



## Surprise Christmas Bride (Silhouette Desire, No 1112)

By Maureen Child

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ON THE FIRST DAY OF CHRISTMAS...

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HE GOT A WIFE...

After he and Casey were caught in compromising positions, Jake had proposed. But love had made a fool out of him once, so he told himself that it was only lust his new bride inspired....

AND A SURPRISE!

Until the stick turned pink and Casey was congratulating him on his impending fatherhood!

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## **Surprise Christmas Bride (Silhouette Desire, No 1112) By Maureen Child Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

Maureen Child is the author of more than 130 romance novels and novellas that routinely appear on bestseller lists and have won numerous awards, including the National Reader's Choice Award. A seven-time nominee for the prestigious RITA award from Romance Writers of America, one of her books was made into a CBS-TV movie called *THE SOUL COLLECTER*. Maureen recently moved from California to the mountains of Utah and is trying to get used to snow.

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"Maybe I should put the top up before I drown."

Casey Oakes pushed wet hair out of her eyes and squinted into the freezing rain. A deep hard shiver rippled through her. "Too late now to bother," she grumbled, and told herself that maybe it would be a blessing if she did drown. At least then she would have done something no other Oakes had ever managed. Drowning in a convertible while cruising the back roads outside Simpson, California, wasn't, as her mother would say, "what society expects of an Oakes."

Accomplishing that feat in a wedding gown would only add to the myth, she told herself. A few years from now, her little ride would probably become the stuff of local folklore. People would tell the story of Cassandra Oakes in hushed tones around campfires. Parents would discipline misbehaving children with the threat of a nighttime visit from the Drowned Bride.

Still smiling to herself, Casey flinched when her soggy veil flew in front of her face and blocked her view of the road. She slammed on the brakes, heard something under her car snap, then came to a shuddering halt.

She cut the engine, and when that powerful noise disappeared, all that was left was the sound of the heavy rain pelting on and all around her. The wind-shield wipers continued to slap rhythmically as they futilely tried to do battle with the downpour. Nearly an inch of water covered the floorboards, no doubt ruining the plush scarlet carpet. Casey winced as she realized that the leather seats probably weren't faring any better.

"Well, hell," she muttered to no one, "who expected rain?" But then, with the way the rest of her day had gone, why not rain? Heck, why not a blizzard?

Reaching up, she pushed her veil to the back of her head and looked around at the drenched countryside. The road wasn't much more than a narrow dirt track, covered yearly by a thin layer of gravel. Now the ground-up rock was practically floating atop a sea of churning mud. On either side of the road wooden fence posts, strung with barbed wire, stood at attention for miles. Behind those fences lay open ground. Meadow grasses, waving and dipping with the wind and rain, a few gnarled leafless trees that looked as though they'd been there for centuries, a veritable forest of giant pines, their needles dipping with the weight of the rain—and that was it.

No houses.

No lights.

No people.

To top it all off, it had been so long since she'd been back in Simpson she didn't know if she was close to the Parrish ranch or not.

Casey inhaled sharply and felt the familiar sting of tears filling her eyes. Roughly she brushed them away with the backs of her hands.

She already had all the water she could handle. Then she heard it.

The call came softly at first, then built into a low throbbing moan.

Frowning, Casey stepped out of the car and grimaced as the cold mud oozed over the tops of her white satin pumps. When her right foot slid out from under her in the muck, she forgot all about her ruined shoes. She grabbed at the car door for balance and managed somehow to keep from landing facedown in the thick brown river at her feet.

"Yuck." A sucking noise accompanied the movement as she lifted one shoeless foot from the icy mud. She heard the moaning sound again and turned her head to find the source.

Her eyes widened and a rush of sympathy for something besides herself washed over her.

"Oh, you poor little thing," she crooned, and started slogging through the mud.

"No, I don't want to tell you what it is." Jake Parrish laughed, shook his head and reached for his coffee cup. His sister, Annie, hadn't changed a bit over the years. Grown-up or not, she still couldn't stand suspense.

"C'mon Jake," she pleaded over the phone. "One little hint. Just one."

"Nope," he told her, and took a sip of coffee. "You'll just have to get out here first thing in the morning if you want your curiosity satisfied."

"You really are an evil man, big brother."

"Yeah, I know." He grinned, then added, "Oh, and would you mind bringing Dad, Uncle Harry and Aunt Emma, too?"

Annie sucked in a gulp of air and Jake could almost see his younger sister's black eyebrows shooting into her hairline. Lord, how she hated not knowing everything.

"This must be big," she finally said.

"Big enough," Jake assured her.

"Dammit, Jake!" Annie's voice dropped into the stern no-nonsense tone she used on her three-year-old, Lisa.

"You know I hate surprises. If you don't give me something to go on, I won't get a wink of sleep all night."

She wouldn't, either. Memories rushed through him. The night before her birthday, Annie would lie awake all night, wondering what she might receive. And Christmas Eve was even worse. Then she was so bad not only did she stay awake, she kept Jake up, too.

"All right," he said with a smile. "One little hint."

"Yesss!"

Jake frowned thoughtfully as he tried to figure out a way to phrase the hint without giving away too much of his surprise. He leaned back against the kitchen wall, crossed his feet at the ankles and stared up at the overhead light fixture. Shaped like a wagon wheel, the chandelier held six globe-covered lightbulbs, which shone brightly against the late-afternoon gloom.

He shifted his gaze to the storm raging outside the window. Thanks to the deal he'd just managed to pull off, he told himself, not even the torrential rain or predicted snow could ruin his good mood. "Jake..."

"Oh! Sorry, Annie. Just thinkin'."

"Don't strain yourself."

"Very funny. Maybe I won't give you that hint, after all."

"Jake Parrish, if you don't..."

He laughed and pushed away from the wall. "OK, you win. Here's your hint. It's something I've wanted for a long time."

A lengthy silent pause. Then, "that's it?" Outrage colored her voice.

"That's it. Until tomorrow."

"I said it before and I'll say it again. You're an evil man, Jake. And you're going to hell."

"Probably. But that's all right. At least all of my friends will be there with me."

"Count on it."

In answer he gave her a deep-throated malevolent chuckle. He wasn't surprised to hear her hang up in disgust.

Oh, he knew his little sister would find a way to make him pay for dragging this out. But dammit, it would be worth it. He'd waited a long time for this. And he wanted to enjoy every minute of it.

He hung up the phone, walked across the room to the gray granite countertop and set his coffee cup down. Then he leaned forward to peer through the rain-spattered glass at the growing darkness. This was just the beginning, he told himself.

With the conclusion of this deal, his long-held plans for the Parrish ranch were complete at last. Now he could focus on the horse-breeding program he'd been thinking about for months.

Anything was possible.

A slow grin tipped up one corner of his mouth as he took a quick look around the kitchen. Modern appliances, a gleaming Spanish-tile floor and a kiva-shaped fireplace in the corner made the kitchen something of a showplace. Not that he could do anything more complicated than a pot of coffee, grilled cheese sandwiches and an assortment of microwavable delights.

That didn't matter, though. For Jake had made good on his promises. He had turned the ranch into a business prosperous enough to pay off all the cosmetic changes to the house that his ex-wife had insisted on. And despite Linda's efforts, she hadn't managed to empty his pockets.

Jake frowned slightly at the memory of the woman he had allowed to make a fool of him, but then he dismissed all thoughts of her. Instead, he concentrated on the ranch. His accomplishment. His triumph. The place was now a far cry from how it had looked while he and Annie had been growing up.

In his mind's eye he could still see the antique stove his mother had somehow coaxed into working long beyond the time it should have. If he tried hard enough, he could make out the shadow of the battered pine table where he and then Annie had done their school-work. The same table where the family had gathered at suppertime for loud long discussions on everything from the Chicago Cubs to Darwin.

Jake blinked, and in place of that old familiar table was the heavy Santa Fe style polished-oak dining set Linda had purchased three years before. He frowned thoughtfully. True, the ranch hadn't had much in the way of comforts when he was a kid. But there was always enough love.

The one thing his new and improved ranch house lacked.

Jake shook his head and reached for his coffee cup. He took one last drink of the still-hot brew, then slammed the cup back down onto the counter. Keep your mind on business, he told himself. Thoughts of love and what-might-have-beens wouldn't get his work done.

And thoughts of Linda would only give him an ulcer. "Besides," he said aloud into the empty room, "you've got to check the fencing before nightfall." With the rain and the howling wind, he couldn't risk wires coming down and his stock wandering out onto the roads.

Besides, if the weatherman was right for a change and the first snow of the season was really headed in that night, then he'd best keep ahead of the chores.

He snatched his rain slicker and hat from the pegs near the back door and pulled them on, purposely keeping his back to the shiny sterile room. The sooner he was started, the sooner he'd be back. With a microwaved pizza, a beer and a front-row seat for the football game on TV.

If he kept the volume loud enough, he just might be able to convince himself that he wasn't really lonely.

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