



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**“Shh. You’ll wake  
the neighbors.”**

“Serves you right. I hope they call the police,”  
Chelsea said, her laugh muffled against  
Nick’s chest.

She gripped his tie as she righted herself and, too  
late, heard him make a choking sound. “I’m sorry,  
Nick,” she apologized.

“You’re going to be the death of me yet.”

“Well, who in their right mind wears a tie at this  
time of night anyway?” She turned to face him,  
reaching for the knot. “Mind if I at least loosen  
it?” Her eyes lifted to his and what she saw made  
her heart slam against her ribs.

“Be my guest,” he answered huskily. “I haven’t  
been undressed by a woman in at least . . . well,  
too long.”

**Shannon Waverly** lives in Massachusetts with her husband, a high school English teacher. Their two children are both in college. Shannon wrote her first romance at the age of twelve, and she's been writing ever since. She says that in her first year of college, she joined the literary magazine and "promptly submitted the most pompous allegory imaginable. The editor at the time just as promptly rejected it. But he also asked me out. He and I have now been married for over twenty-one years."

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This edition 1995

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## CHAPTER ONE

"THIS ISN'T MY LEASE!" Chelsea dropped the crisp stationery on the kitchen table and frowned. April was the month she always renewed it, but she was used to signing for a whole year. This thing was only good for a month!

She sat back, rereading the note Mr. Lockwood had included, but all it told her was that the Pine Ridge ski area, which he owned and on whose fringe her house sat, was in a temporary state of flux. "Don't be concerned," he'd added in his familiar broad scrawl. "Go about business as usual. Matters should stabilize soon."

Chelsea's bewilderment deepened into anxiety. Not that Mr. Lockwood had given her any indication that she should be worried, but something was going on up the road at Pine Ridge, and she wished she knew what it was.

She walked to the sink and poured her suddenly unappetizing coffee down the drain. Outside, a mixture of rain and snow, driven by a cold, gray wind, was pelting the greening lawn and confusing the daffodils. Winter died hard here in the mountains of western Massachusetts.

Chelsea had canceled this morning's charter because of the unseasonable weather. But then, hot-air balloon flights had to be cancelled for reasons far less serious than a late-April sleet. Ballooning was a thin, precarious business, and lately she'd been wondering how much longer she could stick it out. She earned a marginal living at best, and at the age of twenty-six this was beginning to depress her. She didn't want to be wealthy. All she'd ever wanted was to be

self-sufficient. But the truth was, if she hadn't worked at other jobs along the way to supplement her income, Balloon the Berkshires would have folded years ago.

Living anywhere else would've scuttled her business, too, she thought with growing concern. The rent she'd paid Mr. Lockwood these last six years was inordinately low, especially in light of what she got for her money. Her house was quite large, nine rooms, one of which she'd converted to an office, and it had an attached barn that was perfect for storing her ballooning equipment and doing repairs. Her lease also gave her permission to launch her balloon from a meadow up the road and to maintain a billboard along its edge.

Chelsea especially appreciated that meadow. Not only was it close to home and office, it was also strategically located along the busy road to Pine Ridge. Skiers driving by couldn't possibly miss her billboard, and most of the time the breeze took her balloon right over the slopes and their curious upturned eyes.

Chelsea knew she'd never find a setup better suited to her purposes, but even with low rent, finances were often tight, and on a bleak day like today, it was easy to start thinking she'd reached a crossroads in her life. Perhaps it was time to stop dreaming she could make a living from ballooning and to start training for something real.

The only problem was, she loved what she was doing now. Since the age of twelve, when her grandfather and all his gear had moved in with her family, she'd never wanted to work at anything else.

The wall clock chimed, reminding her that Mimi, her brother Larry's wife, had called from work earlier, looking for a ride home. Her car was being repaired, and Larry had a faculty meeting after school and couldn't stop by for her. It was now three-thirty. Mimi's shift at the hospital was almost done.



Chelsea picked up the lease and, as she headed for the front hall, skimmed it again, but another reading left her no more enlightened. She leaned into her office and tossed the document onto her desk. From the opposite wall, a bright, framed poster of a balloon in flight proclaimed: "Life's too short not to take the adventure!" Some adventure, Chelsea thought, glancing at the stack of bills her lease had landed on.

She opened the hall closet and surveyed the contents, looking for the proper battle gear for today's weather. From the hospital, she and Mimi would have to run by the sitter's to pick up nine-month-old Beth. After that, they'd retrieve Mimi's two boys from their friend's, where the school bus dropped them off on the three afternoons their mother worked.

Chelsea shook her head as she pulled her green vinyl rain poncho off its hanger. Two people who were as active as Larry and Mimi had no business trying to raise three children. It was a wonder they weren't all neurotic.

Actually they were thriving, kids and parents alike, and quite often Chelsea found herself envying them. Not that she was ready to settle down just yet herself. Too much energy still had to be channeled into her business. She wanted Balloon the Berkshires to be firmly established and prospering before she got seriously involved with anyone. Entering a relationship as an independent, self-sufficient person was important to her. Her mother had never worked outside the home—until she was widowed—and the transition had been traumatic.

The way things were going, though, Chelsea figured she wouldn't be able to settle down until she was ninety-two. It seemed that every penny she'd ever earned had gone back into her business—into purchasing equipment, furnishing this office and converting the barn out back to a work space.

Then there was always advertising and insurance and repairs...

She'd thought this would be a pivotal year, the year when her investments would start to reap a noticeable profit. Last year had been so promising she'd even quit cashiering at the market. Now she didn't see it happening. The weather had been abominable, the economy even worse.

The arrival of this new one-month lease wasn't helping matters any, either. It just underscored the precariousness of her situation, because the reality was that she didn't own this house where she'd lived and conducted business for the last six years. She didn't own the barn out back where she stored and repaired her equipment. And she didn't own the meadow where she advertised and launched her flights. All the underpinnings of her life were rented and therefore controlled by someone else.

She and Mr. Lockwood had enjoyed a pleasant relationship until now, one that was mutually beneficial. He had no use for her house or meadow, while to her they were absolutely vital. She only hoped her apprehensions were unfounded and their relationship wasn't about to change. She didn't know how she'd swing a higher rent, if that was what was on his mind, and she strongly suspected it was. She'd have to go back to cashiering—and probably take in housemates, besides—not a scenario she relished. Ah, well, she'd just have to adjust, she supposed. Ever since her kid sister, Judy, had married and moved out, the house had been too quiet, anyway.

Chelsea rummaged in the wardrobe for boots, hating the thought of the inch of slush already blanketing the ground. All she came up with, though, were the puffy maroon things that matched the down coat she'd already given away. Her brother considered her the family's free spirit of fashion. Still, when she glanced at her reflection, even she had to groan. The poncho made her look like a three-masted

chooner at full sail, and those boots resembled tree stumps! She hadn't put on any makeup today, either, and because of the weather, her short bob was curling defiantly. With a disgusted huff, she tugged up her hood and headed for the door.

The hospital was a few miles down the valley on the outskirts of the village. Chelsea pulled her Jeep into the lot at the rear of the building, found a parking spot, then dashed out into the elements, head ducked against the angled sleet. Slush splashed into her boots. "Dang!" she swore, shivering. She hopped a puddle at the curb, landed with an off-balance, one-footed slide and continued up the walk at a run.

At the top of the steps she threw her shoulder against the heavy glass door. "Excuse me, I'm so sorry," she apologized as she collided with someone in the muddy entranceway. She shook out her hair, wet curls sticking to her cheek and forehead.

"No problem."

She raised her eyes, drawn by a warm, deep voice. The man she'd bumped into wasn't wearing a coat. Probably just taking a break from visiting a patient, she surmised. She smiled, hoping to convey her apology again.

She stamped her feet to knock the slush off them, then searched her shoulder bag for a tissue to dry her face. "Crazy New England weather," she felt compelled to say, sharing the small entranceway with him as she was. "Can't decide if it's winter or spring."

"They say it's the cruelest month, April." He spoke in that friendly way strangers adopt when momentarily sharing a shelter on a stormy day.

"I remember that. Chaucer, right?"

He smiled and shrugged. "Somebody."

Chelsea got the feeling he knew exactly who, and it wasn't Chaucer. Even as she was searching her memory, though, he

returned to watching the storm, bringing the conversation to an end.

She tossed the tissue into a disposal bin and gave the man another sidelong peek. He had a disarming sort of handsomeness about him, the sort that took a person totally by surprise and left her slightly dizzy. He was muscularly lean and tall, six feet or more, with thick nut-brown hair and deep hazel eyes that glinted with flecks of gold. He had a straight classic nose, a firm sensually drawn mouth and a well-defined slightly cleft chin.

But it wasn't so much his physical features that struck Chelsea as handsome, though they were uncommonly so. It was . . . well, she really couldn't put her finger on what was so striking about this man. All she knew was that she'd never felt another person's . . . presence so intensely before.

She swallowed with an uncomfortable dry gulp, realizing that she was staring. Not that he'd noticed. He seemed to have withdrawn into himself, reeled in whatever lines of communication the situation had drawn out of him. Feeling unaccountably disappointed, she left him to his musing and pushed her way through the inner door.

The receptionist put down her phone. "Hey, Chelsea! What are you doing here today?"

"Hi, Carol. Just picking up Mimi. She still working?"

"Uh-huh. Want to go in?" The receptionist gestured toward the corridor behind her marked Physical Therapy.

"No. I'll take a seat and wait."

Chelsea found the only available seat in the crowded waiting alcove. The one next to it was vacant, too, but someone had already claimed it with a dark gray topcoat. A blend of cashmere and wool, she guessed. Well made, attractive and expensive.

She unzipped her green poncho and let it fall aside, revealing black tights above the maroon boots, a straight black skirt, and a chunky yellow sweater. She had to admit

she was almost as colorful today as one of her balloons. She reached for a *Good Housekeeping* magazine and opened it at random.

"Excuse me," a familiar voice murmured.

Chelsea glanced up and found the stranger she'd barreled into staring at her outstretched legs. "Oh, sorry." As she tucked her feet beneath her chair, her cheeks warmed. Which was absurd, she reminded herself. Blocking someone's path wasn't that grievous a faux pas. Or was it rather because that someone was the man from the entranceway and he was settling into the seat beside her?

Chelsea screwed her attention back on the magazine but soon realized she wasn't absorbing a word she read. For some reason, her mind kept returning to the man beside her, like a radio determined to pick up only one station clearly.

She took a stealthy peep sideways. He was reading, too—*Business Weekly*. How odd, she thought, the protocol of people in waiting rooms. Although they had spoken just minutes before, there was no social law that mandated they now acknowledge that meeting. They were just strangers, isolated within whatever private reasons had brought them here. She wished that fact didn't bother her so much.

Unwittingly, Chelsea let out a sigh, and though he didn't even blink, she felt his attention shift from his magazine to her. A strange, uncomfortable heat rose through her body, pulsing from her skin, until she thought her vinyl poncho would melt.

What was wrong with her, anyway? It wasn't as if she was starved for male companionship. She dated. All the time. No one in particular, of course, but that shouldn't matter.

Chelsea sat tight, trying to conjure up the image of the handsomest male friend she had, but all she could think of was the man sitting next to her. The magazine print swam out of focus as she watched him cross his leg, ankle over

•

knee, as she caught a faint scent of warm wool and a lime-scented after-shave...

In spite of her discomfort, she began to smile. A few years earlier, she and Mimi had bought a dog-eared copy of *Fear of Flying* at a yard sale. After they'd both read it—at lightning speed, she remembered—they'd had a hilarious discussion about the idea at the heart of the controversial novel, namely that a woman could fantasize as wildly about meaningless sex as any man, that she could be on a bus and spot a stranger across the aisle and...

The man beside her uncrossed his legs and shifted his weight as if he was finding the chair suddenly uncomfortable.

When they'd read *Fear of Flying*, Mimi was already married to Chelsea's brother and the mother of two boys. Yet, even she had admitted to a few R-rated daydreams involving Tom Selleck, and at the time, Chelsea had been quite taken with Christopher Reeve. But neither of them had been adventurous enough to sketch out scenarios featuring the spontaneous, uninvolved sex suggested in the book. Both were too hopelessly romantic. Violins and moonbeams usually intruded somewhere in the fantasies.

Well, then, had either of them ever passed a stranger on the street, or shared a bus or plane with someone she'd found instantly appealing? A ship passing in the night who would haunt her memory forever?

Mimi said she had. "But I married him as fast as I could," she'd added with a laugh.

Chelsea had felt vaguely cheated. She'd never enjoyed such an experience herself. She'd dated, she'd felt affection for several acquaintances, perhaps even a measure of love for a few. But she'd never met anyone who'd had that instantly distracting effect on her, that riveting aura and ability to "rattle her teeth" with just a glance, as Mimi phrased it.

Not until today.

From the corner of her eye, she studied his hands clasping the magazine. Strong, clean, capable hands, with long fingers and bony knuckles. Hands that wore no ring, she noticed. Now *that* was unusual. Men like him were almost always taken. Maybe he was divorced?

She liked the way he dressed, too, which came as no little surprise. Usually she didn't go for the buttoned-down, polished-shoe type, but he carried the look well. The crisp white shirt and maroon tie showing over his ribbed black sweater indicated a vein of restraint in his personality, and his tailored charcoal pants did nothing to relax the image. Nevertheless, she liked the clothes—on him—and she loved the sweater. It was earthy, casual—but hardly careless. No, carelessness was the least part of this man's character. He was thoroughly deliberate, deliberate in the way he tied his shoes, combed his hair to one side, folded the cuffs of his sweater...

He turned, slowly, and looked right into Chelsea's eyes, one of his brows arched in a silent question. He didn't look amused.

Chelsea's gaze zoomed back to her magazine, her heart hammering. With one stern glance he'd made her realize how absurd the last ten minutes had been. Fantasy and imagination were fine in their place, but this was not one of those places. Her mind had wandered inappropriately, and what was worse, he somehow knew it.

She rose from her chair. "I've d-decided to go meet Mimi after all," she stammered to the receptionist on her way by.

The wing where her sister-in-law worked was filled with a mystifying assortment of exercise equipment. When Chelsea spotted her, Mimi was leaning over a little girl on a machine that somewhat resembled a bicycle.

"Chelsea! Hi!" Mimi smiled her patently warm nurse-smile. "Five more minutes, okay?"

"Don't rush."

Mimi, freckle-faced and red-haired, leaned over to adjust a tension monitor.

The child looked up at her gloomily. "Can I stop now?"

"Almost done, Katie. You're doing super." Mimi motioned for an attendant to take her place before walking over.

"New patient?" Chelsea asked.

"Hm. Brand new." Mimi's lips tightened.

"She sure is cute."

"If you ignore her fascination with four-letter words and a bite to shame a rottweiler."

"Her? She looks like Shirley Temple, for heaven's sake! She can't be any older than six or seven."

Mimi nodded indignantly. "That's right. Seven." Slowly her smile returned, easing out the scowl, and when she murmured, "Poor lamb," her voice was soft with compassion.

Chelsea watched the little girl struggling to press the pedals of her machine, her small full mouth pursed in a pout, her blond curls bouncing around her dimpled face—and mutiny simmering in her blue eyes.

"What's her problem? Anything serious?"

"Not anymore. Her right leg was injured in an accident three years ago. She's had several operations to correct the damage, but she's still left with thin muscles that need strengthening, and a limp, which may or may not disappear with time, we aren't certain."

"Any more surgery down the road?"

Mimi shook her head. "Just therapy. But she's been through so much already I'm afraid she's had her fill of hospitals. She wants no part of doctors or nurses or..." She paused and a light went on behind her eyes. "Say..."

Chelsea's gaze skittered around the room, searching for an exit. She recognized that look. "Mimi, you know I've



taken on too many kids as it is. I'm barely making any money now."

"But she's so tiny. You could slip her in with a group of paying passengers, and nobody'd even notice."

"I'll have to think about it."

"Look at her, Chelsea."

Purposely, Chelsea did not look. She knew she'd be a dead duck if she did. "I said I'll think about it."

"Please do. I have a feeling she's the type who'd really benefit from your attention."

Chelsea had been taking children from the hospital up in her balloon for years. The idea occurred to her after a couple chartered a flight to celebrate their son's eighth birthday. Only after the child died four weeks later did Chelsea learn that he had had cancer. His parents, who were fairly well-off, had let him make up a "wish list," and taking a balloon ride was the thing he wanted to do most. After his death they'd called to thank Chelsea again. Their son, they said, had talked about his ride right up to the end.

Chelsea had felt gratified, knowing she'd created a moment of happiness for the boy, but she'd also felt shaken and angry because of his death. She'd called Mimi, hoping some of her professional objectivity would rub off, but Mimi was no help that night. If anything, she'd made Chelsea feel worse, opening her eyes to the numbers of children in the area who were seriously ill, children whose parents, for the most part, couldn't afford the luxury of granting dying wishes.

Chelsea had lain awake that night, the cogs of her mind whirring away. If an hour's balloon ride had meant so much to one sick child, maybe it would mean something to others. The next morning she'd called Mimi again and with her help began to make connections at the hospital.

At first Chelsea gave rides only to seriously ill children, for no other reason than to get their minds off their situa-